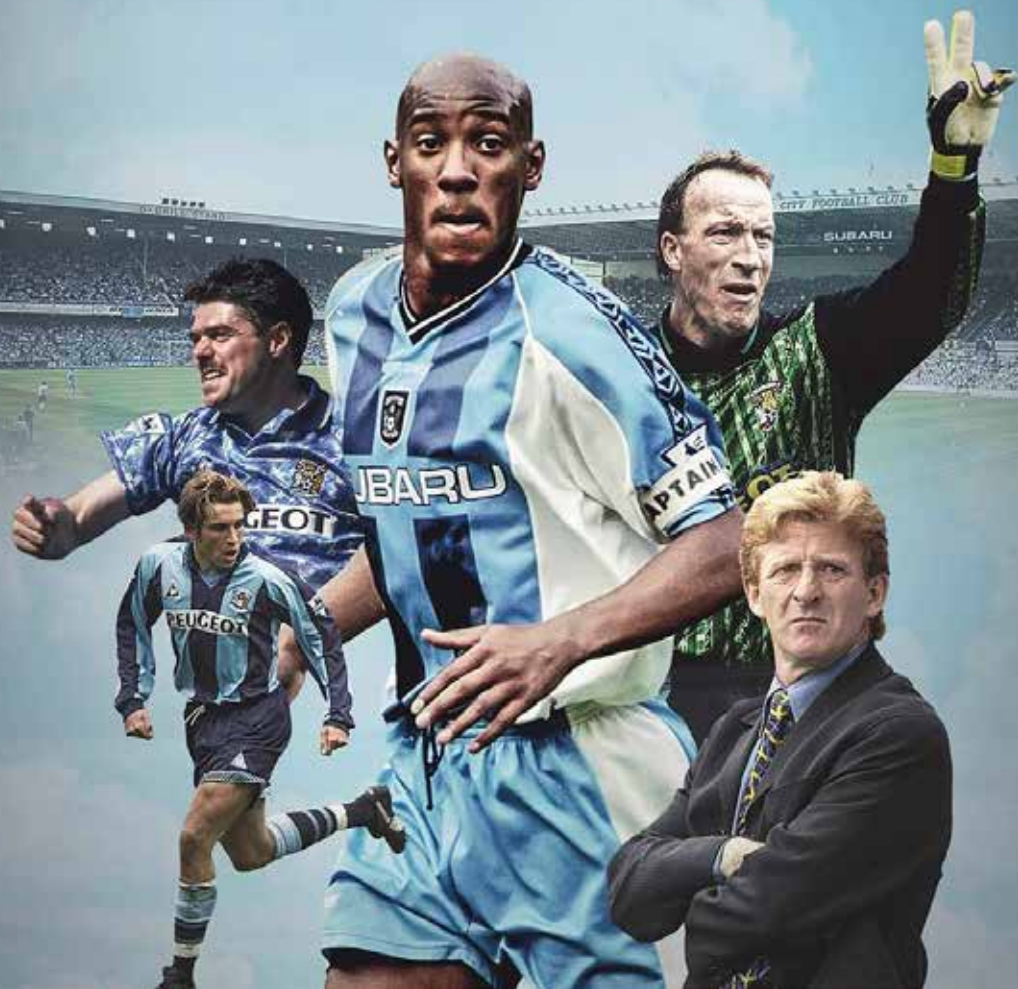


R I C H C H A M B E R L A I N

WHEN THE
SKY WAS BLUE

The Inside Story of
Coventry City's Premier League Years



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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction: The Beginning	9
1. A Whole New Ball Game	14
2. Quinny Does the Wright Thing	36
3. Bobby Out ... Phil Neal In.	48
4. The Glitz and Glamour of Big Ron	64
5. Here Comes the Money	77
6. Gordon Takes Over.	95
7. The Great Escape	113
8. Broken Records ... and Hearts	130
9. Dion Departs	153
10. The Entertainers	174
11. The End	199

1.

