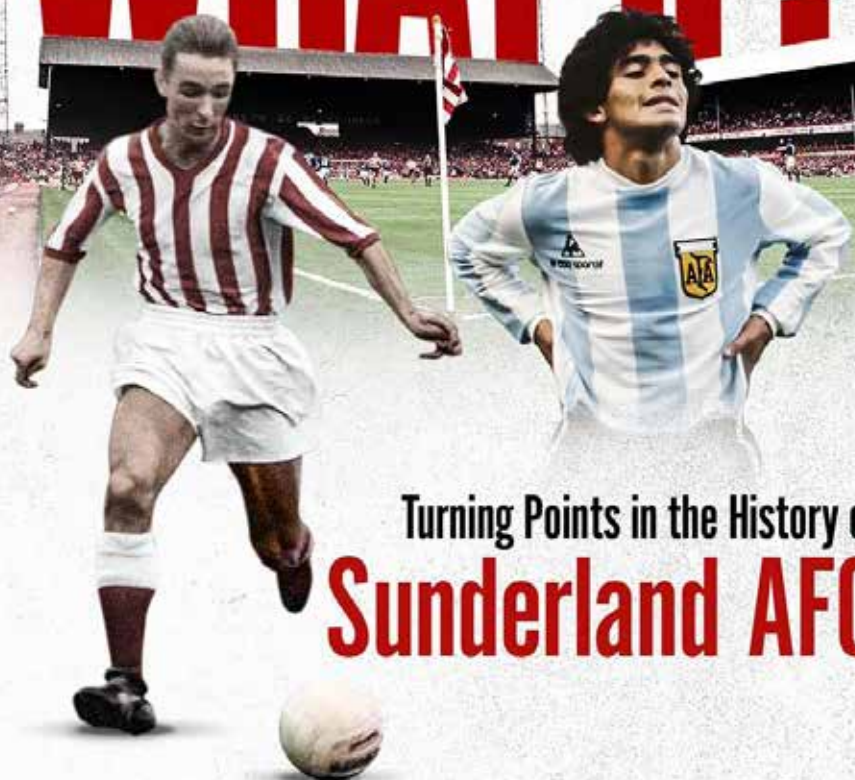


Rob Mason

WHAT IF?



Turning Points in the History of
Sunderland AFC

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Sunderland AFC



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MANAGERIAL MISSES

THERE WAS a time when *GET CLOUGH FOR ROKER* car stickers were de rigueur on Wearside. Former Sunderland centre-forward Brian Clough (63 goals in 74 games for the Lads) twice came close to becoming Sunderland manager. If he had, might Sunderland have been European champions in the way 'Old Big 'Ead' twice led Nottingham Forest to that pinnacle?

Britain's first European Cup-winning manager Jock Stein wanted the Sunderland job before he took over at Celtic, who he led to continental glory in 1967 when Cloughie was just starting out on his managerial path. Bobby Robson came within a penalty shoot-out of getting England to the World Cup Final in 1990. He had once shaken hands on accepting the manager's job at Sunderland, only to change his mind.

Like Brian Clough, Don Revie was a former Sunderland centre-forward. Like Bobby Robson, he also managed England and, of course, he was the manager of the Leeds United team who lost to Sunderland in the 1973 FA Cup Final but were hugely successful after

being promoted with Sunderland in 1964. He could have become Sunderland manager in 1964. Had he done so, maybe it would have been Sunderland and not Leeds who won two league championships, two European titles and both domestic cups. After all, the Sunderland team who went up with Leeds were every bit as good as Revie's Leeds that year and took three of the four points available from them that term. Sunderland-supporting Bob Paisley was a local lad who slipped through the net. The Liverpool manager once brought the European Cup and league championship to display in his home town of Hetton-le-Hole in Sunderland. Maybe Paisley should have been a hero in the red and white of Wearside instead of the red of Merseyside?

