

WORST GAME EVER

Journeys into the
Agonies of Defeat

Phil Harrison



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Chapter One

From Tranmere to Trabzonspor

Aston Villa 2 Trabzonspor 1

(2-2 on aggregate; Trabzonspor win on away goals rule)

**UEFA Cup, second round, second leg, 11
November 1994, Villa Park, Birmingham**

Attendance: 23,858

Aston Villa: Nigel Spink, Earl Barrett, Steve Staunton, Ugo Ehiogu, Paul McGrath, Kevin Richardson (captain) (**Garry Parker, 68 minutes**), Ray Houghton, Andy Townsend, Dean Saunders, Dalian Atkinson, Andy King. **Unused substitutes:** Mark Bosnich, Michael Oakes, Graham Fenton, Chris Boden. **Head coach:** Ron Atkinson.

Trabzonspor: Viktor Grishko, Hamdi Aslan, Ogün Temizkanoglu (**sent off, 70 minutes**), Kemal Serdar, Tolunay Kafkas, Abdullah Ercan, Cengiz Atila, Ünal Karaman (captain), Soner Boz, Hami

Mandirali (**Kakhabar Kacharava, 76 minutes**),
Orhan Kaynak (**Osman Özköylü, 80 minutes**).

Unused substitutes: Nihat Tümkaya, Mehmet Yener, Ender Tras. **Head coach:** Şenol Güneş.

Referee: Jaap Uilenberg (**Netherlands**).

Shortly before 6pm on 27 February 1994 – bitterly cold, dark Sunday – Villa Park was immersed in a tsunami of insane celebration, not witnessed since the days of the improbable yet triumphant European Cup run that saw the Villans crowned champions of the continent in May 1982.

Since 1982, the famous, fabulous old stadium – the Trinity Road End designed by the great Scottish architect Archibald Leitch – had been party to many disappointments. The shambolic dissimulation of that now legendary Villa side culminated in inglorious relegation from the top flight at the close of the 1986/87 season. Five short years after that iconic night in Rotterdam, an air of shared disbelief and a rare pessimism had gestated amidst Villa's habitually positive fanbase. It was failure that concluded in the sacking of the coach, the much maligned (amongst dwellers of the Holte and Trinity anyway) Billy McNeill.

Under the tenure of the newly appointed Graham Taylor, Villa achieved an immediate, if somewhat scruffy, promotion back to the old Division One, playing a direct brand of football that had become the trademark of the Taylor teams of the 1980s and early 1990s. The talismanic coach guided a workmanlike

Villa side to a second-place finish in 1989/90 season, the promise of a return to previous glories inciting fresh optimism amongst the followers of the team from B6.

Much of Taylor's agrarian spadework was undone the following season, the appointment of Slovak coach Jozef Vengloš pitching the club into the throes of another relegation battle – one which they only narrowly escaped.

Many opined that Vengloš's coaching methods were 'too progressive' for the urgent, blood and thunder British game of that era. Although there was a resonant truth amid these musings, the overriding reality was that the Villa fans were turned off by the insipid performances and regular, calamitous defeats. *Pass the ball patiently from the back via midfield? No thanks, Uncle Jo!*

The Villa board (under the tutelage of their outspoken chairman and major shareholder, Doug Ellis), desperate to avoid a repeat of the club's recent relegation misfortunes, decided to go big. In the summer of 1992, 'Deadly Doug' – renowned for his zero-tolerance approach to chairmanship – unveiled the flamboyant and recurringly quotable Ron Atkinson as the new manager tasked with steering Aston Villa into the monied futureworld of the new Premier League era.

Atkinson's appointment witnessed a qualitative improvement in Villa's style of play over the following two seasons, bringing another second-place finish at the end of the inaugural Premier League season of 1992/93. Whereas the football produced by Graham

Taylor's overachieving Villa in 1989/90 had been direct and laboured, 'Big Ron's' 1992/93 edition reached their pinnacle playing a possession-based, continental style of the beautiful game that beguiled opponents and fans alike. 'Total Football', of a sort, had arrived in north Birmingham.

Fast-forward to 27 February 1994 and Villa – not nearly as potent in the league now but firmly establishing themselves as a useful cup side – faced a Tranmere Rovers team modelled in a similarly expansive style to Atkinson's Villa by their gaffer, London-born adopted Scouser John King.