A Whole New Ball Game

UNORTHODOX. IF you put a gun to my head and asked me to describe Bobby Gould using one word, that would be my choice. I'm not quite sure why anyone would do that, but if it ever happens, the research and interviewing for this book has solidified 'unorthodox' as my pick. Gould did things his own way, as you will see over the next couple of chapters. For starters, they say never to go back, and this wasn't Gould's first dance at Highfield Road. A no-nonsense centre-forward by trade, he was signed by Jimmy Hill, penning his first professional contract in 1964. He went on to score 40 goals in 82 matches before moving on to Arsenal. He returned to Coventry as manager for a spell from 1983 to 1984. Despite the astute, cut-price signings of Steve Ogrizovic, Brian Kilcline and Cyrille Regis, among others, City found themselves scrapping at the wrong end of the table throughout Gould's first spell in charge, and in late 1984 he was sacked.

It was, therefore, a slight surprise that he returned for a second bite in 1992. Here we stood at the dawn of this new era for football and the gaffer who was trusted with leading the club at this time was an ex-manager sacked just a few years earlier. He was also a manager described by many, even in 1992, as 'old school'. However, while some of his methods may have belonged to a slightly bygone era, after the Butcher debacle the club was in need of a lift, and one thing Bobby

Gould can deliver is exactly that. The man bleeds sky-blue blood, too. I first spoke to Bobby for a *Coventry Telegraph* interview back in 2006 and his enthusiasm and passion for the club was remarkable and something that stuck in my head even as I dialled his number for an interview for this book some 16 years later.

On his return to the club, Gould was briefed that, while the Premier League was set to make the game richer than ever, he wouldn't be able to enjoy free spending. Instead, he would need to unearth lower league gems once more. That was no problem, though, as he had a secret weapon.

'The first time I met Bobby, he told me he would show me the future of the football club,' Stuart Linnell recalls of meeting Gould shortly after his first appointment as manager back in 1983. 'He took this little black book out of his pocket. It was full of names of footballers, locations and phone numbers. He went out and signed these players from non-league that none of us had ever heard of, because he thought they were the players who would be hungry and would do a job for the club.'

That little black book would certainly be put to the test in the coming months. The aforementioned trio of Ogrizovic, Regis and Kilcline had been snapped up for pennies during Gould's first reign and all went on to become club legends, so there was optimism that he could repeat the trick. Key signings that summer included John 'The Flying Postman' Williams, snapped up for £250,000, and defender Phil Babb, a relatively big-money acquisition by Gould's standards at £500,000 from Bradford City. This was textbook Gould, signing hungry young players from the lower divisions. Players who otherwise may not have got their chance in the big league. Players who felt a debt to Gould's confidence in them. Players who would run through brick walls for their manager. Gould reveals that they were also players within whom he saw himself.

‘I joined Coventry City when I was 15 on the ground staff,’ Gould says of his arrival at the club back in the 60s. ‘Billy Frith was the manager. I worked and worked, played in the B team, got my nose into the reserves but it wasn’t to be. It was a knock-back. I had to get a job as an apprentice heating and ventilation engineer. All of a sudden, Billy Frith got the sack and Jimmy Hill came in and invited all of the local lads back on to the training ground. I had a trial and Jimmy said he liked what I had done and he wanted me to come back that afternoon. I said, “No, I’m not coming back this afternoon Mr Hill, but I’ll come back next week.” The next Sunday I played in a trial for Jimmy Hill. He liked what he saw and he told me he’d like me to sign as an apprentice. He said, “But before you sign that contract, I want to know why you wouldn’t come last Sunday.” I told him that my dad, Roy Gould, was going blind and the only opportunity I had to see him was at 2pm on Sundays. He stood there, smiled and said, “You and me are gonna be alright, you know.” From there it all just flowed. I went through those tough times, just like the [lower league] players I was looking at when I was a manager. Those players, I had that feeling for them. I felt the spirit that they had. I had spirit, I would never give in and that’s what I related to when I would go and watch those players. I had a good assessment of lower league players and putting them into a group. I would say, “Right, you want to play professional football, you want to play in the top division, well here’s your opportunity.”’

Gould’s penchant for lower league talent is near-legendary, not least because he helped to launch the career of one of English football’s most iconic figures during his first run in charge at Highfield Road.