In more modern times how might things have turned out differently if the love and support of fans hadn't supplied flowers to Dick Advocaat's wife in the summer of 2015? That well-intentioned action led to the Dutch boss coming back to Sunderland, where he stayed for only ten matches after his change of mind. Had Advocaat not returned it is highly likely that Sean Dyche would have taken over. More than one well-placed source at the time claimed that Dyche was staying at the Seaham Hall Hotel ready to be revealed as Sunderland boss before Advocaat decided to come back. Dyche successfully kept Burnley in the Premier League for five seasons after leading them to promotion, before being given the bullet late in his sixth term as the Clarets slid towards the drop. In the same period Sunderland slumped from Premier League to

League One. Serial promotion winners Neil Warnock and Dave Bassett both had the chance to come to Sunderland in the early 1990s in the period when Malcolm Crosby was caretaker manager but just kept winning in the cup, eventually got his team to the FA Cup Final and was rewarded with the manager's position.

Clough, Stein, Revie and Robson are the biggest bosses Sunderland never had, so how close did Sunderland get to possibly enjoying huge domestic and European success under this quartet?

BRIAN CLOUGH

In the history of English football no one has scored 250 league goals in as few games as Brian Clough, and yet Cloughie is best known as a manager. That tells you how good a manager he was. He took both Derby County and Nottingham Forest from tier two to the top-flight title. He made Forest European champions twice and got Derby to the European Cup semi-finals in 1973, when defeat at the hands of Juventus was accompanied by serious claims of bribed officials, although I won't go into this here as this is a book of 'what ifs?' concerning Sunderland rather than Derby.

With due respect to Derby and Forest, who are both fine clubs, Clough provided a sensational level of success to clubs not regarded amongst the giants of the game and without the level of support of the biggest clubs in the land. Before Clough took over at Derby their only major trophy was when they won the FA Cup in 1946 when

Raich Carter (having won it with Sunderland in 1937) became the only player to win the trophy on both sides of the war. Before Clough arrived Nottingham Forest had two FA Cup wins to their name. Clough could never win the FA Cup although he did take Forest to the final. Two European Cups, the league title and four League Cups was an extraordinary haul for a club who also paid Britain's first £1m transfer fee while Brian ruled the roost.

While Clough left Sunderland to pursue his managerial career down the A19 at Hartlepool, he had set out on the road to management by taking charge of the Sunderland youth team, nurturing a set-up that would see immense success. In 1964/65 Brian helped Sunderland to the semi-finals of the FA Youth Cup for the first time. In the season Clough left Roker to become manager of Hartlepoons (they were still called Hartlepoons United then), his youth team went on to reach the FA Youth Cup Final. They won it in two of the next three seasons. Four years after the second of those victories, when the FA Cup itself was won, six of the 11 players were home-produced.

Before setting out on his managerial journey with Hartlepoons United, Clough could possibly have become assistant manager at Sunderland. Manager George Hardwick – more on him shortly – had put Clough in charge of the youth team, enrolled him on an FA coaching course at Durham and had plans to make Brian his right-hand man. However, aware of resistance to Clough's forceful personality in the boardroom, in his

autobiography Hardwick wrote that at a board meeting, ‘when I suggested my long-term objective, which was to appoint him as my right-hand man with the first team, I thought some of the directors were going to have seizures’.

‘The happiest time I ever spent in a football club, including when I was manager of league champions, was when I played for Sunderland. That was my happiest time of my career.’ This is one of numerous clips of Clough you can find on YouTube these days talking about how much he liked Sunderland.

Clough appointed Malcolm Bramley as his club secretary at Derby County having taken a shine to Malcolm when the latter was a young member of the office staff at Roker Park when Brian was Sunderland’s centre-forward. Bramley recalls,

‘I vividly remember when Brian, Peter Taylor and I were driving down to London to attempt to sign Dave Mackay, Brian saying, “If we got him and I eventually got to be manager of Sunderland, what a player Dave Mackey would be for Sunderland even if he was 40”, so even then Brian evidently had it in mind that he would like to come back to Roker Park as manager.’

