

ISSUE THREE

SLIDING DOORS

# THE SQUALL

— BLIZZARD'S BREEZY BROTHER —



# THE SQUALL

Matt Thacker

**It's worth repeating here the reasons why we have set up *The Squall*, the little brother to *The Blizzard*, a digital football magazine to give freelance writers a forum for their work. Not just so they can get paid to write, but so they have something to aim for, a sense of job satisfaction at a time when such satisfaction is in short supply.**

*The Blizzard* has never been about the here and now, it's much more taken with the there and then. And we see *The Squall* as serving the same function, showcasing great football writing on subjects you are unlikely to read about anywhere else.

We hope you enjoy this "What if..." issue of *The Squall*. As Jonathan mentions over there, despite the generous waiving of fees and donations to date, if *The Squall* is not to blow itself out, it will need further funding.

***If you are happy to buy this issue, please do so by paying into our bank account with sort code 40-05-17 and account number 71515942, or you can pay via PayPal to [paypal.me/thesquall](https://www.paypal.me/thesquall). Any money paid into either of these accounts will be used for the sole purpose of producing future issues.***

*We are very grateful to all of the people who have waived fees and donated to The Squall since we announced the project.*

*Special thanks go to: Nick Ames, Philippe Auclair, John Brewin, Kieran Canning, James Corbett, John Cross, Martin da Cruz, Miguel Delaney, Andrew Downie, Peter Drury, Ken Early, Emmet Gates, Sasha Goryunov, John Harding, Simon Hart, Gary Hartley, Ian Hawkey, Frank Heinen, Tom Holland, Adam Hurrey, Elis James, Neil Jensen, Samindra Kunti, Jonathan Liew, Simon Mills, James Montague, David Owen, MM Owen, Simone Pierotti, Jack Pitt-Brooke, Gavin Ramjuan, Callum Rice-Coates, Philip Ross, Paul Simpson, Marcus Speller, Jon Spurling, Seb Stafford-Bloor, Ed Sugden, Jonathan Wilson, Suzy Wrack, and Shinobu Yamanaka. And huge thanks to Getty Images, for use of the photos.*

July 2020

# EDITOR'S NOTE

Jonathan Wilson

**Football is back, although it all feels deeply unfamiliar. It's hot, there's games on pretty much every day and a lot of the play is disjointed: it could be a major tournament, except there's none of the excitement or glamour. But at least we have our great distraction to bicker about on Twitter, and that probably is for the best.**

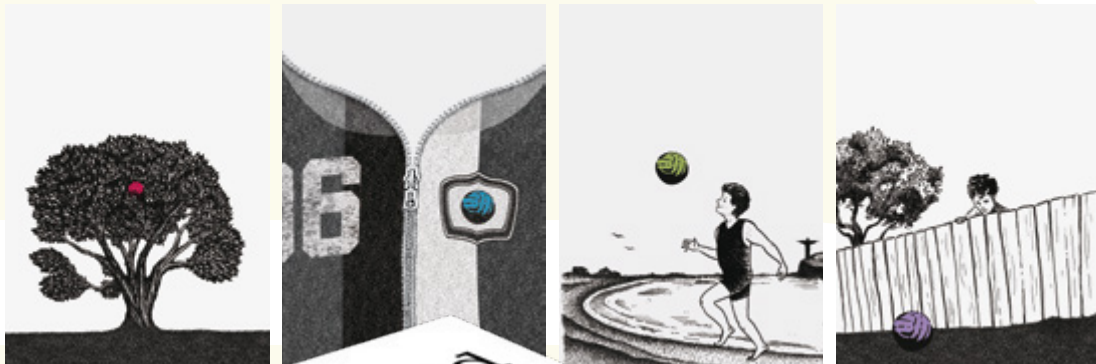
But for freelances, the situation remains grim. Few journalists are allowed in to games, several leagues have been cancelled and, with budgets limited, so too are opportunities. *The Squall* was established as a short-term measure to try to provide at least some work for at least some people and, perhaps more importantly, as a symbol that some opportunities do still exist, remains just as relevant now as it did when we launched. Which is to say that we will keep going for a little while longer – but we do need your support.

The magazine has been funded largely by writers for *The Blizzard* waiving their fees for last year, but also by kind donations from the public. In addition, all editorial and design staff are working for free. Such sacrifices to help the community of readers and writers suggests the initial spirit that fired *The Blizzard*'s launch a decade ago still burns.

But *The Squall* can't be a charity. It has to stand as a magazine in its own right. We needed the donations to launch, but now we need people to buy the product. Each issue will be available on a pay-what-you-want basis. We recommend £3, but if that's a stretch then pay what you can afford; conversely, if you can afford more, then every extra penny is welcome. And please do promote us however you can.

Hopefully we won't need to exist for too much longer. We're a temporary product to get us through the crisis and we urge you to support us on that basis.

**July 2020**



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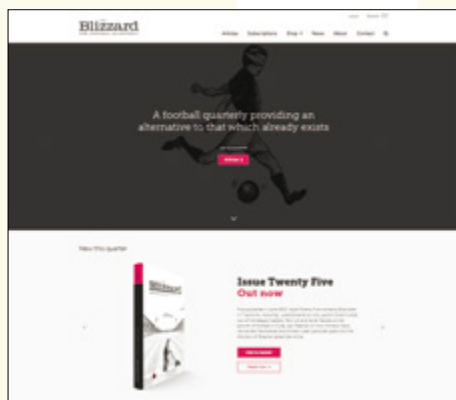
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## About The Blizzard

**Editor** Jonathan Wilson

**Publisher** The Blizzard Media Ltd  
[www.theblizzard.co.uk](http://www.theblizzard.co.uk)

**Design** TriNorth Ltd  
[www.trinorth.co.uk](http://www.trinorth.co.uk)

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# THE EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL OF REASON