‘There’s the famous story about Stuart Pearce,’ says Stuart Linnell. ‘He wanted to check him out one more time so told his wife Marge he was taking her out for a meal. She asked where and he told her Stevenage, because that’s where Stuart

Pearce was playing on that night. She said, “Oh you’re not taking me to another football match!” He told her not to worry because it wouldn’t take long – and it didn’t. They were there for seven minutes. In that first seven minutes they saw Pearce, fairly, take out his man and deposit the ball in the back row of the stand. Bobby turned to Marge and said, “That’s enough for me.” They went out for their meal and the following week Stuart Pearce signed for Coventry.’

While Gould’s eye for a lower league gem can’t be called into question, I must say that during the research and interviewing for this book, I found that players generally fell into one of two camps. Some senior pros were critical of Gould’s second spell in charge. On the other hand, many of the players who Bobby brought to the club spoke with incredible warmth, with several describing him as the best manager they had worked for. It’s a fascinating split in the camp; at times it seemed like two different dressing rooms were being described. Here, I’ve done my best to give both sides their say.

Stewart Robson was signed by Terry Butcher from West Ham. A classy, former Arsenal midfielder who had once been on the cusp of a breakthrough for England, his career had been derailed by injuries and he had spent much of the few years before his arrival at Highfield Road on the treatment table rather than the pitch. After impressing in a short loan spell, Robson signed a permanent deal with Coventry and immediately slotted into the middle of the park. A player-of-the-year winner in his debut season with the club, Robson was enjoying his time in Coventry, but that was about to change.

‘I was really enjoying my football and decided that I wanted to spend a long time at Coventry,’ he says. ‘Unfortunately, the manager changed. With that, my good feeling towards the club changed. I had a lot of praise from all quarters in that first season [1991/92]. Bobby Gould came in and his first

words to me were that I had too much influence on the club and he was going to change that.'

The cultured midfielder believes that Gould had a simple way of lessening his influence – by selling him.

'I was getting phone calls from Tottenham and Aston Villa asking if I would be interested in going there,' he says. 'I challenged Bobby about this and he said he wanted me at the club but he was just seeing what my value was. I said I wanted to stay at Coventry, I loved it and had settled in. I knew he wanted me out. I knew I wasn't his kind of character. I was maybe a bit too strong for him at the time. It was a shame because it was such a good season the previous season and I had loved every minute of it.'

Meanwhile, long-serving full-back Brian Borrows wasn't a fan of the direct style of play that Gould introduced.

'I didn't really see the game the way Bobby saw it,' says Borrows. 'We'd been coached with John [Sillett], and Terry to a degree, where it was build-up play, we'd get the ball, we'd play it to feet, we'd get it to Cyrille and we'd go from there. Bobby's thoughts on the game were to just get it forward as quick as possible and almost play percentage football. I found that difficult. I'd been brought up at Everton and playing it out from the back. I'd like to think one of my main attributes was on the ball and I found it quite difficult under Bobby.'

Robson was another who didn't share Gould's vision of the game. The midfielder claims that the team's tactical approach during pre-season was to play the ball on the ground, to pass and move with pace. He reckons, however, this all changed when it came to the opening match with Middlesbrough.

'The strange thing was in pre-season he never mentioned long-ball,' he recalls. 'In pre-season we were passing the ball around. We got to the opening weekend against Middlesbrough and he told us what he wanted and what he expected. No more than two touches in midfield. I questioned why we had done pre-season as we had and now we were

doing this. As Bobby would, he would say, “Just do as I say.” There’s nothing wrong with long-ball football but don’t hide it behind something else. If you play long-ball well it can be effective, as it was in the opening weeks of the season. It got the best out of John Williams and Peter Ndlovu.’

That it most certainly did. While some players may not have agreed with Gould’s methods, there’s no denying that they worked, as City started the 1992/93 season in fantastic form. The Sky Blues kicked off the campaign with wins over Middlesbrough, Spurs and Wimbledon to sit proudly at the top of the Premier League table. The Premier League billed itself as a whole new ball game, and it seemed to be a game that Gould was more than equipped for.

<i>Team</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>GD</i>	<i>Pts</i>
1. Coventry	3	+4	9
2. Norwich	3	+3	7
3. QPR	3	+3	7

‘We were surprised at how well we started but we then just realised that you don’t have to be household names to be successful,’ says Robert Rosario, a striker signed by Butcher, but a player who flourished under Gould. ‘It just clicked and worked with us. It was a changing of the guard with the young guys getting chances, like Peter Ndlovu, John Williams and Lee Hurst.’