In 2007 and 2010 I interviewed former Sunderland chairmen Keith Collings and Sir Tom Cowie for the official Sunderland AFC magazine *Legion of Light*, which I edited at the time. Both are long now passed away, but

both spoke about their experiences of trying to achieve what the car sticker pleaded for: *GET CLOUGH FOR ROKER*. Keith Collings was chairman when Sunderland won the FA Cup in 1973. His father Syd had been chairman when SAFC staged four World Cup finals games, including a quarter-final, in 1966. Keith told me he interviewed Clough but couldn't have worked with a manager known to be extremely abrasive with his boards of directors. Collings commented,

'Brian Clough was very bitter when he didn't get the job. To be honest I don't think I could have worked with him. I've always regarded Sunderland Football Club as a football club with a club spirit. Forest, when they came to Sunderland, came in two buses – one for the directors and one for the players. I, as the chairman, wouldn't have the manager saying to me that I couldn't travel on the bus with the team. You don't sit and talk to the players and tell them what to do all the time, but as chairman you are still part of the club. Brian Clough and I would have clashed too much. It would probably have finished up with me going not him, but we did try to get the best managers there were. We did talk to them.'

Speaking of managers in the plural here, Collings is also talking of attempts to land Bobby Robson and Don Revie – more on that later.

Sir Tom Cowie did succeed in bringing in a big name as manager in Lawrie McMenemy. Big Mac had emulated Bob Stokoe in winning the FA Cup with a Second Division side, Southampton, just three years after Sunderland achieved that feat. McMenemy then led the Saints to runners-up spot in the top flight and had a massive media profile when he was brought back to his native North East. A success everywhere else in his managerial career, McMenemy had a disastrous time at Sunderland, but that was not Cowie's fault. McMenemy had been Cowie's second choice. First of all he had tried to replace the sacked Len Ashurst with Clough, but like his own predecessor Keith Collings, Cowie could not appoint Clough. 'We had several talks and I was desperate to sign him. I travelled down to Nottingham to see him but you couldn't talk to the man and in the end I just thought, "No chance". If he had joined the club I think I would have fired him about three weeks later.'

Clough ruffled feathers wherever he went. He fell out with people and bore grudges. Sunderland legends Bob Stokoe and Len Ashurst were amongst them. Both feuds stemmed from the injury that effectively ended Clough's career on Boxing Day 1962. Stokoe was at centre-half for opponents Bury and accused Brian of 'coddling' (kidding) when he was badly injured, while Ashurst was blamed by Brian because it was Len's long ball Clough was chasing when he collided with Shakers' keeper Chris Harker. I worked extensively with Ashurst on his self-penned autobiography *Left Back in Time*, in which he wrote,

‘I always felt that Brian partially blamed me for him sustaining the injury. The relationship which we had prior to the Boxing Day incident always hung by a thread. Thereafter we hardly spoke ... Sadly, over the following three years that Brian remained at the club, he indicated his dislike for me on a number of occasions, believing that I was a part cause of his career-finishing injury as I had kicked the ball down the field leading to his clash with the opposition goalkeeper. I never felt that he forgave my unwitting role in that incident.’

In *Left Back in Time*, Ashurst – who did manage Sunderland – explained that Clough’s clandestine meeting with chairman Keith Collings was held in *Last of the Summer Wine* country at Holmfirth in West Yorkshire at the home of Alan Martin, son of former director Billy Martin. Vice-chairman Jack Ditchburn and director Ted Evans were also present, with Clough’s number two Peter Taylor ready to join in if Clough and the Roker board could reach agreement. Ashurst goes on to explain the caustic nature of that meeting, one that chimes with Keith Collings’s recollections as given to me in that club magazine interview.

Undoubtedly, had Collings or Cowie succeeded in getting Clough for Roker, their noses as chairmen would have been put out of joint. Both Collings and Cowie were old school, used to the privileges of being chairman. With Clough in charge those privileges would

have been diminished, with the manager calling the shots and not the chairman. I don't doubt that both Collings and Cowie wanted what was best for SAFC, but it may well be argued that both also wanted what was best for themselves. Ultimately, neither of them were bold enough to hand the keys of the red and white kingdom to Brian Clough. They had their reasons for that, but we can only wonder as to how things might have changed had Brian become boss.