*WHAT IF THE ICELANDIC VOLCANO HADN'T ERUPTED  
IN 2010, DISRUPTING FLIGHTS ACROSS EUROPE?*

*BY ALEX HESS*

*The Inter manager José Mourinho talks  
to the referee Franck De Bleckere*





**In April 2010, a burst of seismic activity under Eyjafjallajökull, a small ice cap in southern Iceland, threatened to come to an explosive head. As molten magma rose towards the Earth's surface, meteorologists across the world quickly sounded the alarm: a spate of eruptions seemed imminent and, despite being fairly minor in scale, they would have huge consequences. Because the volcano was situated directly under one of the Earth's atmospheric jet streams, an explosion would cause a disproportionately huge cloud of abrasive, glass-rich ash to be projected five miles into the sky before spreading out and billowing slowly across the continent. The resulting meltwater would then flow back into the erupting volcano, which meant the rapidly vaporising water would in turn re-enhance the eruption's explosive power and the fast-cooling lava would further thicken the ash cloud. This was all very bad news for Pep Guardiola.**

Guardiola had spent the week preparing his Barcelona side for the biggest challenge yet in defending their Champions League title: a trip to San Siro to face José Mourinho's Inter. Despite what he'd heard, Guardiola liked Mourinho – an upbeat, charming guy who had been on the staff at Barcelona a few years earlier – but he knew this Inter side were no mugs. To win in Milan his players would have to be well-rested and limber. The last thing they needed was a 14-hour journey in a cramped coach, which they'd be doing if this ash cloud, as predicted, put the brakes on any air travel.

Fortunately for Guardiola, the rumblings within the Earth's lithosphere stopped

just in time. There were no eruptions, no ash clouds. Aeroplanes continued to sail across the skies of Europe. Barcelona boarded their flight, landed in Milan smoothly and escaped San Siro with a 1-1 draw. Boarding the flight home, Guardiola watched as Pedro struggled to heave his suitcase into the overhead locker. It was a sorry sight – the compartment was far too high, the bag far too heavy – and at last, sheepishly, Pedro asked Zlatan Ibrahimović to do it for him. *I guess he has his uses*, Guardiola chuckled to himself. Then he had a brainwave.

A fortnight later, as the final whistle sounded on a 2-0 home win at the Nou Camp, Guardiola took to the pitch and danced for joy under the sprinklers: his men were on their way to another final. He hugged Ibrahimović, the night's two-goal hero, and congratulated himself on the surprise change of game-plan: nothing risky at the back, a big lad up top winning flick-ons, Lionel Messi scrapping for second balls, Yaya Touré and Rafa Márquez standing tall in midfield. Inter didn't know what had hit them. He laughed at the sheer simplicity of it all, then scolded himself for not trying such tactics sooner. But hey, better late than never. Maybe this was a philosophy that could be worked on...

In the honeymoon suite at Milan's Hotel di Lowri, Mourinho poured himself a large port, his mood one of grudging respect. *Fair play, Pep old boy*, he thought, *I didn't see that one coming*. Mourinho didn't like to be beaten, but there was no shame in losing to a team of proper men. Men with big biceps and even bigger balls. Besides, Inter were still on for the double and for him, more important things were

on the horizon. Then his phone buzzed; a message from Florentino Pérez. "Best leave it a year or two, *hombre*. I know we said we had a deal, but I think we might give it another year with Pellegrini." In an instant, Mourinho's goodwill had evaporated into the ether. He felt the old rage bubbling up in his chest. *Madrid think they're too good for me?! He* snatched up his stress ball and began to squeeze. He counted slowly to 10, closed his eyes and tried as hard as he could to think happy thoughts – tailored jackets, tactics boards, long alfresco dinners with Rui Faria – but it was no good. He hurled the ball across the room and poured another drink. And he began to plot.

On Merseyside, Rafael Benítez was basking in triumph. By the skin of their teeth, his Liverpool side had avoided a tortuous train journey to face Atlético Madrid – Runcorn to London, London to Paris, Paris to Bordeaux, Bordeaux to Madrid – and flown direct. Needless to say, his game-plan had been flawless: neither team had attempted a single shot all match. Nil-nil. *'El juego perfecto'* – *they said it could never be done*, Benítez thought. *Ha!* And the return leg had been just as spectacular: one shot, one goal, one-nil. Liverpool's league campaign might have fallen apart but Benítez knew that winning the Europa League – against that press-darling Roy Hodgson, no less – would make him unsackable, even to these American *imbéciles*. After that he'd have the whole summer to get Alberto Aquilani fit and once that was done, he knew it in his bones: it would be Liverpool's year.

Benítez loosened his tie, set his Lay-Z-boy to full recline and let his thoughts wander

to the final. It wasn't long before his imagination was running indecently free. The images came easily to his mind: Dirk Kuyt tracking back tirelessly, Lucas Leiva man-marking Danny Murphy out of the game, Albert Riera compressing the space on the flank. Benítez licked his lips. Finally, he pictured the end-of-match stats tally: *one shot, one goal*, as he fell into a deep and peaceful slumber.

"Lewandowski. Big fella, a bit rough around the edges. But strong, two good feet – I think he could really bring the best out of David Dunn." Sam Allardyce was on the phone to his chairman. "I know four million sounds like a lot but I reckon we should take a punt, and we need to get a bid in before West Brom." Allardyce had been eyeing the Lech Poznań striker for a while and when Lewandowski finally jetted over to check out Blackburn, his flight green-lit at the last minute, the manager had given him the big sell: chip butties at the best take-away in town followed by a tour of the training ground and a pint of mild – on the house – at the Ewood Park VIP bar. The contract had been shaken on in Allardyce's kitchen over thick slices of Bakewell tart. After long a pause, his chairman spoke. "Get the deal done," came the answer, "before anyone else gets wind of this guy."