For others it was the same old game, despite the influx of flash and pizzazz from the broadcasters.

‘The Premier League felt like just another season under a different name,’ says Micky Gynn. ‘The only difference was that now you had all of these dancing girls before a TV match [laughs]. We won our first three games so that was a great start. We beat Spurs 2-0 but I missed a penalty. It was the first penalty to be missed in the Premier League, so I’ve got that claim to fame. It was on my 31st birthday as well.

John Williams scored both goals that day and we beat them comfortably. That sent a message, to beat Spurs away like that, it should have been three or four. John was a very underrated player. He was a breath of fresh air that season.'

'I had supported Spurs since I was seven years old,' goalscorer Williams says. 'I just wanted to play well. I left a little mark in their head that night. The second goal, everyone raved about how special it was, but that was my trademark goal. I scored lots of goals like that at Swansea because that's what I was engineered to do. The ball came through, I ran from the halfway line and left the defenders in my wake and slotted it right into the corner from an acute angle. They called us a route-one team but the move leading to the penalty was a passing move of the highest class. Because it was Gynny's birthday they got him to take the penalty. I don't think they trusted me to take it but, on the night, I think I would have scored because I was on a high.'

Williams certainly seemed to be a signing right out of the Bobby Gould scrapbook. He was known as the Flying Postman due to his victory at the Rumbelows Sprint Challenge, a race held before the 1992 League Cup Final to find the Football League's fastest player. Obviously, the fact that he used to be a postman also played a part in the nickname.

'People don't remember that I scored 13 Premier League goals in my first season, but winning a race at Wembley made me a superstar!' says Williams of his claim to fame. 'I played at Darlington [for Swansea] and it was my friend Jon Ford's birthday. We got back to Watford at about midnight because he only had this rubbish little Mini Metro. We went into the Hilton and, as it was Jon's birthday, we thought we'd go for a drink. We had a glass of champagne and carried on drinking. I got back to my room at about 4am. I was hammered. All the other players were being professional and were tucked up in bed before the race the next day. I was thinking, "It's only a race, who cares?" Next morning, I was asleep in the bath so

Fordy turns on the shower to wake me up. I go to grab him and he runs out shouting, "We're late, we're late!" I got in the shower, got my kit on and got in the lift with Keith Curle. It was me, Jon, Keith Curle and Keith's wife with all of these Man United fans around him. Keith had scored against them in the week and stuck his fingers up at them. They were spitting at him and trying to punch him. I think that affected him in the race. I was still really drunk. In the final, everyone went down into the blocks like in a proper race but in my head I knew if I got down there I was not going to be able to get back up. The gun for the race goes off and everyone gets off before me. I thought if I could catch them by halfway I'd win because I was faster once I got going. Well, the rest is history. I won £10,000 for 11.43 seconds' work.'

Williams netted three goals in the first two matches of the season, justifying the faith placed in him by Gould almost instantly. The manager had spotted the speedy striker while he was still in charge of West Brom.

'We were beating Swansea at The Hawthorns,' Gould recalls. 'This big, lanky fella was playing for Swansea and he had all this pace. We were coasting and all of a sudden this fella caused us all kinds of problems with his pace.'

'West Brom were hotly tipped for promotion at the time,' Williams remembers. 'I was pretty raw but pretty quick. The manager Frank Burrows told me to just go out there, do what I did and cause mayhem. West Brom were 2-0 up. The West Brom fans were all singing, thinking they were getting promoted, and all of a sudden I made three goals from three long balls over the top and we won 3-2. Afterwards, the fans were calling for Bobby's head and the next week they had a coffin at the ground with RIP Bobby Gould on it! Bobby said he couldn't believe the impact that I had in such a short amount of time on the pitch.'

The big lanky fella began the season working perfectly in tandem with another quick attacker with great balance, Peter

Ndlovu. Spotted years earlier by Sillett and signed for just £10,000, the Zimbabwean quickly made a name for himself thanks to his electric pace and eye for a special goal.

