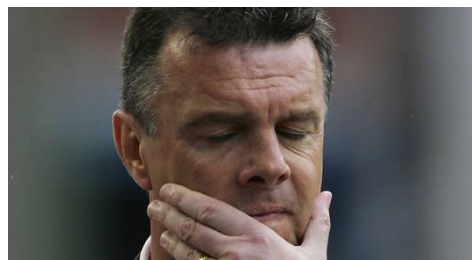


DREAMS ARE JUST DREAMS: THE RIDSDALE YEARS



January 11th 2000 started as an ordinary working day for every Leeds fan; Tuesday morning, another day in the endless drudgery of the rat race. It ended with a world turned upside down and an explosive keg of intrigue. Doubt, suspicion and paranoia had made an unwelcome return to our serene and engaging world.



Words: Jon Howe

Two days earlier, Leeds had destroyed Manchester City at Maine Road in the FA Cup, winning 5-2 and scoring a procession of fabulous and almost insolent goals. Leeds United's young side had received many plaudits in recent months, and although passing comments describing them as a 'popular' team seemed far-fetched, it was clear that O'Leary and Ridsdale were doing the right things in changing the populist image of the club. It was all going in the right direction, until today. I sat at work, and listened to news stories about two Leeds players being arrested for assaulting an Asian student. Immediately the witch-hunt was back on, and all vague hopes that Leeds United could for once be viewed in a positive light again proved false. Leeds were back on the front pages: the media wasted no time in milking the opportunity to turn the clocks back and remind the nation what a cancerous club we really were. It wasn't about two professional footballers, it was about the club, the fans, all of us.

Leeds United.

There was a blanket silence from the club as the fans hoped and prayed that the players under suspicion were just a couple of Academy hopefuls, unaware of their stature and responsibilities. It couldn't be anybody near the first team. Surely nobody would risk the situation the club was in for the sake of a few beers on a quiet Monday night? What transpired over the next few years made me question everything I had ever known about footballers, their clubs, their management, the media, the FA, the judicial system, my friends, my work colleagues; in short, my life. It triggered a decline in my love for the game that is still on a downward trajectory today. Most stories have a defining moment, but at the time we don't know it.

That the two players arrested under the more serious allegations had a market worth approaching £30million between them was certainly newsworthy, that was undeniable. The polar opposite ways that this news was received by the nation and by Leeds fans could not have been more obvious. Bowyer and Woodgate were two of the brightest stars in the 'new Leeds', and they were two of the biggest sticks the media would have to beat us with. They were

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immediately banned from playing for England by the FA, despite not yet being charged and the prospect of any trial still many months away. We could only dream of equal treatment from the FA as that afforded to Tony Adams, appointed England captain following his custodial sentence for drink-driving charges, or subsequently to Steven Gerrard: doubt, suspicion, paranoia.

The season continued in unusual fashion. Away fans had new material to berate us with, but we continued on an even keel and maintained second place behind Manchester United, this despite receiving an FA charge for a melee involving all the players on the pitch at home to Spurs. Spurs were also charged, but you never heard that bit. The UEFA Cup run took in glorious wins against Spartak Moscow and AS Roma, and suddenly a fearless jaunt through the opening rounds had launched us into the semi-finals, and a daunting tie against Galatasaray of Turkey.

My only previous interest in Galatasaray had involved childish sniggering as they dumped Man

Utd out of the Champions League in 1994. Their ground and fans held a fearsome reputation which they revelled in and openly promoted, to the point that even English fans could see the sinister nature of their glorification being a step too far. And so it proved. Wednesday April 5th 2000, the night before our UEFA Cup semi-final, two Leeds fans were brutally murdered in a street attack in Istanbul. The details of how the incident had occurred were lost in a wave of national sympathy, and every Leeds fan felt a kinship with the victims. The build-up to the game was dominated by discussions about whether it should actually go ahead, as it seemed everybody from Leeds just wanted to get out of Istanbul.

Ridsdale was interviewed at the hospital in the early hours of the morning, minutes after escorting the brother of Christopher Loftus to identify his body; a duty you would think was outside of his responsibilities, but he stood up to the plate. Ridsdale was a colossus in this situation. He stood tall and dignified, fighting our corner, but he was bullied into playing the game by UEFA. There was no minutes' silence, no black armbands, and the Galatasaray fans continued as if nothing had happened. The English media leapt to our defence, but it meant nothing. The young Leeds players, in the biggest game of their careers, could only participate in a hollow non-event. How brilliant it could have been. We lost 2-0 despite a manful second half rally. Galatasaray attempted to get the second leg switched to a neutral venue for fear of reprisals, and in the end sensibly refused tickets for Elland Road.