Veteran journalist Doug Weatherall was a long-standing friend of Clough. Doug had a fund of brilliant stories for me in the years he contributed a column when I edited Sunderland's programme. I wasn't born when Doug first interviewed Brian in September 1956 when Clough was a young forward at Middlesbrough. Doug first watched Sunderland in 1941 and was still doing so in 2023, having spent a lifetime as an eminent journalist with the *Daily Herald* and later the *Daily Mail*.

'You must be joking! Of course Brian and I talked about his managing Sunderland,' replied Doug when I emailed him to ask about conversations he had with Clough about Brian possibly taking over at Sunderland. 'I set him up three times to be the manager; three times the board preferred someone else. As I've often made clear, the biggest regret of my career was that Brian didn't manage a North East club even though he'd succeeded as Sunderland's youth team coach.'

The three times Weatherall tried to set up Clough as Roker boss were when Alan Brown was appointed for a

second spell to replace Ian McColl in 1968, when Brown left to be replaced by Bob Stokoe in 1972 and when Jimmy Adamson was preferred to replace Stokoe (after a spell where Ian MacFarlane was in caretaker charge) in 1976. At the time of the first of that trio of attempts, Clough was early in his reign at Derby and yet to take them out of the Second Division and into the European Cup as league champions. By the second occasion Clough's Rams were league champions and at the third time of asking, Brian was at Nottingham Forest after his failures at Brighton and Leeds, but Forest's incredible glory years under the former Sunderland centre-forward were still to come. Having already won a quartet of trophies with Derby, there were a dozen to come with Forest. Might those have come to Roker if Sunderland had taken Cloughie on? Weatherall adds, 'Tom Cowie eventually offered Brian the job and handed him a signed cheque. Brian had the chance to write any amount, but it was too late; the Cloughs were too ensconced in the East Midlands.' As Cowie said himself, had he appointed him Brian might have been sacked about three weeks later. Infamously, Clough lasted just 44 days at Leeds so could have conceivably been in charge for under half that time at Sunderland. Sir Tom liked things done his way, and there would have been an inevitable clash.

There is no guarantee that had Clough come to Roker he would have been successful – he wasn't at Brighton or Leeds – but given his love for the club and how much backing he would have had from the support, there is every

chance that if Clough had carried on at the club where he ended his playing days, Sunderland's history would have experienced a major turning point. As of 2023 the 1973 FA Cup triumph remains the only major post-war success of one of the historical giants of English football. More than any man – and we're about to discuss some other major figures who came close to coming to Sunderland – the outcome had Clough come to Sunderland could well have been stratospheric.

JOCK STEIN

Jock Stein was the first manager to lead a British team to win the European Cup. His Celtic team – composed entirely of players born within 30 miles of their home ground – indeed all but one of them were from within 11 miles of Celtic Park – defeated Inter Milan in Lisbon in 1967, and will forever more be immortalised as the Lisbon Lions. However, had Stein had his way he would have become manager of Sunderland rather than Celtic.

Stein sold Irish international defender John Parke to Sunderland on 9 November 1964. At the time Stein was manager of Hibs and Sunderland were without a manager. Promoted for the first time earlier in the year, Sunderland had lost manager Alan Brown who had walked out over a dispute concerning whether or not he was able to buy the club house he lived in at a preferential rate. Brown – who was the biggest single influence on Brian Clough and Lawrie McMenemy and in turn a massive influence on Alan Durban, Bobby Saxton and Roy Keane, amongst

others – was not replaced until after Stein’s visit to complete the sale of Parke.

As Sunderland returned to the top flight, the club’s directors felt they could take charge. Coaches Arthur Wright and Jack Jones were nominally in charge of training with captain Charlie Hurley effectively the man his teammates looked up to for guidance, but Sunderland were struggling. When Stein arrived at Roker Park to sell Parke, Sunderland were third from bottom in the league, had just been beaten 3-0 by Spurs and had won just one of their 15 league games.