‘Peter came and in his first training session he was diving all over the place,’ Gynn recalls of Ndlovu’s arrival in 1991. ‘Nobody had touched him and he was diving on the floor. [Sillett] said to him, “Get yourself up, don’t start diving around in training.” He was such an exciting player. He could go past players without a problem.’

It was a dive of a different kind that Ndlovu was more accustomed to by the time 1992/93 rolled around. He showed this with a stooping headed goal before an assist for Lee Hurst that helped City to a 2-1 win over Sheffield Wednesday in what was the third of a four-match away-winning run.

We’ve already established that Stewart Robson and Bobby Gould didn’t exactly see eye to eye, but Robson is quick to admit that Gould got it right with the man known by some as the Bulawayo Bullet.

‘Peter Ndlovu wouldn’t have been at the club if Don Howe was still the manager,’ says Robson. ‘They had got frustrated with him and didn’t believe in him, really. He wouldn’t have been anywhere near the team come the start of that season. Bobby saw something in Peter Ndlovu that other people didn’t and he got the best out of him. He praised him and praised him and made him feel a million dollars.’

‘It’s like the Jimmy Hill thing with me, you look at people differently,’ Gould says of his trust in Ndlovu. ‘He had the balance and the blend. He just rocked, when he took someone on he would rock and still have good balance. There was only one place where he had to go and that was in the first team.’

The Gould–Ndlovu love-in was certainly mutual.

‘Bobby Gould was like a father to me,’ the Zimbabwean attacker says. ‘I remember one interview, and I still have this interview, he said if Peter Ndlovu was English he would be in the national team. He said that he would pay to watch me

train. He was a strict father, a strict coach, he said he gave me the platform to play so I had to perform and not take that for granted. He coached me and loved me like a son. I remember one game, I'd had a terrible first half. He said to me, "What are you doing?" As we were going out for the second half I just said to him, "Watch this." I played my heart out. I came in at full time and he said, "That's the Peter Ndlovu I know."

While the team were impressing on the pitch, there was to be an early season casualty in Micky Gynn. He was sidelined for three months after tearing ankle ligaments during the team's first defeat of the campaign, a 1-0 loss against QPR. The Sky Blues lost just two of their first 12 league matches, but there was a blip in the League Cup as lowly Scarborough overturned a 2-0 Coventry win in the first leg with a 3-0 thumping to dump City out. In the league, while certainly difficult to beat, Gould's men were notching up plenty of draws, a problem perhaps due to a lack of a clinical striker. Thankfully, the boss's little black book had an answer for that.

'I was with Pete Robbins and I said I needed a natural goalscorer,' Gould recalls. 'I needed someone that was going to live in the penalty box. I negotiated a deal with [Mick Quinn] from Newcastle. He sat in the office at Ryton and we had a good chat. I said I loved being in the six-yard box when I played and I saw him as a player who was going to score goals for us.'

Quinn has, in the years since, made no secret of his love of playing for Newcastle and it's likely that his first choice would have been to have stayed on Tyneside and fired the Geordies to promotion that season. But Kevin Keegan had other ideas.

'Keegan called me into the office at Newcastle and said Coventry wanted me,' Quinn recalls. 'I had a long chat with Kevin and the gist of the conversation was that I wasn't going to be a regular in the team there. Within a couple of hours I was getting on the motorway to Cov. Bobby said they had a young team, they played some good football, they just

needed to put the ball in the back of the net. He said I was the missing piece.'

However, there was one potential sticking point in the signing of Quinn that wasn't jotted down in the little black book but emerged during that first meeting.

Gould continues, 'He said he had to tell me that he'd backed us to go down! We both sat there, just laughing. He said, "You expect me to go score all of these goals and I've backed you to go down!"'

Quinn, or Sumo as he was affectionately known by fans for his slightly larger than typical frame for a top-flight athlete, instantly proved that he was the great goalscorer that Gould had been looking for. He notched an incredible ten goals in his first six matches after his move from Newcastle. His arrival also proved a boon for Robert Rosario. The striker had struggled since his £600,000 transfer from Norwich in 1991, particularly as he had been labelled as the much-loved Regis's replacement. Suddenly, with Quinn as the focal point, Rosario dropped into a slightly deeper role and quickly developed a deadly understanding with his roly-poly partner.