Allardyce breathed a sigh of relief. He knew his side could get drawn into the relegation fight next year if they weren't careful, but he had an inkling Lewandowski was the real deal. Plus, he knew a rabbit-from-the-hat signing could put a manager in the shop window. Allardyce thought back over the last few weeks: the pieces had finally started

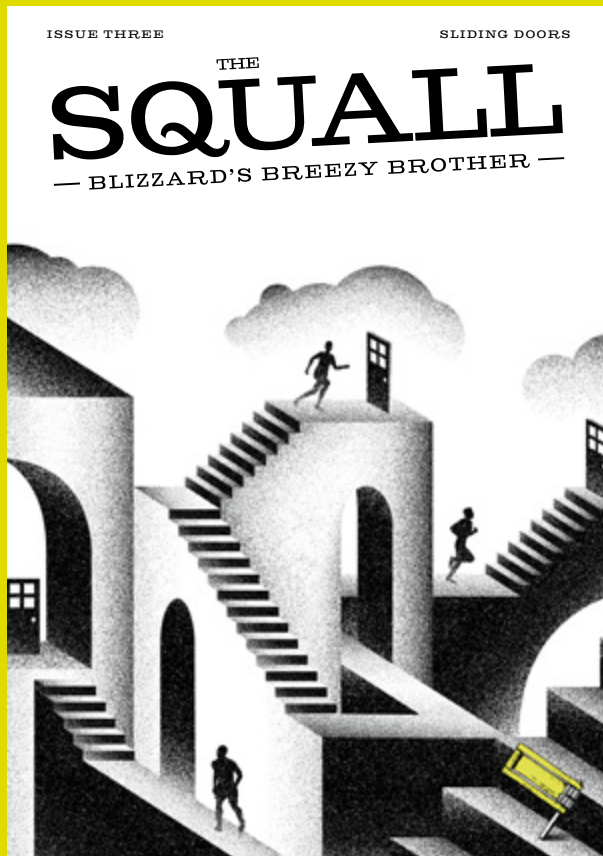
falling into place. With Barcelona blazing a tactical trail, the world was at last waking up to the magic of the skyward punt. Already there had been faddish imitators and he had no doubt there'd be more to come. But Allardyce was ahead of the curve; he'd been doing this for years. He didn't want to get ahead of himself, but rumour had it that Real Madrid would be on the lookout for a new manager this season. He fished around in his pocket for the fortune cookie he'd got with lunch and snapped it in half. He unravelled the paper and chuckled knowingly. *Your destiny lies away from these shores.* "Too bloody right," he said to himself.

Jürgen Klopp put down the phone and pulled out a list of names from his desk drawer. He put a red line through the name at the top: Robert Lewandowski. Just as well, he thought, it would have been a risk anyway. He needed someone

who could do the business here and now, not some lanky kid from the second division. Klopp was coming to the end of his second season at Dortmund and he'd taken them up the table, but they were still only fifth – as many points from 12th as from first. Another year like that and his job could be on the line. The Lewandowski news had been a wake-up call: no time to waste. Klopp looked again at his list of names and circled the second one down. 25 years old, 29 league goals in two seasons. And he knew Getafe needed the cash. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed a foolproof move. Klopp let out a sudden, unhinged cackle, then picked up the phone and dialled his secretary. "Get me Roberto Soldado's agent," he barked.

In Iceland, the wind blew gently over Eyjafjallajökull as the volcano moved into its 188th year of dormancy. 🌋





The idea of *The Squall* is to help out freelance writers during the Covid-19 crisis. For it to survive and thrive, we are asking readers to pay what they can and we suggest a minimum donation of £3.

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Thank you in advance for helping out.

# THE HABIT OF A LIFETIME

What if Arjen Robben hadn't  
stayed on his feet in the  
2010 World Cup final?

*BY SHASTRI SOOKDEO*

*Arjen Robben of the Netherlands after  
defeat in the World Cup Final.*





In the summer of 2010, I visited Europe for the first time. It was the longest journey I had ever made at the time, flying from Trinidad to Tobago and then leaving the country on a plane bound for Frankfurt followed by one to Amsterdam. The flight to Frankfurt was only half full **and** consisted mainly of Germans, who didn't seem as deflated as I imagined they had to be feeling. Spain had beaten Germany in the World Cup semi-final less than three hours before the flight had departed. For the first time since 1978 two teams who had not won the cup would be in the final.

The other finalists, the Netherlands, had qualified a day earlier by beating Uruguay 3-2. They had not played well, despite scoring 3 goals. However, other than Johan Cruyff and a few scattered dissenters, most people in the Netherlands didn't care how the team had played on route to the final. It was only relevant that the possibility of winning the tournament remained, even if they were generally seen as underdogs against Spain.

Dutch teams had played beautiful football in the past and had returned with little to show for it. Despite being one of the most influential and recognisable national teams in the world, there was only single Euro triumph in 1988 to speak of. The Dutch team of 2010 was a mix of veterans who would play in their last World Cup and players approaching the zenith of their careers. There was also young talent, some of whom would never replicate the same levels of performance at that tournament again, such as Gregory van der Wiel and Eljero Elia. Wesley Sneijder was an archetypal Dutch footballer. Technically gifted and two-footed,

blessed with great vision, Sneijder was just what you'd expect from an alumnus of Ajax's academy.

Then there was Arjen Robben. He is not the typical Dutch footballer. He is not the typical footballer of any national team. Extremely left-footed with a tendency to hold the ball, it's unlikely he would have been allowed to continue with his idiosyncratic style had he been trained in the academies of Amsterdam or Rotterdam and not in the more distant northern province of Groningen. Robben had a reputation for being talented but injury prone with a predisposition to cutting inside and shooting. He was also famous for being extremely quick with a tendency to exaggerate contact.

The final is predictably tense, while the robust tackling of the Dutch means there is little aesthetically pleasing football. Eight of the Dutch starting eleven would get yellow cards, as would five Spanish players. Nigel de Jong climbing studs-first into Xabi Alonso's chest becomes one of the enduring images of the final. There is little for the Dutch to cheer for until Robben breaks through one-on-one with Iker Casillas. The goalkeeper saves with his foot, but he has dived the other way. It is at this moment that the crowd in Rotterdam, where I watched the match, seems to believe that the Dutch can actually win their first trophy.

It has been said that Robben dives. At the speed he runs, a seemingly minor touch can result in a loss of balance but he's admitted to exaggerating the effect. In the 82nd minute Sergio Ramos, under pressure from Elia, misplaces a pass and Spain lose possession on the edge

of the Dutch box. Ramos is playing at right-back, the last time he will do so in a major tournament for Spain. The ball is cleared by Nigel De Jong and drops just inside the Dutch half for Robin van Persie. Van Persie is facing his own goal when he makes contact with the ball. No Spanish player is close enough to him to challenge him and his feet are still on the ground after the ball touches his head and his jump seems to begin after the ball has gone. His flick sends the ball into the path of Robben.