Jim Jeffrey was a student at Sunderland in the 60s before becoming programme editor at Hibs. In 2010 I asked him to tell the tale of Jock Stein’s hopes of leaving Easter Road for Roker Park. When I commissioned him to write an article for the Sunderland club magazine, Jim explained,

‘When interviewing Harry Hood recently, the former Sunderland and Celtic striker revealed that the legendary Jock Stein once harboured hopes of landing the Sunderland job. It was when travelling south in 1964 as Hibernian boss to sell John Parke to managerless Sunderland that Stein had noted that no replacement for Roker boss Alan Brown had been appointed. Several years later when Stein was managing Hood at Celtic, he confessed to Harry that he would have jumped at the chance to manage Sunderland and was disappointed that no

offer was made by the Roker Park directors during the course of the Parke negotiations.'

To be fair to Sunderland chairman Syd Collings, at the time Stein was not the major name he became, but nonetheless he did have a commendable record. As a player he had won the league and cup in just over 100 games for Celtic and won promotion with Albion Rovers in a modest career where his sole representative honour was in playing for the Scottish League in 1954. He had commenced his managerial journey in March 1960 with Dunfermline Athletic. As usual when a team changes manager at that stage of the season, the Pars were struggling, but Stein had an instant impact. Not only did he keep them up but in his first full season he won the Scottish Cup – beating Celtic in the replayed final to win the club's first-ever major trophy, after which Stein attracted interest from Newcastle United and Hibs.

Stein's second full season with Dunfermline saw them reach the quarter-finals of the European Cup Winners' Cup and fourth place in the league to qualify for Europe again. This time they beat Everton in a Fairs Cup win in a season when the Toffees won the league championship. Featuring former Sunderland winger Billy Bingham in their side, it was Everton's first-ever European tie, Stein's side overturning a first-leg deficit.

After almost exactly four years at Dunfermline, Jock was poached by Hibs, two days after his Dunfermline side had lost to Rangers in the Scottish Cup semi-final

at Hampden Park. Installed at Easter Road, one of Stein's main men was centre-forward Neil Martin, who like Parke – but not Stein – would soon make the move to Sunderland. Despite once again taking over a struggling side, Stein wasted no time in achieving success. At the time a 'Summer Cup' had been introduced for top-flight teams in Scotland. Jock's men defeated Aberdeen in a replay after a two-legged final in which former Sunderland centre-forward Andy Kerr scored twice for the Dons. It was Hibs' first success in a decade. As he continued to forge a burgeoning reputation, Stein was touted as a manager of Wolves and turned down the opportunity to become joint manager of Celtic (alongside Sean Fallon). It was around this time that he hoped to be offered the vacant Sunderland job when selling Parke.

Come the end of that season – in which he took Hibs to a much-improved fourth in the league and the semi-final of the cup – he moved on to Parkhead. Stein would reach legendary status as the manager who took Celtic to the European Cup in 1967 and nine consecutive league titles (ten in all), as well as eight Scottish Cups, six League Cups and six other trophies. A charismatic and much-loved character, I met Stein once. It was a brief meeting of a 15-year-old autograph hunter outside Parkhead before a friendly with Sunderland in 1973. It was hours before kick-off and he had time to stop and talk for a couple of minutes as he arrived at the stadium. Seeing the red and white scarves of my mate and I, Stein signed my autograph book and said we supported a great club. Little did I know

at that time how he had wanted to take up the mantle of Sunderland manager before going to Celtic.

Five days after Stein sold John Parke to Sunderland but returned to Edinburgh disappointed not to have been approached to take over the managerless Wearsiders, Sunderland's directors handed the reins to George Hardwick. A former England international, Hardwick had resigned as player-manager of Oldham Athletic in April 1956. Since then he had coached a US Army team in Germany and had coaching stints with Eindhoven and the Netherlands national team before taking over as coach of Middlesbrough's youth side, a role he had left a year before. In his autobiography, *Gentleman George*, Hardwick explains that while working as a journalist he was appointed as manager of Sunderland without actually applying for the post.