'Quinny was one of the most unbelievably natural goalscorers there has ever been,' Rosario says of his partner. 'The guy didn't care what he looked like, he could just score goals in his sleep. God gave him that gift. We made each other better. For clubs like Coventry you need that chemistry because you don't have the same budget as the big guys.'

'Micky Quinn coming in, when you saw him you thought he didn't really look the part, not an athlete,' Stewart Robson adds. 'He was a bit of a Jack-the-lad, but a lovely bloke. He was obviously a good finisher. You were so surprised how he managed to find the space or hold off a challenge. He was a perfect fit for Bobby Gould. He was a little bit unconventional, lived on confidence, a bit mad at times but a very good finisher and knew how to find space in the box. He gave the club a lift.'

He got more out of players around him, like Robert Rosario, and Ndlovu was flying down the wing.'

Ndlovu *was* flying down the wing, although sometimes Quinn wasn't exactly sure where the Zimbabwean would end up.

'Peter would drive me absolutely fucking potty!' Quinn laughs. 'He would beat 15 players, I'd be waiting in the box and all he'd have to do was roll it back to me for a tap-in and he'd try to bend it around 19 people to score. Then he'd beat 19 people and lash one in the top corner. He was an explosive player. As a character, I took a shine to him, he was bubbly all the time, very skilful and he was a match-winner. He could create a goal out of nothing, he was a top player.'

Quinn's goals were all well and good but, despite bagging six in his first four matches, his efforts failed to inspire City to a single victory, instead falling to a 3-2 defeat against Manchester City, followed by three draws. After 19 matches of the season, the Sky Blues had slipped from early season table toppers to tenth, having been leapfrogged by the likes of Manchester United, Aston Villa, Norwich and their next opponents, Liverpool. Quinn again was on song and so were his teammates as Graeme Souness's men were swept aside in a thrashing.

The pre-match signs, however, didn't look promising. Coventry would be missing the calming experience of Steve Ogrizovic in goal due to injury and were forced to call upon a rookie to make his debut. Gould was fully aware of what that particular rookie could do, as it was his son Jonathan.

'It was a dream,' the younger Gould says when discussing his ascension to the first team. 'I woke up on the morning of the Liverpool game not thinking I was playing. I got a phone call from the manager, my father, saying Oggy had hurt his neck and I'd be making my debut against Liverpool that afternoon.'

A father and son link-up within a club may be relatively unusual but, in fact, Coventry saw the same thing a few years

later as Gordon Strachan's sons Gavin and Craig buzzed around the fringes of the first team. During the interviews for this book, both Bobby and Jonathan mentioned the word nepotism. They clearly share concerns that those on the outside, or perhaps even those within the club, harboured thoughts that Jonathan may have been fast-tracked into the team. In fact, Jonathan suspects that, perhaps due to that fear of nepotism in the back of his mind, his dad was harsher on him than the rest of the squad. One thing his team-mates certainly had going for them over their young goalkeeper was that they could escape the gaffer after a poor performance. Not so for Jonathan, who was still living in the family home when he broke into the first team.

'There were times when I was a little bit petulant and the hammer would come down harder on me,' he says. 'Nepotism isn't a very nice word and I struggle with it. If my dad had been a butcher and I had joined the business, then it would have been Bobby Gould Butchers and Son. It just followed that my grandfather was a footballer, my dad, me and my son also. There were some challenges when I was living at home. I was told to move out a couple of times! As a player you're home before the manager, so I'd be home after a match, settled in front of *Home and Away* or *Neighbours* and he'd come in and his scowl would be there after a defeat. That was the point when we both felt it was best for me to move out.'

It's safe to assume that Jonathan was able to enjoy *Neighbours* in peace after his debut performance, as he proved himself a more than able deputy when Liverpool came to Highfield Road six days before Christmas in 1992. The visitors started the better and Gould was by far the busier of the goalies for much of the first half. Then, on 37 minutes, Jamie Redknapp felled Lee Hurst in the box and Brian Borrows dispatched the resulting penalty with supreme confidence. The ball shot into the roof of the net, more by accident than design, it later transpired.

‘To be honest, I didn’t quite mean to put it right in the top corner,’ Borrowas admits. ‘I wanted it that side of the goal but even I had a little bit of a scare as it just went under the bar.’

