

# YER JOKING AREN'T YA?

TOM FLIGHT



The Story of  
Middlesbrough FC's  
1996/97 Season

# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	6
Foreword . . . . .	9
Introduction . . . . .	13
1. Middlesbrough v Liverpool, 17 August 1996. . . . .	19
2. August . . . . .	29
3. Middlesbrough v West Ham United, 4, September 1996 . . . . .	39
4. September. . . . .	45
5. Sunderland v Middlesbrough, 14 October 1996 . . . . .	53
6. October . . . . .	58
7. November. . . . .	66
8. Middlesbrough v Newcastle, 27 November 1996. . . . .	73
9. December. . . . .	83
10. Middlesbrough v Everton, 26 December 1996 . . . . .	94
11. January . . . . .	100
12. Middlesbrough v Sheffield Wednesday, 18 January 1997. . . . .	113
13. February . . . . .	120
14. Stockport County v Middlesbrough, 26 February 1997 . . . . .	128
15. Middlesbrough v Derby County, 5 March 1997 . . . . .	136
16. March. . . . .	143
17. Leicester City v Middlesbrough, 6 April 1997 . . . . .	155
18. April . . . . .	167
19. May . . . . .	181
20. Chelsea v Middlesbrough, 17 May 1997 . . . . .	203
Epilogue . . . . .	212
Bibliography . . . . .	222
Middlesbrough 1996/97 Results . . . . .	223

## Chapter 1

# Middlesbrough v Liverpool

Saturday, 17 August 1996  
Riverside Stadium  
Attendance: 30,039

He was instantly recognisable the moment he strolled out of the players' tunnel on to the turf of the Riverside Stadium. The shock of silver hair glinted in the scorching August sun, the loose-fitting red shirt sagged untucked, the collar turned up. The name commentators relished saying. A month or two ago the transfer sounded like a joke. There he was in the flesh. One of the elite strikers on the planet was playing for Middlesbrough Football Club.

Less than three months earlier Fabrizio Ravanelli was playing for Juventus in the Stadio Olimpico in the Champions League Final. On 13 minutes, the man known in Italy as *Penne Bianca* ('White Feather') latched on to the ball after a defensive mix-up between Edwin van der Sar and Frank de Boer. Ravanelli spun around to side-foot the ball from an acute angle over the line for the

opening goal. Ravanelli wheeled away in ecstasy, racing down the touchline with his arms outstretched, howling rapturously to the heavens. His team-mates chased after him, but just before they caught him, he delivered his trademark celebration: pulling his shirt over his head. Juventus would go on to win the match on penalties and Ravanelli's team-mate and captain Gianluca Vialli hoisted the European Cup. It remains the last time the *Bianconeri* lifted the trophy. It was also the last game the pair would play for the club.

English football fans were familiar with Ravanelli. For those who didn't have a Sky subscription many people's weekly dose of live football came on Channel 4's *Football Italia*, along with the *Gazzetta* show on Saturday mornings. Serie A had gained an illustrious reputation and Ravanelli was one of the true stars in the league.

He was a gilt-edged striker in a crowded field in Serie A. He had been Juve's top scorer the previous season, and helped the side win a domestic double in 1994/95, before the Champions League win in 1996. Juventus, however, were notorious for their lack of sentimentality, always happy to sell their assets for new available models. In the summer of 1996 they signed Alen Bokšić and Christian Vieri. Overloaded with strikers, Juventus looked to make a hefty profit on Ravanelli while he was at the peak of his powers.

Ravanelli was initially distraught. 'I don't want to go,' he said in a statement. 'I've always been a Juventus fan

and I wish I could have signed a contract for life but that's the way it goes.' Juventus had interest, but there was one club who were unrelenting in their endeavour to sign the striker.