Robben has started running from his own half. When the ball touches Van Persie's head, Robben's foot is on the halfway line. The Spanish defence is undermanned, but the ball doesn't fall into the vacant left of the field. The header bounces into the centre of the field almost directly between Carles Puyol and Gerard Piqué. These two won the Champions League together for Barcelona the year before. They're good defenders. Neither is out of position to cover the bouncing ball. Puyol seems favourite to collect it. But Robben is fast. He runs around Puyol to get to the ball first. Puyol turns and tries to put in a tackle but he doesn't succeed. and loses his balance. While falling, he attempts to pull Robben back just outside the Spanish penalty area. Piqué tries to get around and puts in a tackle at the top of the box. He does not make contact with either the attacker or the ball. However, his sliding challenge forces Robben onto his right foot near the penalty spot. Robben, trying to find space on his weaker foot, is unable to shield the ball perfectly and Casillas collects.

At no point during the play does Robben fall. When he finally hits the turf, Casillas is almost ready to release the ball. If

Robben had gone to ground earlier, Puyol would have been sent off and the Dutch would have a free kick on the edge of the area. Although they hadn't scored a free kick in the World Cup, Sneijder or Van Persie would have had a decent chance to test Casillas.

Spain going down to ten men is more significant.

A red card for Puyol would mean a substitution. Carlos Marchena or Raúl Albiol could come on, or perhaps Alvaro Arbeloa be introduced with Ramos moving into the centre. Either way, Spain would have had to sacrifice somebody, losing either midfield control or attacking threat. Perhaps Cesc Fàbregas, who was so influential in the winner, wouldn't have made it onto the pitch. Perhaps the reshuffle would open up more space for Robben.

As it happened, Johnny Heitinga's red card in the first period of extra time meant that the Dutch defence was overworked. It was Rafael van der Vaart's weak clearance that fell to Fàbregas and allowed him to pass to Andrés Iniesta. Despite being the original intended recipient of the ball that Van der Vaart cleared, Iniesta was still completely free. A man down, Iniesta would probably be playing deeper in midfield and so not there for the pass. With ten men, Spain would probably have looked to retain possession, and wouldn't have made the incursion that led to Heitinga's second yellow. With a complete back line, Van der Vaart is either not the final defender or there's another defensive player present to perhaps put pressure on either Iniesta or Fàbregas.

Maybe it's the Dutch who get the goal and, in their third final, win the World Cup at last. In this alternate future parties continue deep into the night in Rotterdam and across the country. The welcome back party for the national team is much more vibrant and joyous than the one actually held in Amsterdam for the silver medallists (though this was still fairly well attended). The weather remains sunny and the canals are packed with cheering supporters watching the team's barge. There are no discussions of what should have been done differently. The analysts speak of the coach Bert van Marwijk as an immensely brave pioneer who was willing to go against the expected philosophy of Dutch football. He, and the team, are feted for playing for results instead of placing an emphasis on beauty. Cruyff, of course, does not agree and says it is better to play well and lose.

The influence on the future Dutch football turns out to be minimal. Older players still retire, albeit as champions, and players such as Edson Braafheid and Sandro Boschker never add to their tally of caps, unable to see off the rise of younger goalkeepers and defenders such as Jasper Cillessen and Daley Blind. The Dutch still lose all their games at Euro 2012 and Louis van Gaal takes over from Van Marwijk, although criticism is tempered by his reputation and directed more at the players than the coach. Van Marwijk retires and so doesn't lead Saudi Arabia to qualify for the 2018 World Cup and doesn't coach Australia in Russia either.

The team that goes to the World Cup in 2014 looks very similar to the one that actually reached the semi-finals. Van Gaal, who exceeded all expectations to

get the Dutch team to the semi-final, gets them there again. This time the old guard from the previous tournament steps up and De Jong, instead of Ron Vlaar, goes first and scores the opening penalty against Argentina. Gonzalo Higuaín misses Argentina's fifth and Klaas-Jan Huntelaar converts the final penalty to send the Netherlands into their second straight final.

In the final the Germans play a much more open game, less wary of the Dutch attacking talent than that of Argentina. De Jong follows up his foul on Xabi Alonso in the last final with a foul on Toni Kroos. This time he is sent off. With the extra space in the midfield Germany pass their way through the Dutch defence with regularity and the three-man defence, cannot prevent Miroslav Klose from scoring.

The Dutch public accepts the team has overachieved to even reach the final, considering the youth in the squad. There is little disappointment when Van Gaal still leaves to coach Manchester United. The underperformance that would see the Oranje miss Euro 2016 and World Cup 2018 still happens and the associated managerial churn still consumes Guus Hiddink, Dick Advocaat and Danny Blind.

On the way to their second final, the Dutch beat Spain again in the group stages, setting into motion the full abandonment of tiki-taka. At Euro 2016, in which they were feted after winning their first two group stage matches before losing the third to Croatia due to their vulnerability on the counterattack, it is possible they would have at least developed secondary systems to deploy

in difficult matches. This may perhaps have proven useful against Italy who would knock them out of the tournament by crowding the midfield and restricting any space to play a passing game.

The football played by Spain in the 2018 World Cup was barely recognisable from its origins in tiki-taka. Notable mostly for slow and indecisive recycling of the ball in the midfield, Spain set the record for most passes in a World Cup match against Russia but did not have their first shot on goal until the 45th minute, after Russia had scored an own goal and a penalty. It felt like the end of

an era for a style that probably should have been changed after Xavi retired in 2014. If the Dutch had scored late in Johannesburg, Spain perhaps would have changed their style years earlier. And then, the Dutch influence on international football visible in Spanish style emanating from Barcelona by the way of Amsterdam through Cruyff, becomes a little less visible.

Would the Dutch have minded their traditional philosophy not dominating for so long? At least some of them might have preferred the trophy. 🏆

# FOR THE WANT OF A NAIL...

What if Everton had  
followed up initial interest  
in Ian Rush in 1980?

*BY JIM KEOGHAN*

*Ian Rush has the ball taken off  
his boot by Neville Southall.*





**“And it’s played across for Rush... that’s another one! And that will make it safe for Liverpool.”**

Brian Moore’s words cemented what those watching had felt for some time, that the 1986 FA Cup was Anfield-bound. Outplayed by Everton and 1-0 down at the break, the Red Machine had turned the game in the second period, scoring three without conceding. It was a determined performance that had broken Evertonian hearts.