We went out 4-2 on aggregate; we didn't care.

In the wake of the murders Elland Road became a shrine for Leeds and many other clubs' fans. Ridsdale hugged fans at half-time during the next game away at Villa, and Arsenal players threw bouquets of flowers into the crowd before mauling us 4-0 at Elland Road. Our form slipped alarmingly and we just managed to claim a coveted Champions League spot on the last day of the season.

The Champions League qualification was an immediate signal for the club to move up a notch at every level. Strongbow were our new sponsors, somebody we had actually heard of. Leeds United Travel and Leeds United Financial Services were impressive and 'necessary' new additions to the clubs' portfolio, we assumed. Dacourt, Viduka and Matteo were signed to bolster an already impressive squad. We wondered where the money was coming from, but we had faith in Ridsdale's business structure. He was the archetypal fans' Chairman, and we had faith; he was one of us.

Season 2000/2001 started in patchy fashion. The league form was inconsistent but the Champions League ignited everything that was right about the club. Progressing through groups containing Real Madrid, Barcelona, AC Milan and Lazio was tangible success on an unprecedented scale, and for the first time ever this was success filtered of any controversy or malice. No media bias, this was pure football success. Each game was an event of epic grandeur. The players raised their game



to match the very best, and you sort of knew that this kind of form could never be attained again.

Kewell was injured for the first quarter of the season and he was average when he returned. Given his sensational form in the previous season, it seemed inconceivable that we could prosper without him, but we did. Two more signings had us questioning the sanity of the whole situation, however. Robbie Keane came on loan from Inter Milan, yes, Inter Milan; and Rio Ferdinand for a British record fee of £18million from West Ham. This was now serious. You could sense the nation was questioning who the hell we thought we were, but still we sang Ridsdale's name as he paraded Ferdinand on the Elland Road pitch. We actually sang his name. He had done this for us. We shuffled uneasily in our seats, but said nothing. Don't upset the appletart; doubt, suspicion, paranoia.

The long overdue court case began in February 2001. Woodgate's form had long since disappeared and he looked frail and ghostly throughout the proceedings, a visual concession of apparent guilt. On the other hand, Bowyer was an absolute inspiration and used football as a glorious release,

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and we loved him for it. The sensationalist headlines that recorded the case were no surprise, but I spent every working day scouring the news for snippets of information from the days events in court, and defending the players to all and sundry, praying they were innocent but secretly fearing the worst. Nevertheless, the facts suggested right from the off that Bowyer was clearly innocent and Woodgate was sort of guilty. But nobody else bothered to read or digest the actual details of the case.

The alarming aspect was the bitter in-fighting that this had clearly created within the club. You could only imagine what harm it was doing: factions and cliques forming, whispers and huddles in training, players giving evidence against teammates, the club solicitor badly advising players over their version of events. But all through this we had prospered on the field, and none of it made sense: Ridsdale must have been a worried man.

In the middle of all this distracting and concerning intrigue, O'Leary appointed Brian Kidd as his First Team Coach in a move that mystified and alienated many Leeds fans. A coach of



great reputation, he had failed miserably in the number one role at Blackburn and will always be synonymous with Man Utd's 1990s resurgence. The image of Kidd leaping onto the Old Trafford pitch and embracing Ferguson in celebrating a vital winner, in the sixth minute of injury time, during their first Premiership win of 1992/93, particularly sticks in the throat, an indelible stain on his character. To rub salt further into the wounds, this move was seen by fans to demote Eddie Gray from his position of Assistant Manager. O'Leary's halo was askew and he hadn't noticed it, and neither had Ridsdale. Form slipped; doubts, suspicion, paranoia.

The one saving grace was that the court case would soon be over, and the club could move on. We would finally know the truth, and we could emerge from the rock we had crawled under. Judgement day was getting ever-nearer, and while we had all become experts in the complexities of legal proceedings, patience was wearing thin.