When Tranmere Rovers took to Villa Park's hallowed turf for the League Cup semi-final second leg, Aston Villa's season was at the point of implosion. An atrocious first-leg performance at Prenton Park 11 days prior had gifted their lower league opponents a 3-1 lead that could've been much, much worse had Dalian Atkinson not volleyed home a contextually vital consolation – the precious commodity of an away goal – with their hosts leading 3-0 deep into injury time. Three days later, Villa were dumped out of the FA Cup at Bolton, Alan Stubbs smashing in a late free kick winner.

Villa's league season was also stuttering, an inability to create chances and score goals a real worry for the claret and blue faithful. However, on a crisp Sunday afternoon in front of the TV cameras, Villa emerged from their slumbers, producing a focused, intense performance that annulled Rovers' first-leg lead.

After 120 minutes of high-octane, proper football, the aggregate scores were level at 4-4, goals from Dean Saunders, Shaun Teale and Dalian Atkinson rescuing the tie for Villa.

With penalties came additional drama, Tranmere's Liam O'Brien coming within one converted spot kick of taking the team from the Wirral to Wembley. A fabulous stop, low to his right, by Villa's Australian custodian of the sticks Mark Bosnich was greeted with wild delight by the home support. When England international Tony Daley then nervelessly dispatched his kick, Villa led 5-4. The responsibility to save the tie fell to Tranmere full-back Ian Nolan. Nolan had scored his only Tranmere career goal in his club's 3-1 home win versus Villa but there was a palpable air of inevitability as the young defender stepped forward. His kick was poor, Bosnich this time plunging left to bat away Nolan's nervy strike.

The joyous chaos that ensued served to disguise the fitful nature of Villa's overall seasonal form. Indeed, as they approached the Wembley showpiece against Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, Atkinson's side were deeply entrenched in a dismal run that saw them lose three consecutive league fixtures prior to the League Cup Final; Ipswich, Leeds and Oldham the grateful and unlikely victors.

Once again, Villa galvanised themselves for the big game against a powerful United side – a team that would go on to win the Premier League and FA Cup double that season. With the tungsten spine of

Gary Pallister and Steve Bruce at their defensive core and the brilliant and brutal Paul Ince and Roy Keane marshalling the middle of the park, flanked by the creative ingenuity of Andrei Kanchelskis and Ryan Giggs and spearheaded by the nonchalant Gallic flair of Eric Cantona and bullish strength of Mark Hughes, Villa didn't have a prayer, surely?

When Ron Atkinson announced the team to face the fully realised powerhouse that was Ferguson's United, many were staggered by the surprise inclusion of Geordie rookie Graham Fenton. Aged just 19, Fenton had made his Villa debut against Leicester City in January but wasn't on the radar, selection-wise, for a game of such magnitude.

But Atkinson, a wily and intelligent tactician, saw in Fenton a player who – amidst an ageing Villa midfield that contained Kevin Richardson and Andy Townsend – would add the speed and nous to make darting runs in between United's defensive midfield line, dragging Ince and Keane into areas they weren't usually keen to go. This allowed Richardson and Townsend the time and scope to dictate the pace of the game from the centre of the field – and it was their metronomic cadence that proved key to Villa's subsequent 3-1 win.

For Atkinson, sacked by United in November 1986, it served as gratifying vengeance – especially so in the wake of Villa's narrow second-place finish behind Ferguson's Reds in the Premier League the season prior.

However, the 1994 League Cup Final proved the acme of Atkinson's Villa reign.

Victory against United secured Villa's place in the 1994/95 edition of the UEFA Cup. It was a good job, too, as their league form dipped horrendously after the final. In the nine games that remained post-Wembley, Villa won twice, scoring only six times.

As the 1994/95 season rolled around, Villa fans were far from enamoured with Ron Atkinson's ventures into the transfer market. Holte End favourites Tony Daley and Neil Cox were offloaded to Wolverhampton Wanderers and Middlesbrough respectively, replaced by Phil King from Sheffield Wednesday and PSV Eindhoven's Ghanaian wonderkid, Nii Lamptey. The latter had been dubbed 'The New Pele' but it was a signing that promised much more than it ever delivered.