If the first goal was a thunderous effort, the second was a real rocket. Borrowas was again the scorer, lashing home after a clever free kick that looked fresh from the training ground but, as with the penalty, looks can be deceptive.

‘The second goal wasn’t rehearsed,’ Borrowas says. ‘Kevin Gallacher was on the free kick and just saw me a few yards to the side. He rolled it across to me and I took a shot. It found its way into the corner of the net. It was just off the cuff. It must be the only game where I ever scored two goals! Everything that we touched seemed to go in that night.’

The change between the sticks wasn’t the only difference that day. Rosario proudly wore the captain’s armband for the first time. He admits that it came as a shock to everyone, most of all himself and his poor, unaware mum in the crowd.

‘I’d never been a captain before,’ he says. ‘Robbo was injured and then Oggy was injured so we were sitting in the changing room and Gouldy looked at me and said, “Hey, you’re going to lead the team out today.” I thought he was messing around. He sat next to me and said, “You don’t realise what a leader of men you are.” I said I’d never been a captain before and he said, “You’re a leader.” To be captain against Liverpool at home; wow. I usually came out of the tunnel at the back, and I led us out and I saw my mum in the crowd mouthing, “What are you doing?” I looked up and shrugged my shoulders! I think I got three assists that game and man of the match. It was textbook Gouldy, he was so left of centre. He was a little bit old school but not set in his ways. He was like Cloughie, where he was different. The players loved Gouldy. I loved that man.’

The new skipper played in Gallacher for the third of the night, before Redknapp pulled one back with a stunning free kick that wouldn’t have been stopped even if City had both

Gould and Ogrizovic in goal. Redknapp's eventful evening took a turn moments later, however, as he was sent off for a foul on Gallacher. From there, that man Quinn got in on the act and bagged a brace. It ended Coventry 5 Liverpool 1. Scouser Quinn was delighted to have got one over his boyhood team, even if his family weren't quite so keen.

'I brought my dad and uncles down for the game, they're all Liverpool fans,' he says. 'They thought, "Let's hope our Mick has a good game but we hope Liverpool batter them." That was one of our best all-round games as a team and *we* battered *them*. I put the cream on top of the cake with my two, the last two of the game. I was buzzing afterwards. I got to the players' lounge and saw my dad and uncles and they had faces as long as Ruud van Nistelrooy's! I gave them a right bollocking.'

It wasn't just goals that Quinn brought to the team. Throughout my work on this book I've heard from numerous players and managers about the importance of the spirit in the dressing room. By all accounts, Coventry had a great blend of characters in the camp for much of the 90s. Quinn's addition to this particular dressing room was certainly a positive one.

'Micky came in and was like a breath of fresh air,' Micky Gynn assesses. 'Over his whole career he's scored loads of goals. He's not someone who's going to outrun many defenders but get the ball into the box and he was as sharp as a tack. He was a great character. I remember when we played Norwich in the cup in midweek and then we were playing them in the league three days later, so we decided to stay over there in a hotel rather than driving home and back again. Mick organised a table tennis competition between the players. He was the bookie. On the quiet, I said "Listen Quinny, I guarantee I can win this competition because I'm pretty good at table tennis." I'd won a competition years before at Peterborough United. I'm built like a table tennis player, quite short with good backlift. Some lads put some money on me.'

I got to the final against Jonathan Gould and beat him quite comfortably. Me and Quinny cleared up with the betting because I'd given him that inside information!'

'What a character,' Brian Borrows continues. 'He was probably the most unfit player I played with but he was the best finisher. He was the most obsessive finisher. Whether it be in training or a five-a-side, all he was interested in was scoring goals. It's a shame we didn't get him in the top division when he was younger and in his prime. We got him towards the end of his career. Imagine having him in the Sillett era, up front with Cyrille Regis.'

It wasn't just his fellow players that were quickly seeing the benefits of Quinn's arrival. He became an almost instant fan favourite. I was only seven years old at the time, but distinctly remember being in awe of this heavy-set goal machine. The local media also picked up on the moustachioed goal-getter.

'He's fat and round and scores at every ground!' Stuart Linnell laughs. 'He was the fastest man over a yard that you'll ever see. He had a point to prove. He felt he hadn't been given a fair deal previously in football. Here he was, given a chance by Bobby Gould, who he still calls gaffer, by the way! He holds him in high regard because he gave him that chance. I think Bobby probably identified with Micky a little bit, they were in a similar mould.'