One Monday as I searched the internet for news of the verdict, I saw headlines I could not believe. A Sunday Mirror interview with Muhammad Najeib - the father of attack victim Sarfraz - had caused the trial to collapse. This was truly the very worst case scenario, and I was speechless and apoplectic with sheer bewilderment. How could something this high profile have such a shoddy non-ending? The thought of going through this whole episode again just didn't seem possible: I couldn't compute it, the entire sorry saga was going to continue for another year. As if Leeds fans didn't have enough reasons to boycott the Mirror group after their pathetically bitter two page spread by Emlyn Hughes the day after our title win in 1992, now one editor's decision had led to the torturous agony continuing. The lives everybody involved would continue with a sense of precarious doom for yet more uncertain months. Pressure not lifted; doubts, suspicion, paranoia.

Mid-table for much of the season, we had a minor resurgence after the court case collapse and went hell for leather in pursuit of the third place finish that would regain Champions League



qualification, as three rather than two English teams were now allowed the Golden Ticket. Many impressive away wins kept us in the top five, but valuable points were dropped at home, not least when a last minute Wes Brown own goal was dubiously chalked off for offside, denying us a win against Man Utd and making a nonsense of the new 'passive' rule that was fleetingly enforced throughout the season. We ended up finishing a gallant fourth, but it might as well have been fourteenth. Our only hope of avoiding the riff-raff in the UEFA Cup was to actually win the Champions League, but we lost 3-0 to Valencia in the Semi-Final. Oh, and Valencia's first goal was a blatant hand-ball, and the inspirational Lee Bowyer was banned from the second leg the day before the game for a questionable offence that the referee had missed in the first leg; doubts, suspicion, paranoia.

The Champions League windfall may have been better spent giving foundations to the finances, but instead we added more names to an already weighty squad. Injuries to Bridges, Kewell and Batty had led to much uncertainty over their futures and in came Robbie Keane on a permanent deal (£13m), Seth Johnson (£7m) and, unbelievably, Robbie Fowler (£11m). The numbers just weren't adding up. Exacerbating the confusion was the club's announcement that they wished to move to a new 50,000 seater stadium. We were all bewitched by Ridsdale's nonsensical ambitions, as 87.6% of

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us season ticket holders voted "Yes" to a move like brainwashed lab monkeys. Did we need a new stadium? Hell yes, why not? Did we need a Leeds United Premier One Grand Prix team? Hell yes, why not? Neither actually ever happened, but that's what was on our agenda in these strange, strange times.

In a role reversal from the previous season, sketchy European form led to a Fourth Round UEFA Cup exit to PSV, but league form was decent and we hung around the top three until Christmas. Ferdinand was now rightly captain and his long-held reputation was now visibly based on solid evidence. The second court case began in November 2001, nearly two years after the original incident. A week before it, and to add more good news, the national press gleefully reported that Robbie Fowler was arrested in Leeds after the players' Christmas Party - wrongfully as it turned out, but that was an addendum that barely registered.

Woodgate had started only one game all season, and Bowyer was injured. This time you knew what form and pattern the trial would take. There were

no sensationalist headlines - people had grown tired of that - but the pressure was still there, the doubt, the uncertainty, the not knowing. Until finally one late December afternoon the news was out, and I was right all along. Bowyer was innocent, Woodgate was guilty. What I hadn't expected was the build-up of vitriol that was released the next day in the national press. The victim's story could finally be released and every paper tried its best to ensure anything with a connection to Leeds United was sullied and blackened beyond repair. Bowyer, despite being found innocent, which was obvious all along, was pictured on the front page of one paper with a bloodied nose and an expression of gnarled ecstasy on his face. The fact that he had a Leeds shirt on and was celebrating a goal scored at Old Trafford, just after sustaining a facial injury, was not explained. In the eyes of the nation, he and Leeds United had got away with it. Their minds were made up.



That day we played Newcastle at home in a pivotal game. Falling behind early, Bowyer equalised a minute later, and I've never celebrated a goal quite like it since. It seemed so right. Leeds were 3-1 up in the second half, cruising, and on the way to concreting second place in the table. At that point Eirik Bakke was penalised for hand-ball in the box, despite having the ball hammered at his face from approximately one yard. Ball-to-hand is how the pundits would normally describe it, and 100 times out of 100 it wouldn't be given, but not today. Decisions change history. The penalty was scored and ten minutes later Nolberto Solano was speeding past Ian Harte, who seemed to be wading backwards through quicksand, and he made it 4-3 to Newcastle. It was a painful, shuddering defeat, a psychological hammer-blow; all renewed hope was lost, the legs were gone, we never recovered. Shot. [TSB](#)

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