But it was Villa's centrepiece signing – a key statement of Atkinson's stylistic intent – that baffled and irked the Villa fans. John Fashanu's arrival from aesthetically bereft, spit-and-sawdust outfit Wimbledon for the huge sum of £1.35m posed more questions than it answered: why was Atkinson, a manager whose teams were naturally attuned to the finer nuances of the beautiful game, buying a player like John Fashanu? It was akin to a crop-top on a septuagenarian. Fashanu – direct, confrontational and ferocious in style – seemed an immensely inappropriate fit.

A goal on his debut at Everton on the opening day of the 1994/95 season temporarily quietened discontent and a five-match unbeaten start – albeit

incorporating three draws, two of them at home to modest Southampton and Crystal Palace sides – masked the slow degeneration of an ageing and broken team. Fashanu would make only 13 appearances for Aston Villa, scoring three times. A cruciate injury sustained at Old Trafford in early 1995 ended his career.

However, the first-round draw for the UEFA Cup provoked considerable excitement for those connected with the club. Villa were pitted against Italian behemoths (and UEFA Cup holders) Internazionale of Milan. It was a draw that evoked recent memories of Villa's 1990/91 UEFA Cup second-round tie against the same opposition. In a quite brilliant display, a 30-yard howitzer by centre-half Kent Nielsen, coupled with a neat finish from the inspirational David Platt, gave Vengloš-led Villa a 2-0 lead to take to the San Siro. Their good work was undone by a dreadful showing in Milan, Inter winning 3-0, with Villa, on the night, a muted doppelganger of their first-leg selves. The home leg at Villa Park was to prove the zenith of Vengloš's short-lived tenure.

This time, the first leg saw a domestically unbeaten Villa travel to the San Siro where a late, debatable penalty – awarded by Danish official Peter Mikkelsen and converted by Dutch forward Dennis Bergkamp – gave the Nerazzurri an undeserved but potentially crucial 1-0 lead to protect in Birmingham.

Upon the Italians' return to Villa Park, their hosts were already showing signs of the wear and tear and

malfuction that culminated in a long, winless run that would eventually signal Ron Atkinson's exit.

In the games preceding the second leg, Villa's unbeaten run had been emphatically culled, back-to-back away defeats at West Ham and Blackburn putting paid to any illusions of a title-challenging campaign. Yet, on the night of 29 September 1994, the Villans produced another gutsy and intense performance. Roared on by the 30,000 inside the stadium, Ray Houghton crashed in a close-range drive to level on aggregate before the resultant penalty shoot-out cast new signing Phil King as the hero, his decisive penalty – after Ruben Sosa's kick had hit the underside of Nigel Spink's bar – winning the tie for Villa.

Villa's reward for their thrilling victory against Inter was a double date with seemingly modest opposition in the shape of Turkish club Trabzonspor.

Ironically, it was Villa manager Tommy Cummings who, upon Trabzonspor's formation in 1967, had, in an act of kindness, donated spare Villa match kit to the emerging Turkish *Kulübü*. They have worn the claret and blue bestowed upon them by the Midlands club ever since.

Karadeniz Fırtınası – the 'Black Sea Storm', as Trabzonspor are known to their legion of committed *destekçiler* (that's 'supporters' to an English speaker) – qualified for the 1994/95 edition of the UEFA Cup by finishing third in the Turkish 1. Lig behind the perennial forces of Istanbul rivals Galatasaray and Fenerbahçe. Trabzonspor's outstanding form in

the 1994/95 season, coupled with a first-round win against Dinamo Bucureşti, had flown largely under Villa's radar; a comfortable passage was expected for Big Ron's side.

In the games prequelling the first leg, Villa descended into freefall, losing four of five Premier League games before a tepid home 1-1 draw with Norwich City four days before the Trabzonspor fixture partially stemmed the rising negative tide.

Atkinson's side arrived at Trabzonspor's hostile Hüseyin Avni Aker Stadyumu – a tinderbox of fire and smoke – with their confidence brittle. Yet, in the first half-hour, they bossed the game, Guy Whittingham wastefully squandering an early chance, ballooning a Ray Houghton pull-back against the underside of the Turkish bar from five yards when it seemed almost impossible to miss.

After the half-time break, Trabzonspor gained impetus, Hami Mandirali spanking a ferocious volley against the crossbar minutes prior to Orhan Kaynak bulleting home a headed set-piece winner late on. It proved a sobering defeat, beset with all of the confidence-draining detritus that came with it. A further duet of 2-0 defeats – Nottingham Forest at home and QPR away – added to the air of panic that was quickly manifesting itself around Villa Park. The performances were bad enough but it was the team's lightweight attack that came under starkest scrutiny, Villa's source of goals having almost totally dried up.