You'd expect a 5-1 thumping of Liverpool to be the highlight of any season in Coventry's history, but just one week later they pulled an equally momentous result out of the bag. This time Aston Villa were the visitors to Highfield Road. Gould's men served up a Christmas cracker. Their preparation was typically unorthodox for a Bobby Gould team.

'On Boxing Day when we beat Villa, before the game [assistant manager] Phil [Neal] took us for a run around outside the stadium,' Rosario recalls. 'It was snowy and icy and we were running around the stadium. We thought he was out of his mind, it was embarrassing! Maybe it worked though.'

Brian Borrows, meanwhile, recalls a walk across the snow-covered Stoke Park grass with Gould prior to kick-off. Whichever way you slice it, trudging through snow and ice isn't your typical warm-up for a match against your local rivals. It did the trick though. Coventry romped to a 3-0 win. Quinn bagged the first with a neat, hooked finish, before he added a second from a Rosario cross. The duo linked up again to complete the scoring, this time Quinn assisting Rosario to make it 3-0.

'Highfield Road, when it was full, was incredible and had a fantastic atmosphere that day,' says Quinn of the Villa match. 'It could be very intimidating. Me and big Rob were on great form. The first goal, Hursty played it to Robert, he flicked it on and I hit it as sweet as a nut with my left foot. It was a guided volley, it wasn't about power, it was precision.'

The result meant that, at the halfway point of the season, Coventry were seventh in the table, just eight points behind surprise league leaders Norwich. If anyone was getting carried away, the trip to Old Trafford that came next brought everyone back to earth with a bump. After witnessing the Sky Blues humble two of their title rivals, Manchester United weren't going to underestimate Bobby Gould's men.

'I remember being very nervous on the day,' says Jonathan Gould, who was once again in goal. 'My dad said to me in the dressing room at Old Trafford, "If you can keep the ball out of the net for the first 20 minutes, we've got a chance." We were on a bit of a run ourselves. Well, Giggs put one in the top corner and Mark Hughes put one in the bottom corner and we came in at half-time 2-0 down. Dad looked at me as if to say, "I did say about the first 20 minutes," and I countered by saying, "I think it was 23 and 25 minutes that they scored their goals!"'

A 5-0 hammering was certainly a setback, but the team were still comfortably in the top half of the table at the start of 1993. That's not to be sniffed at after a final-day escape

to stay in the division the previous year. The excellent form can be attributed to the goalscoring prowess of Quinn, but it's also difficult to ignore the spirit and game plan that Gould had put into place. Despite not being every player's cup of tea, the 11 on the pitch were doing the job set for them and doing it well. Gould had showed faith in Ndlovu, which had been richly rewarded. He had also signed a pair of bargains in Williams and Babb, while the likes of Rosario and Hurst were in the form of their lives. No doubt buoyed by this excellent run, it was around this time that my dad decided to take me to my first match. On 30 January 1993, I sat in the Family Stand and watched what was, quite frankly, a diabolical game of football. We lost 2-0 to Wimbledon, going behind as early as the fourth minute, having been undone by a goal from the archetypal 90s football playboy, Dean Holdsworth. Not the start to my match-attending career that I, or my dad, would have hoped for, but I was at least off and running. More importantly, we got back to winning ways a week later with a 2-0 win away at Middlesbrough and all once again looked rosy.

It wasn't to last, unfortunately. In late April, with the team riding high in the table, Rosario was sold to Nottingham Forest. Judging by goals alone, many thought the striker wouldn't be a big miss. He had bagged just four goals all season. But his presence and link-up play had benefited the likes of Gallacher, Ndlovu, Williams and, especially, Quinn.

'I'm aware people said I didn't score enough goals and I fully agree with them, but if we had assists like they do now, I guarantee I'd have been top of the assists league every single year,' he asserts. 'Whether it was with Kevin Gallacher, Quinny or at Norwich and Forest, I've always been a team player. I didn't score a lot of goals but my team-mates scored – I made them millionaires because I created a lot of chances. My team-mates like Quinny loved me because of that and I loved them too.'