With the league wrapped up a week earlier, the victory meant that Kenny Dalglish’s side had done the double over their city rivals, leaving the Blues as the bridesmaid in both competitions.

Although Dalglish, as player/manager, had been the architect of this success, for Evertonians, the role played by Ian Rush could not be understated. Already loathed and feared in equal measure as a player with an almost supernatural eye for goal, one who had powered Liverpool to domestic and European glory in recent seasons, Rush had also earned the ire of the Goodison faithful by reserving a special place for Everton in his goalscoring exploits. The two that afternoon merely represented another notch against the club to add to the others he had plundered since arriving across the park a few years earlier.

And yet, it could have all been so different. But for the reluctance of the Everton chairman, Philip Carter, to sanction the purchase of two rather than just one promising youngster back in 1980, Rush might well have been wearing blue, not red on that May afternoon.

For Rush, such an outcome would have made sense. Everton had been his first love and the boyhood Blue had often made the pilgrimage to Goodison growing up, heading there from his north Wales home to watch the Everton sides of Billy Bingham and Gordon Lee.

His hero back then had been Bob Latchford. The teenage Rush had been in the lower Gwladys Street to watch his idol make history on the final day of the 1977-78 season when Latchford scored his 30th goal of the campaign. It was a feat that won the Everton forward £10,000 from the *Daily Express*, who had put the bounty up for the first player to reach that target, its own attempt to encourage greater attacking verve amongst the First Division’s low-scoring forwards of the 1970s.

By that point in Rush’s life, with dreams of emulating his hero, he was already taking the first steps on his own professional journey, having recently been picked up by Third Division Chester City. At Sealand Road, the teenager would become the club’s best prospect in a generation. Inevitably, that attracted attention, not least from the two nearby Merseyside giants.

Over the years, Rush has spoken about his disappointment that Goodison never came calling, believing that Everton had come to look at him and returned across the Mersey unimpressed.

But that isn’t the full story. Although the club did indeed pass on Rush, it was nothing to do with his ability. Far from being unimpressed, the Everton manager at the time, Gordon Lee, thought that Rush had it in him to become one of the



best strikers in the country. And he came very close to signing him.

In the spring of 1980, Lee was looking for ways to bolster his underperforming attack. With Everton languishing near the bottom of the table and finding goals hard to come by, he set out to find some fresh blood to change his side's fortunes. In an interview with the *Lancashire Evening Post* in 2003, the former Everton boss outlined what happened next: "I went to watch Chester Reserves and a young boy called Ian Rush playing as an attacking midfielder. The next night, I was at Dumbarton and saw a raw striker called Graeme Sharp. I went back to the chairman and told him that, paired together, they could be one of the most exciting partnerships in English football. Chester wanted £300,000 for Rush, so I signed Graeme for £80,000 because the board said I couldn't have them both."

Everton's loss ended up becoming Liverpool's gain. Around the same time that Lee was running the rule over Rush, the Liverpool manager Bob Paisley had been down to Chester to watch the young prospect. Encouraged by what he saw, the Reds made a move, offering Chester £300,000 for the teenager. But Liverpool's quarry took some persuading. "When they did come in for me, I turned them down first time." Rush told *LFC TV* in 2014. "People ask me why I turned them down. Partly confidence but mainly I didn't think I was good enough to play at that level."

Determined to get their man, Liverpool persevered. A few weeks after the initial rejection, Paisley invited Rush and his Dad (a lifelong Red) down to Melwood. "He [Paisley] was so down to earth," Rush

recalled. "He was just ignoring the likes of [Kenny] Dalglish, Graeme Souness and [Alan] Hansen coming in. He called them 'the bigheads' and would look after me and go and talk to the dinner ladies and people like that. That was how Bob Paisley was. It was like a family club and he gave that impression to me. 'We're all in this together. It doesn't matter who you are or why you are here, we're all the same.' With that, I decided to give it a go."

Rush joined Liverpool in April 1980. Tall, thin and ungainly, he seemed initially to be the very embodiment of teenage awkwardness. And he has since admitted that it took him time to feel comfortable at Anfield, particularly in the dressing room. That nagging lack of confidence that had briefly held him back proving difficult to completely shake off.

But it didn't last for long. By the beginning of the 1981-82 campaign, Paisley had seen enough of a change in the young forward to warrant a regular start in the senior side. Although it would take nine games for Rush to find the back of the net, once he began scoring, he didn't stop; his 30 goals across 49 appearances that season helping deliver yet another league title to the Anfield trophy room.

Meanwhile, over at Goodison, Sharp was beginning to find his feet too. Like Rush, the young Scot had taken time to adjust to his new surroundings and during his first season with the club had been a marginal presence. But with Bob Latchford moving to Swansea City in the summer of 1981, Sharp began to get more chances, an opportunity he capitalised upon, ending as Everton's top scorer for the 1981-82 season.

But for the man who had plucked Sharp from relative obscurity, it all came too late. Gordon Lee's Everton project had ultimately left the club mired in the nether regions of the table and in the spring of 1981, he'd been sacked. His replacement was the Blackburn Rovers manager Howard Kendall, an alumnus of Everton's 1970s title-winning side.

But it would take time. Although Sharp's gradual improvement offered Kendall a vital outlet, his Everton project stuttered to begin with, two and a half seasons of struggle punctuated with numerous lows. And for many fans, one of the lowest of these came on a cold November afternoon in 1982.

It was a game that would provide a painful reminder of how wrong Everton had been to ignore Lee's judgement on Rush. Kendall's side were devastated by the young striker, as he scored four in a 5-0 rout. It remains Liverpool biggest win at Goodison.

But, as bad as that was, it would get worse before it got better for Kendall and Everton. At one point during the 1983-84 season, with the club hovering above the relegation places, calls for the manager's head echoed around Goodison. Philip Carter resisted. It proved to be one of his better decisions. Form turned and from January 1984 until Kendall left the club in the summer of 1987, Everton were transformed.

After collecting the FA Cup in 1984, Kendall's men romped to the title the following season, finishing 13 points above second-placed Liverpool. They even collected the club's first European

trophy along the way, defeating Rapid Vienna in the 1985 Cup Winners' Cup final. It was a mini golden age at Goodison, one that would see the club reach five major finals and bring home two league titles between 1984 and 1987.