The Trabzonspor tie was welcomed by the fans as a distraction from the perils of league form; an opportunity to rack up the goals and enhance their diminishing, collective morale. However, Villa's awful sequence of results and ITV's live coverage of the game ensured that a reduced number of the faithful attended the second leg. Short of 24,000 were at the stadium to watch the events of that ill-fated night joylessly unfold.

As Trabzonspor took to the Villa Park turf, it was a scene redolent of a previous Turkish visit to the stadium. I'd stood on the Holte End when Fenerbahçe were the visitors in 1977. Those were very different times, when worldly connection was in its infancy. In my seven-year-old imaginings, the Fener players – dark-skinned, exotic, enigmatic – may as well have been teleported from a different planet, so jarringly alien to 70s British sensibilities was their appearance.

The 17 years that had elapsed since Fenerbahçe's visit observed a minor sway in public acceptance of visiting foreigners but this was an overview generally lost on your average mid-90s terrace dweller.

Trabzonspor's coach, Şenol Güneş, was establishing himself, within the then narrow remit of Turkish football, as an adept, pragmatic and thoughtful coach. The ex-Turkish international and Trabzonspor goalkeeper had spent his playing career observing a myriad of footballing styles and it was a stored wisdom he would transpose upon his determined Trabzonspor team. It would also be fashioned into the winning

formula that would take Güneş's Turkey to the semi-finals of the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea.

After a nervous start by the home side, in which Soner Boz forced Nigel Spink into a full-stretch save, Villa began to create – and miss – a stream of presentable chances, Trabzonspor's Ukrainian keeper, Viktor Grishko, making a catalogue of excellent and heroic stops.

At half-time, the score remained level, the visitors 1-0 ahead on aggregate courtesy of Orhan Kaynak's solitary strike in Trabzon.

Beneath ironic plumes of claret and blue smoke, the Trabzonspor fans – 2,000 in number – positioned in the old away terrace, shadowed by the North Stand, were in vociferous voice, gleefully celebrating their team's successful act of first-half attrition. In the stands and terraces of the home support, silence reigned as quiet sedition bubbled.

The second half continued in the same vein as the first, Villa's continued profligacy allowing the Turks to preserve their fragile lead, layering further frustration upon the increasingly agitated home contingent. Trabzonspor's niggling, petty fouls and reversion to time-wasting were inciting an ever more noxious mood among baying home fans. The visitors, as an attacking entity, were now offering nothing. The clock ticked on ...

With 12 minutes remaining, a further wave of now-incessant Villa pressure culminated in a Steve Staunton free kick being whipped high into the visitors'

box, prompting a messy and prolonged bout of 18-yard-box pinball, Trabzonspor players defending raggedly. A loose ball eventually broke to Villa defensive legend Ugo Ehiogu, whose mis-hit volley dug deep into the turf before arching upwards on to the head of Dalian Atkinson five yards from goal. His header beat Grishko in the Trabzonspor goal but was batted off the line by the right hand of centre-half Oğün Temizkanoglu. Dutch referee Jaap Uilenberg pointed immediately to the spot, red-carding the offending defender.

At last, with 12 minutes remaining, Villa had their chance. With a one-man advantage and a penalty award in the bag, surely this would prove a defining and restorative moment in a season that was threatening to slip away from Ron Atkinson's side.

The ball was presented to Steve Staunton. Amid the burgeoning powder-keg pressure, a man of Staunton's experience and poise seemed a perfect personnel 'fit' for such a scenario. Indeed, he had nervelessly blasted home his penalty in Villa's shoot-out victory against Inter in the previous round. But, on the night, with the surrounding mood poisonous and visceral, doubt resonated. The Turkish players surrounded the Republic of Ireland international, attempting, by any means necessary, to shake his resolve.

As Staunton wound up to take the spot kick, Villa Park held its communal breath. Opting for power instead of placement, the Irishman thrashed a shot to the keeper's left. Grishko guessed correctly, parrying the ball back into the six-yard box, where the oncoming

Ugo Ehiogu volleyed goalwards. Again, Grishko smothered the drive. But, this time, the loose ball fell to Dalian Atkinson, standing virtually on the goal line. The talented striker poked home a leveller that had looked like it would never come. As the ball nestled in the Trabzonspor net, a wave of shared relief and ecstasy enveloped the old stadium. Rarely in Villa's history has so much joyous noise been made by so few. Trabzonspor were breached, the seal broken. The delighted Villa fans relaxed and awaited the inevitable.