'In November 1964 I was in the Roker Park press room, simply collecting information for my column, when my career was to take yet another twist. Sunderland's club secretary, George Crow, called in to inform me that the chairman Syd Collings wished to speak to me. As I sat down in the plush surroundings of the chairman's office, I automatically presumed he was about to reveal the name of the club's new managerial appointment ... It was a bit of a scoop to be selected as the journalist who was exclusively invited into the chairman's office to be given the name of the new

boss. I eagerly awaited to see who it was going to be. So, you could have knocked me down with a feather when, right out of the blue, Syd Collings offered the position to me. I was the main character in the exclusive story I'd hoped to scoop. ... I'd been given no previous indication that my name was even under consideration for the vacant position. There was no formal interview process. Sunderland didn't want me to give them my CV or to try to explain why I was the right man for the job. The chairman simply said that the club would be pleased if I accepted the position. To say that I was taken aback by Mr Collings' offer was a complete understatement.'

Stein, meanwhile, spent less than two months at Hibs following his visit to Sunderland before he had a new job. On 31 January 1965 it was revealed he would be leaving Hibs at the end of the season to take over at Celtic. The rest is history, albeit in green and white rather than red and white.

DON REVIE

Don Revie played for Raich Carter at Hull City and was known for his tactical nous when at Manchester City. Under former Sunderland player Les McDowall, City's approach to the game became known as *The Revie Plan*. After coming to Roker Park, Don made 66 appearances for Sunderland. He went on to do for Leeds United what

Bill Shankly, Sir Matt Busby and Brian Clough did for Liverpool, Manchester United and Nottingham Forest – made them the dominant team of their era.

On 16 September 1964 the *Evening Chronicle's* front-page headline revealed that Revie had applied, in writing, to take over from Alan Brown at Sunderland. Revie was a year into a three-year contract at Elland Road. Always careful with expenditure as the club still reeled from the aftermath of being exposed for making illegal payments in the 50s, perhaps Sunderland's directors were reluctant to contemplate paying compensation for the Leeds manager. 'Under no circumstances will Leeds United release Don Revie from his contract,' declared Leeds chairman Harry Reynolds, despite being in hospital after a car crash. According to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* Revie visited Reynolds in hospital and remained keen to leave Leeds for Sunderland.

Sunderland chairman Syd Collings departed for Majorca – presumably for a holiday – and asked vice-chairman Laurie Evans to progress the move for a new manager. He was reported as saying, 'I have given the board a full mandate to negotiate in my absence and I have complete confidence in their ability to see the job through successfully.'

Maybe Revie recognised that the Sunderland team that went up with his Leeds side in 1964 were every bit as good as his United XI. Leeds edged the title in 1964 with Sunderland as runners-up. Sunderland beat Leeds at home and drew with them away. A cup run

that included a three-game quarter-final marathon with holders Manchester United cost Sunderland points after they had knocked out reigning league champions Everton – after Everton had eliminated Leeds. Revie's Elland Road class of 1963/64 had some great players, including six of the side who would lose the 1973 FA Cup Final to Sunderland, but in Jim Montgomery, Martin Harvey, Charlie Hurley, George Herd, Nicky Sharkey, Johnny Crossan and George Mulhall, for instance, Sunderland had as much quality.

Regardless of debates about which squad had the most talent, Leeds went in one direction after promotion and Sunderland went the other. In the first season after promotion Leeds were runners-up in both the cup and the league, missing out on the title only on goal average. By the time Sunderland were relegated in 1970, having never finished higher than 15th, Leeds had been champions, won the European Inter-Cities Fairs Cup and the League Cup, as well as being runners-up in the league three times, reaching another European final, two European semi-finals (including one in the European Cup), two FA Cup semi-finals and winning the Charity Shield. That is an incredible contrast in fortunes for two teams with a whisker between them when promoted together.

Leeds were rightly reviled for their gamesmanship and brutal play in this era, but there is no doubting their talent or success. Meanwhile, Sunderland dismally failed to progress. After losing manager Brown straight after promotion (he took Sheffield Wednesday to the FA

Cup Final in 1966), Sunderland struggled without a manager at all for almost half a season before appointing George Hardwick. After 'Gorgeous' George significantly improved the team, he was abruptly sacked amidst unconfirmed and unsubstantiated rumours of womanising close to home, although in his biography he makes no mention of this, instead suggesting his plans to promote Brian Clough to assistant manager played a part.