So great was the turnaround that Everton became the first club in some time to challenge Liverpool's dominance of the domestic game. Sharp played a vital role, delivering on the promise that he had shown at Dumbarton. "Sharp was integral to those great sides of the mid-1980s," recalls Andy Costigan of the fans website *Grand Old Team*. "He was a playmaking centre-forward, at times unplayable in the air and no slouch with his feet too. He was a constant goal threat and I can only imagine opposition defenders had nightmares about playing against him. What Sharpy lacked in finesse he more than made up for with a dogged determination and his ability to lead the line with different players around him."

By the mid-1980s, he and Rush had become indispensable elements in the forward lines of what were the two greatest sides in the country. This was the era of Merseyside dominance of English football. It didn't last for long, but while it did, the accuracy of Lee's prediction, albeit splintered across Stanley Park, was clear for all to see.

Clear enough to frustrate Evertonians. Because, for them, success was only part of the dream. "The aim had been not just to return Everton to the pinnacle of the game but also to eclipse Liverpool in the process, to restore the Blues to the dominance we had enjoyed over our local rivals since the two clubs first

began playing each other in the 1890s," says Costigan.

From Everton's perspective, Liverpool's pre-eminence in the 1970s and early 1980s was an affront to the natural order. Although Liverpool were blessed with more than their fair share of playing and managerial talent in the mid-80s, the key element was that signing from Chester. From his first goal until he briefly left the club for Juventus in 1987, Rush scored 207 times across six seasons in all competitions, providing the kind of ammunition that kept the glory days rolling at Anfield. As good as Everton were – and at times they were exceptional – possessing a forward of Rush's talent constantly kept Liverpool in the game.

What would have happened had the Everton board been more accommodating to Lee? Within the many

permutations of 'what if?', not only does the tantalising prospect of a Rush-Sharp partnership under Kendall exist, but so too does a Rush-less Liverpool. Could any Evertonian, if offered the chance, resist the opportunity to whizz back in time and whisper something different into Philip Carter's ear?

It was a mistake that gifted Liverpool their record goal-scorer. Rush plundered 346 goals across a 15-year stint at Liverpool, so many during his mid-1980s pomp. In his career, 25 of those goals were scored against Everton alone, as time and time again he became the cause of so much heartache amongst the city's blue contingent. That fact he had once stood amongst the die-hards of the Gwladys Street only adding salt to the wound. one of Goodison's own turning his firepower against the club he once loved. 📺

# HOULLIER, GINOLA, AND TWO MEN WITHOUT VISAS

If Kostadinov hadn't scored against France in 1993, how would we look at Cantona and Stoichkov now?

*BY JAMES EASTHAM*

*Eric Cantona with Zlatko Yankov*





**Eric Cantona may have been an era-defining player for Manchester United but he doesn't meet the definition of a great footballer. To be considered a great in any period, a player normally needs to excel on at least two of three fronts: in domestic competition, at continental club level and playing for his country. However difficult it may be for die-hard United fans to swallow, the truth is that Cantona really only ticked the first of those three boxes.**

Cantona would be viewed differently today but for the events of 17 November 1993. That night, the final round of European qualifiers for the following year's World Cup took place. So many of the fixtures that evening turned out to be theatrically gripping that the football writer Rob Smyth wrote an article in 2012 describing the date as a "sensory overload of authentic drama that included death, 'murder', robbery [and] illegal aliens".

At Parc des Princes, Cantona's France hosted Hristo Stoichkov's Bulgaria. France needed only a draw, although their place at USA 94 should have been secured already: in their penultimate qualifier, a month earlier, they had let slip a 2-1 lead in the final 10 minutes, losing 3-2 at home to Israel. For Bulgaria, it was a winner-takes-all situation: they arrived in Paris needing all three points, knowing that victory would eliminate France.

Born three months apart in 1966, Cantona and Stoichkov were close to the peak of their powers. If not Europe's two greatest strikers of the era – although Stoichkov has a claim to that title – they were the most broodingly charismatic at the time. 18 months

earlier Stoichkov had helped Barcelona win the European Cup for the first time in the club's history before going on to finish second in the 1992 Ballon d'Or award. During the same period, Cantona's stock had risen: he had won consecutive league titles with Leeds United and Manchester United and was gaining international recognition thanks to his transformative role in the first Manchester United side to be crowned English champions in more than a quarter of a century. When the 1993 Ballon d'Or standings were revealed, a month after the fixture against Bulgaria, the Frenchman was third, behind Roberto Baggio and Dennis Bergkamp, ahead of Alen Bokšić and Michael Laudrup. Stoichkov placed joint 12th.

Face to face on the field that night, Cantona and Stoichkov might not have grasped the degree to which their legacies were about to be shaped. Yet a place at the World Cup finals awaited only one of them, meaning the outcome of the match was bound to play a pivotal role in how their international careers would be defined.

Cantona settled early French nerves by putting his team ahead on 32 minutes. It was a lovely goal, too: Didier Deschamps's raking crossfield ball found Jean-Pierre Papin and his productive partnership with Cantona bore fruit once again, only this time with the men switching their usual functions: turning provider, Papin cushioned his header into Cantona's path and the Manchester United striker volleyed brilliantly past Borislav Mikhailov. Cantona celebrated by standing on the advertising boards, arms aloft in triumph.

Bulgaria equalised five minutes later. Krasimir Balakov took an outswinging corner and Emil Kostadinov headed past the France goalkeeper Bernard Lama. With the scoreline 1-1, France were still on course to qualify, but anxiety spread around the stadium. Fans remembered it was only a month since les Bleus had blown their home lead against Israel. The hosts spent most of the second half in fearful defensive mode, willing the final whistle to be blown.

When the final whistle eventually came, it did so moments after generational disaster had struck France. Following a short free-kick, the substitute David Ginola had the ball near the corner flag. Rather than wasting time, however, he sought Cantona in the penalty area, but overhit the cross. Bulgaria worked the ball forward from the right-back position. Twelve seconds later, the visitors had scored. "*C'est la fin!*" said disbelieving French co-commentator Jean-Michel Larqué. For Cantona's hopes of playing at a World Cup, it was. As the ball struck the back of the net, the clock in the top-right hand corner of the TV screen read "44:59 second half".