It was an immense effort from Middlesbrough. Neither Ravanelli, nor his agent, had heard of Middlesbrough, but they had heard of Bryan Robson. The Middlesbrough manager had an international reputation which helped spearhead the club's ambitions. Robson and the club's chief executive Keith Lamb made two trips to Turin during the summer to show that they were serious. Eventually a deal of £7m was agreed and contract talks began. The north-east of England wasn't of immediate appeal to the striker. His team-mate Gianluca Vialli had recently signed for Chelsea on a Bosman free transfer, meaning that the Pensioners were able to offer inflated wages to offset the lack of a transfer fee. Ravanelli's agent reportedly told the club that Middlesbrough would at least have to pay his client the same as Vialli if they were remotely interested. Ravanelli probably thought this demand was so outrageous that it would scare away this upstart club he'd never heard of so he could concentrate on offers from more established sides. They were left speechless when the club's chairman Steve Gibson green-lit an offer of £42,000 a week. Middlesbrough were indeed a club that needed to be taken seriously.

'To sell the club to Ravanelli, I took over photos of the new stadium, along with plans for the extension work

and the new training ground. I'd visited a lot of training facilities on my scouting trips around Europe and made sure our training would lack for nothing,' Robson wrote in his autobiography *Robbo*. 'When I showed him the plans and pictures, and told him the place was packed out every week, he was impressed.'

Almost ten years ago to the day Middlesbrough had been relegated to the third tier of the Football League. Finances were in such dire straits that a local TV news station announced the death of the club. The club's youngest board member, local businessman Steve Gibson, had stepped up to bring together a consortium that saved Boro. Now chairman Gibson had signed one of the best goalscorers in Europe.

On 5 July reports circulated the British press that the signing had been agreed. 'We have been watching him for a long time and his quality is clear to see. He is powerful and a great goalscorer but he has a strong overall game, too. I have set him the challenge of helping Middlesbrough win our first major trophy,' Robson was quoted as saying.

Ravanelli, who had been in England as part of Italy's Euro 96 campaign, went on holiday to mentally prepare for his new life in the north-east of England. He pledged his commitment in a statement. 'I'm looking forward to joining Middlesbrough FC and I can assure the supporters that I will give the club 110 per cent commitment in an effort to win trophies.'

Middlesbrough had been eager to sign a statement striker. Newspaper reports linked them with Jürgen Klinsmann, Dion Dublin, Gabriel Batistuta and Gianluca Vialli. But Steve Gibson was adamant they had succeeded in signing the target at the top of their list. ‘Ravanelli was always our first-choice striker, though Bryan shortlisted others who would fit the bill,’ Gibson said. ‘When we finally got Juventus to quote a figure, it was £12m. We had no intention of paying that sort of money but the very fact they quoted a fee told us they would sell if we could agree on a price. Bryan persevered and his efforts finally paid off when we managed to agree a fee of £7m. We were delighted with that.’

At the start of the summer Middlesbrough had convinced Brazilian midfielder Emerson to trade Champions League football with Porto for the project on Teesside for £4m. Along with the signings of Juninho and Nick Barmby the previous year, this took Boro’s spending to over £20m. In the current football climate this is loose change for a Premier League club, but at the time it was staggering, particularly for a club of Boro’s stature.

English football was going through a radical change. The *Bianconeri*’s triumph in Rome had been a symbol of Serie A’s dominance in Europe. But England had signalled they were now operating at the money-burning levels of Serie A. Middlesbrough were the opposite of a glamour club. The fact that they could attract such huge stars of the game produced an injection of wide-eyed hope

into fans of all Premier League clubs. Suddenly it felt like everyone was capable of signing anyone.

In 1905 Middlesbrough paid the first £1,000 transfer fee for Alf Common from Sunderland. The transaction was met with outrage; there was such concern that football spending had spiralled out of control the signing was debated in the Houses of Parliament. Ninety years later the press again were incredulous about Boro's spending. 'Some of the articles about our spending were a joke,' Robson said. 'They were talking as if Steve Gibson hadn't got a business head on him. The club was run efficiently and structured according to what we could afford.'

If Ravanelli was apprehensive about his relocation he was immediately impressed by the stadium. On the opening day of the season Middlesbrough's home was only one year old. (That afternoon Manchester United were playing at the second-youngest stadium, Selhurst Park, built in 1928, where a 20-year-old David Beckham rivalled Ravanelli's debut for the biggest story of the day by sweeping a ball into the net from the halfway line.) Today the Riverside can seem like a cookie cutter compared to dozens of stadiums that sprung up over the next decade. But it's easy to forget that the Riverside was the first; it served as a blueprint for the new wave in stadiums. In 1996 playing at the Riverside was truly like playing in the future.