Hardwick's replacement, Ian McColl, oversaw deep rifts in the dressing room as the ex-Rangers man introduced a raft of players with Ibrox connections while alienating numerous previously successful Catholic players – something covered later in this book (see the Religious Divide chapter). Brown eventually returned and oversaw the club's – and his – second relegation in 1970. With Clough, Stein and Revie all wanting the Sunderland job in this period, it could – and should – have been so different!

Perhaps another reason for Revie to want to take charge of the red and whites was to outdo Brown. The pair had come to blows on the occasion of Revie's final Sunderland appearance at Rotherham in November 1958. Revie had scored as Sunderland won 4-0 but had a request to not travel home with the team turned down by the disciplinarian manager. Don Kitchenbrand scored a hat-trick in that game and simply replied, 'That's correct' when I put it to him that Revie and Brown had fought in the dressing room after that match. Add to all this the fact that Don Revie – like Brian Clough

– was an ex-Sunderland centre-forward and a North Easterner (like Clough, born in Middlesbrough) and the motivation for him to want to come to Roker Park and realise the potential he knew was there is entirely understandable.

Revie was to show that ultimately his number one aim was looking after number one. Never was this better seen than when he controversially and sensationally walked out as manager of England to take over as coach of the United Arab Emirates in 1977. Perhaps his application to manage Sunderland had an ulterior motive? He had wanted a five-year contract when becoming manager of Leeds rather than the three-year deal he was given. This move to manage Sunderland came early in his second year after he had succeeded in winning promotion in his first season. In between the 1973 FA Cup Final and Leeds's European Cup Winners' Cup Final under a fortnight later, Revie was reported to have sought the manager's position at Everton despite having a long-term contract at Elland Road.

On the night of the *Evening Chronicle's* report that Revie had applied for the Sunderland job, Leeds had a home game with Blackpool, which they won 3-0 despite Billy Bremner having two penalties saved by Tony Waiters. After the match an emergency board meeting at Elland Road stretched until beyond midnight. The conclusion was that not only would Revie remain at Elland Road but that, backdated to the end of the 1963/64 season, he would be given the five-year deal he had originally

wanted. It was undoubtedly a result for Revie, who told the *Evening Chronicle's* Len Hetherington,

'I am sorry to have caused Mr Evans so much trouble but Leeds were adamant about my staying with them. It looked like being a long, drawn out business because Leeds were determined to hold me to my contract which has 18 months to run. If they had agreed to let me go yesterday morning I would have been at Roker Park right away, but now it's over.'

BOBBY ROBSON

County Durham lad (Sir) Bobby Robson led England to within a penalty shoot-out of the FIFA World Cup Final at Italia 90. He won the FA Cup and UEFA Cup with Ipswich Town, where he was unfortunate to miss out on the league title after fixture congestion caught up with his team in 1981. He went on to win two league titles with each of PSV Eindhoven and Porto, as well as the European Cup Winners' Cup, Copa del Rey and Spanish Super Cup with Barcelona.

Long before Robson managed in the North East at Newcastle United, he shook hands on an agreement to take over as Sunderland manager. In 2007 former chairman Keith Collings came into my office at the Stadium of Light and explained,

'It wasn't paper talk. Bobby came to my house and met my directors. Bobby is a decent man. He said

he'd join Sunderland – I shook his hand and asked: “Do you want me to ring your chairman?” He said, “No, I'll have a word with him on Monday”. When he called me next, he said, “I'm sorry but my chairman won't release me and I'm not prepared to do the dirty on him”. He was convinced that he'd be released because of coming to the North East.'

After failing with attempts to appoint Brian Clough, Lawrie McMenemy and caretaker manager Dave Merrington after the departure of Jimmy Adamson to Leeds in the autumn of 1978, Sunderland moved for Robson, who had won the FA Cup the previous season with Ipswich. At the time Robson was only a short way into a very long-term contract with the Portman Road club, which meant that Sunderland would have to compensate Ipswich if Robson came to Roker.

Billy Elliott took over as caretaker manager for the second half of the 1978/79 season and took the club to within a hair's breadth of promotion. Although he was a popular ex-player and had been trainer to the 1973 FA Cup winners, clearly the board did not want to appoint the ex-England international, eventually appointing first-team coach Ken Knighton as manager, something that was unpopular with the players, although Knighton guided them to promotion in his first campaign in charge. The club had another go at attracting Robson in April 1979.