The drama of the climax – Bulgaria scoring a winner in the final second of normal time to secure a place at the 1994 World Cup at France's expense – means the clear-headed brilliance of the goal is overlooked. An outside-of-the-foot pass finds Lyuboslav Penev near the halfway line. Penev controls, turns and clips a beautiful ball over the France defence. Kostadinov collects, accelerates, deftly manipulates the ball using several body parts and hits a vicious drive in off the underside of the crossbar just before

Laurent Blanc intercepts via a desperate lunge. Kostadinov makes contact with such force the ball rolls out of the net and back on to the pitch.

Nearly three decades on, the post-goal scenes remain traumatic for France fans. Clutching the back of his head, Marcel Desailly appears to hyperventilate. Deschamps leaves the field in tears. Ginola – who would be blamed for the defeat by manager Gérard Houllier, sparking a feud that ended in court 19 years later – is on his haunches, head bowed, slumped on the advertising hoardings.

There had been tension in the France camp before the game. Talk of splits between the PSG players (Bernard Lama, Alain Roche, Paul Le Guen, Vincent Guérin, Ginola) and the Marseille/ex-Marseille contingent (Desailly, Deschamps, Papin, Cantona) was rife. Further souring the taste of defeat, it later emerged that Penev and Kostadinov probably should have played no part in the fixture: the Bulgarian FA hadn't applied for visas for the pair in time. However, at the squad's pre-game training camp in Germany, Mikhailov and Georgi Georgiev, both of whom played for Mulhouse in eastern France, suggested a route by car across the border into France at a point where they knew security was lax. From there, Penev and Kostadinov took a domestic flight to Paris to join up with the rest of the squad.

The real legacy of the game was its role in France being crowned world champions five years later. 17 November 1993 was the date France finally tired of being noble losers or bottlers, the two duties they had performed most effectively on the



international stage up until that point. No more, they appeared to say. Four of the players in the starting line-up that night (Blanc, Desailly, Deschamps, Emmanuel Petit) and two of the substitutes (Bixente Lizarazu, Youri Djorkaeff) were automatic starters under Aimé Jacquet – promoted from assistant to manager after Houllier was sacked in the aftermath of the Bulgaria defeat – during the successful 1998 campaign.

Even more intriguing, though, is to consider what Cantona and Stoichkov's legacies might be had Bulgaria not netted their late winner. Imagine Kostadinov's thunderous shot had flown just a couple of inches higher and ricocheted off the bar, and the ball had run back into play and been cleared. The game would have ended 1-1. France would have squeezed through and it would have been the Bulgaria players falling to their knees in despair at the final whistle.

Cantona would have headed into the following year's World Cup at the top of his game. He had helped Manchester United clinch the first league and FA Cup double in the club's history. He had won the PFA Players' Player of the Year

award. In Dallas and Chicago and New Jersey he would have been surrounded by international teammates able to bring out the best in him. Bulgaria and Sweden – the two teams that made it out of France's qualifying group – both reached the World Cup semi-finals. France had the potential to progress just as far, suggesting Cantona was well-placed to have emerged as one of the stars of the tournament.

And how would we view Stoichkov today, had he missed out on USA 94? As an excellent striker for Barcelona, but perhaps little more than that. There would have been no World Cup Golden Boot for him, shared with Oleg Salenko for the six goals he scored during Bulgaria's run to the last four. And no 1994 Ballon d'Or, either, won thanks to his World Cup exploits. Cantona finished 13th that year. Unlucky for him.

Football is a game of fine margins and details. Fans are quick to forget how close the roles of winners and losers were to being reversed. On that night in Paris, the specifics went against Cantona, depriving him of his moment of crowning glory. 🏆

# THE BLIZZARD DOES BOOKS!



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# DOWN THE PAN

What if Middlesbrough  
had turned up for that  
game against Blackburn  
in 1996-97?

*BY TOM FLIGHT*

*Bryan Robson with Fabrizio Ravanelli as  
he signs for Middlesbrough.*





**On the morning of Friday 20 December 1996 Eric Paylor of the *Evening Gazette* found Bryan Robson in a bad mood. The Middlesbrough manager had been cutting a forlorn figure for weeks; his Boro side hadn't won a game in the league in more than three months. But that morning Paylor found him particularly uptight. "Don't ask me what the team is going be, because I haven't got one," Robson snapped.**

Middlesbrough were due to visit Ewood Park the next day. With injuries already at crisis point, Robson learned that morning that a virus had gone through the club, officially taking out eight players. Robson was left with 17 fit players, three of whom were goalkeepers, five of whom had never featured in the first team.

Robson knew they would be heading to Ewood Park to receive a hammering. At 10.30am he met with the club's chief executive Keith Lamb to discuss the drastic situation. The anxious club doctor told them, "I'm uncertain how many of the 17 fit players will be fit tomorrow." How many more players could wake up the next morning with the virus? They decided they needed to make a call to the Premier League to see if there was a way of delaying the fixture. The ramifications of that call would completely alter the future of the football club. At 11am Lamb picked up the phone.

This story started two-and-a-half years earlier. In the summer of 1994 Steve Gibson, a businessman in his mid-30s who had recently become club chairman, was desperate to appoint the recently retired former England captain as manager. Robson wasn't keen. "At first

I thought, Middlesbrough... I'm not so sure," Robson recalled in Dave Allan and Adrian Bevington's book *Doom to Boom*. "It didn't really appeal to me."

Gibson would have understood. When he joined the board a decade earlier Gibson remembered, "Everything, right the way through the club, was rotten." In 1986 gates were low and finances so bleak that the local news reported that the club had died, but behind the scenes Gibson had brought together a consortium that saved it with minutes to spare.

What Robson didn't realise was that the Middlesbrough he knew, the Middlesbrough everyone knew, was soon to be a thing of the past. Everything you associated with the club's identity Gibson was shredding and starting anew. Gibson saw the radical way in which the football landscape was unfolding. He saw the transformative cultural effect of Italia 90 and how the Taylor Report was making the sport a safer spectator experience. Most importantly he saw how Rupert Murdoch's Sky deal was flooding the game with money. After accepting mediocrity for so long Gibson asked a question: Why not us? Why can't Middlesbrough be one of the clubs that defines this new era? He set about a creating a revolution.