It was a pressure cooker atmosphere inside the stadium. 'You could sense we were on the cusp of something



magical,' recalls writer Ian Smith, who spray-painted his hair silver on the morning of the match in homage to Boro's new signing. In the programme notes Robson tried to temper expectations. 'Although I haven't set any specific targets I expect an improvement on 12th place this time around. Without wanting to put the players under any undue pressure I am also hoping we can put at least one good cup run together. It is about time our fans had something to shout about and they deserve a cup run.' Middlesbrough had never won a trophy of any significance, and it was clear that everything that Gibson and Robson were working towards was about bringing silverware to Teesside.

The mood around the town was exhilarating. Middlesbrough had arrived at a moment when the team would finally win silverware. Ravanelli was in no doubt of the club's expectations. 'I have been set the challenge of helping Middlesbrough win its first major honour. That is something which excites me,' Ravanelli told the press. 'The club is aching for success. Of course, I feel pressure but that is something I am used to. Every year at Juventus we were expected to win trophies. But if I can play a part in helping Middlesbrough win something, I think that will be even more rewarding. The flavour of the win will be more tasty!'

But now the talk was over. It was time to see what Ravanelli could do on the pitch. If the crowd was bursting with excitement before kick-off, over the next 90 minutes

the decibel levels would blow off the scale, as Ravanelli sent everyone in the stadium into a frenzy.

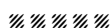


The visitors Liverpool began their season with high expectations, too. The club had rebuilt under Roy Evans, after dominating the 70s and 80s, with some big spending of their own. They looked to improve on the previous season's third-place finish and put up a title challenge to Manchester United.

Liverpool struck first inside the opening five minutes. With all the high-quality attacking additions it appeared momentarily that Middlesbrough had forgotten that they did still need to defend. A long ball from Mark Wright bounced through Boro's defenders and Stig Inge Bjørnebye ran in to score past goalkeeper Alan Miller.

Middlesbrough grew into the game and on 26 minutes Juninho broke into Liverpool's penalty box. Sandwiched between Wright and Jason McAteer, he was brought to the floor and the referee blew for a penalty. Ravanelli had been presented with his moment to signal his arrival on English shores. He placed the ball on the spot, charged forward and rifled it into the top corner. The Riverside crowd broke out into a flurry of limbs. His account in English football had been opened in emphatic fashion.

Celebrations were halted almost immediately by Liverpool. John Barnes chested down a cross from McAteer and steered the ball into the corner. But shortly before the break Nick Barmby won a free kick, and before Liverpool's defence could position themselves he made a clever quick pass to right-back Neil Cox marauding forward. Cox drilled the ball across the box for Ravanelli to slide in for the equaliser. The Riverside erupted again. There had been a question of whether Ravanelli would be doing his famous shirt-over-the-head celebration at Middlesbrough. The FA had just brought in a rule banning players from baring their chests. But in the euphoria of scoring two quick goals Ravanelli was unable to resist showing the adoring crowd his iconic celebration.



It had been a breathless first half of football. With opening day freshness in the legs the tempo did not slow. The attacking intent and quality from both teams was exceptional, meaning both defences were a scattered mess trying to put a stop to the flood of goals. Robbie Fowler put Liverpool into the lead for a third time, with Middlesbrough again finding balls into the box difficult to deal with.

It always felt like more goals were coming. With ten minutes to go Middlesbrough surged forward one more time. Carried through by the noise of the crowd, Juninho

ran into the box. He was tackled, but Mustoe picked up the loose ball. He was tackled, but still Boro came, Juninho knocking it forward into the box. Liverpool's defence couldn't get a foot on the ball and Ravanelli, with his back to goal, spun around and dragged it past David James for his hat-trick. Before the ball had even hit the net the Italian had whirled away towards the crowd, shirt over his head again. It was a spine-tingling moment. His famous left foot had delivered a hat-trick in his first game in English football. In the final minute he even got a great chance to make it four, but James got down to save it and the game finished 3-3.

It was one of the most electrifying debuts in history. When the third went in Steve Gibson jumped up and down hands aloft in the directors' box, delighted at the performance of his new acquisition. He knew he had signed a quality player but no one could have imagined this impact so soon. A giddy Ravanelli said after the match, 'I think I will enjoy English football.'