Quoted in *The People* of 22 April 1979, Robson refused to deny he had spoken to the SAFC board:

‘All I know is there’s supposed to be a job at Sunderland next season and that if a certain chap with a north east background applied, he might get it ... this Sunderland job is appealing and I need to think about it. At Ipswich I have the most perfect club, board and working conditions in the country but I do miss the fervour of an area like the north east where they can get crowds of more than 40,000. If we could get that at Ipswich no-one in his right mind would dream of leaving the club.’

Interviewed by Harry De Cosemo on www.thesetpieces.com, Charlie Woods, Robson’s scout and driver from Ipswich, recalled getting a call from Bobby to pick him up from Sunderland. Although his recollection is that the Sunderland chairman was Tom Cowie rather than Keith Collings (Cowie took over from Collings in 1980), he recalled, ‘So we get there and we’re sat in the car. He comes out and shakes hands with Tom Cowie the Sunderland chairman. He [Robson] gets in the car. I’m driving and Pat’s in the back [Pat is Woods’s wife]. We get onto the A1 and suddenly he turns to Pat and says, “Would you like to go back to the north east Pat? They’ve offered me the Sunderland job.”’ Woods went on to add, ‘He waited a couple of days and decided he didn’t want the job. The first club he ever thought about was Newcastle.’

Robson of course did manage Newcastle United many years later, being unceremoniously sacked by the Magpies in August 2004 after guiding the club to fifth place in

the Premier League and reaching the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup the previous season. Robson was to give great service to several clubs including Newcastle, as well as England. In his later years he seemed much happier coming to games at Sunderland than Newcastle during the spell the Magpies were owned by Mike Ashley. Had he followed up on his handshake agreement to take over at Sunderland, who knows how well he would have done on Wearside? Of the really big-name managers who might have taken over at Sunderland, that handshake shows Robson came closest.

The quartet of Clough, Stein, Revie and Robson are four of the most successful managers in the game since Sunderland's first-ever promotion in 1964. Alan Brown, who secured that promotion, was only the club's seventh-ever manager (excluding caretakers). Of course, over the years there have been many managerial near misses, men who wanted the job and weren't offered it or were approached but didn't take the bait.

In 2017 when chief executive Martin Bain sought to replace Simon Grayson, who had been in charge for 18 matches since Bain appointed him, the CEO asked former Sunderland striker Michael Bridges about Ange Postecoglou. An expert on football in Australia having played extensively there as well as working as a TV pundit, Bridges stressed to Bain how good Postecoglou was. Pointing out Postecoglou's phenomenal record of success in both Australia and Japan, Bridges assured Bain Postecoglou was the man for Sunderland. Bain ultimately

declined to offer the manager who has subsequently been such a huge success at Celtic (and in the summer of 2023 was appointed at Tottenham Hotspur) a chance at Sunderland, telling Bridges, because Postecoglou was an unknown, he would be a hard sell to the fans.

Perhaps unknown to Bain was that in the previous calendar year Postecoglou had been at the Stadium of Light as manager of Australia against England. On that occasion I had arranged for him to meet former Sunderland full-back Jimmy Shoulder, who had been a big influence on Postecoglou when Jimmy managed the Australia side in the late 70s. Instead Bain chose to go for former Wales manager Chris Coleman. He was a big name in British football and tried hard, only to ultimately fail to stop the team experiencing a second successive relegation in Bain's two years in charge. Had Postecoglou come to Sunderland to replace Grayson, quite possibly that awful relegation and subsequent years in League One might never have happened.

Missing out on managers is not a recent phenomenon. In the 1920s, for example, Newcastle-born George Jobey came close to taking over at Sunderland between the lengthy and successful reigns of Bob Kyle and Johnny Cochrane. Jobey had recently won promotion with Derby and took them to fourth in Division One two seasons later.

Brian Clough, Jock Stein, Bobby Robson and Don Revie all have statues to commemorate their achievements. Might one or more of those statues be on Wearside if they had come to Sunderland?