In the remaining minutes, Villa pressed, Grishko continuing his one-man act of defiance as his teammates – a fatigued, dispirited reduction of their earlier selves – struggled to maintain any semblance of a foothold in the game.

As the game ebbed beyond its regulation 90 minutes, Villa fans awaited the final whistle, confident that an additional half-hour would see their charges find the goal – goals – their total dominance truly deserved. With two minutes of additional time played, an agricultural punt away from danger by Trabzonspor skimmed off a covering Villa player and trickled away for a late corner. The visitors, who'd barely escaped from their own half in a second period that had resembled a siege rather than a European football tie, had found their respite.

Whether some moments are preordained is debatable, yet in the seconds that preceded the resulting Turkish corner, there existed a heightened state of almost spiritual unease around Villa Park, a

pre-perceived air of dread that was communally sensed by its audience. An expectation of the worst.

Hami Mandirali, Trabzonspor's set-piece technician, wound up to deliver one final ball into the Villa area. What transpired in the following five-second melee is still – 30 years on – tinted by an indistinct, blurred, dream-like miasma ... but the kind of dream where you awaken in a well of tears, screaming for mummy.

Mandirali's delivery, spinning from the left towards the far right of the 'D', was headed towards the edge of the six-yard box by Cengiz Atila. The ball was pursued by their No.16, the rangy Georgian international substitute Kakhbar Kacharava, with Ehiogu, Staunton and Houghton in close attendance; three Villa players trailing a sole Trabzonspor forward. Yet, somehow, the long-limbed Kacharava wrapped his stretched right leg around the ball, squeezing it back across the face of the Villa goal. The unexpected nature of the cross wrong-footed both Paul McGrath and Earl Barrett and the ball landed in the immediate path of Orhan Kaynak, who smashed a close-range drive beyond a rooted Nigel Spink, high into the top-left corner of the net from seven yards.

In the brief time that remained, Ehiogu stabbed home an ultimately pointless winner and had another headed chance to win the tie saved, at full stretch, by Grishko. Too little, too late.

The aftermath to the equaliser – Kaynak's celebration, the crazed jubilation of Trabzonspor's

away support, juxtaposed by the blunt, choked silence of the Villa fans and the motionless disbelief of Ron Atkinson (looking almost comedic in dark, gold-framed Tony Angelino sunglasses ... I mean, who even wears sunglasses on a murky, November night anyway?) – is captured in all of its grave detail by the ITV television coverage of the day. But, as unedifying as the whole visual tableau appeared, it still failed to tell the full story.

The numb nothingness of defeat, administered by visitors who'd snatched a thoroughly undeserved away goal in a game in which they'd barely registered a shot on goal, did strange things to the Villa fans present that night. Immediately, caterwauls demanding the sacking of Ron Atkinson echoed around the stadium for the first time during his reign. Post-final whistle, legions of Villa fans converged outside the Trabzonspor end on Witton Lane with a view to meting out some good old-fashioned British vengeance. Everything had turned very dark very quickly in B6.

Ron Atkinson's tenure as Villa boss lasted a further nine days, a home loss to Manchester United followed by another gut-wrenching 4-3 last-minute defeat away at Wimbledon after Villa had led 3-1 proving the final straws.

In a further cruel nuance of fate, Villa's ejection from the UEFA Cup coincided with another game played in the city on the same night. As Villa were falling apart, Birmingham rivals City, in a period of renaissance under the tutelage of charismatic wideboy

Barry Fry, were consolidating top spot in the Third Division with a 5-0 slaying of Crewe Alexandra at St Andrew's.

In the city, fans talked of a tightening of the gap between the two great Birmingham rivals. And, on 1 November 1994, the unthinkable (for Villa fans anyway) seemed to be happening.

In the eight months dividing League Cup success and UEFA Cup defeat, Villa supporters had sampled the heights of breathless ecstasy and the gut-punch lows of cataclysmic despair; an allegorical journey, one that's felt at some point in the 'fan life' of anybody who's ever loved their football club. But rarely does the excursion happen in such a short period of time and seldom has it steered a path that leads from Tranmere to Trabzonspor.