Gibson and Robson had dinner together and after about half an hour, before the food had even been served, the former England captain reached across the table with his hand and said, "You've got a deal." The revolution began with a pop of champagne. "I said, 'Excuse me,' before going outside the room where I screamed the place down with joy," Gibson remembered.

As player-manager Robson, who memorably donned a suit-and-tie with shorts combo for the unveiling, immediately got Boro promoted to the Premier League in 1994-95. The following season they would be playing in the new state-of-the-art Riverside Stadium. Today the Riverside is often viewed as basic and sterile, but in 1996 the second youngest stadium in the Premier League was Selhurst Park, built in 1924. Playing at the Riverside was like playing in the future.

And then Gibson and Robson set about creating a super team of foreign megastars. They fought off top clubs all over Europe to sign the Brazilian playmaker Juninho in October 1995. The following summer his fellow countryman, the midfielder Emerson, who had just been voted the Primeira Liga Player of the Year, gave up Champions League football with Porto for Teesside. Perhaps most remarkable of all Boro signed Juventus's top scorer Fabrizio Ravanelli, who had just scored in the Champions League final in his last game for the *bianconeri*.

And it started so well. Ravanelli opened the 96-97 season with a euphoric debut hat-trick against Liverpool. Hammerings of Coventry and West Ham followed. Ravanelli couldn't stop scoring. Emerson, with his shimmering soul glo perm, sauntered around the pitch, banging goals in from 25 yards.

And then it all went so, so wrong. In every revolution, there is chaos at the beginning. Results started to turn. It quickly became apparent that this side was terribly unbalanced. "If Boro's attack is full of virtuosi, their defence is manned by pub piano players," wrote the *Sunday*

*Times*. The club went 12 games without a win between mid-September and Boxing Day.

The dressing room was fracturing. Ravanelli stopped talking to his teammates while criticising the club to Italian newspapers. Astoundingly Emerson disappeared to Brazil for weeks, his wife calling Teesside a "strange, terrible place". Then came the call to the Premier League ahead of the match at Ewood Park.

It's impossible to know what exactly was said on the phone between Keith Lamb and the Premier League, but one thing remains clear: whoever Keith Lamb spoke to did not have a clear understanding of the league's own rules. Middlesbrough acted on the vague advice given to them by the league in their decision to call off the game.

All hell broke loose. The press reaction was incredulous. "Later in the day, Keith got a call from a more senior official at the Premier League, who'd been playing golf," Robson remembered. "He said we couldn't postpone the match, but we said it was too late." The Premier League commissioned a hearing into events the following month and, devastatingly, the club were found guilty and deducted three points. Middlesbrough sank even deeper. Gibson's revolution had quickly turned into anarchy.

The harsh punishment did appear to have a galvanising effect. Juninho in particular went up a gear, producing a breathtaking stretch of form that lead him to being crowned Premier League Player of the Year. The midseason acquisitions of Mark Schwarzer in goal and the seasoned

Serie A centre-back Gianluca Festa improved the defence. The team went on a blazing run, winning four straight in March. They also embarked on two epic cup runs, both culminating in trips to Wembley, extraordinary for a side who had never reached a major cup final in their 120-year existence. The football was often pulsating and they hit the net a remarkable 94 times in all competitions.

If Middlesbrough could just stay up, and maybe even win a trophy, who knew what would follow. Robson tried to lure both Laudrup brothers at the same time. Gianluca Vialli and Jürgen Klinsmann were both targets. Most of these offers came to nothing but while Robson and his side battled relegation, provisional talks were taking place behind the scenes with Gabriel Batistuta, Paul Ince and Roberto Carlos. All three players were reportedly keen and their clubs were willing to sell. Boro were on the verge of assembling one of the most extraordinary collections of international talent ever seen in club football at that point in history.

Boro just had to stay up.

The combination of two cup runs and a relegation battle caught up with the team. They lost the Coca-Cola Cup Final in demoralising fashion thanks to an extra-time Steve Claridge goal in a replay. In the league, they drew three games straight setting up a final day must-win contest against George Graham's Leeds.

Leeds took the lead. But as his teammates fell apart, the indefatigable Juninho kept battling and scored an equaliser. It wouldn't be enough. At the final whistle

11 players in red fell to the floor. The Brazilian, who had fallen in love with Teesside, who knew that if he wanted to be selected for France 98 he would have to leave that summer, was the last to rise.

Having been controversially deducted three points Middlesbrough were relegated by two.

The Blackburn fixture had to be crowbarred into the calendar three days before the Leeds match, adding to an already exhausting schedule. If Middlesbrough had played the original fixture in December and kept the defeat to no more than 7-0 they would have stayed up on goals scored ahead of Coventry City.

The FA Cup final against Chelsea the following weekend was a disaster. The players were sick of the sight of each other. Ravanelli and Neil Cox came to blows during the photo-shoot. It was game over in the first minute as Roberto di Matteo opened the scoring after 42 seconds on their way to a 2-0 victory. It meant no European football for Middlesbrough the following season. The revolution was over.

Chelsea were going through a similar period of transformation. They too discarded the relics of a bygone era; the previous decade had been marred by hooliganism and dismal form. Under the management of Ruud Gullit their FA Cup victory signalled a return. They won the Cup Winners' Cup the following season and would be playing Champions League football by the turn of the century, even before they were the catching the eye of Roman Abramovic.



If Robson's men had survived relegation and, buoyed by the elation of survival, won the FA Cup, could they have bought *galácticos* and strode into the next century as a serious force in European football as Chelsea did?

If they had stayed up how close were Middlesbrough actually to signing Batistuta, Roberto Carlos and Ince? According to Anthony Vickers of the *Evening Gazette*, "Robbo was always totally frank and he told us he thought the deal for Batistuta had been almost there, that he had a gentleman's agreement with Ince and that Carlos would prove trickier but he thought another big push (we took that to mean with more money) might swing it." Juninho, a friend of Roberto Carlos, apparently was "going to have a word."

Relegation didn't mean the spending stopped. Boro tried to recapture the optimism of 96-97 but something was missing. Gibson hit the restart button immediately by doubling Paul Merson's wages to bring him to Teesside. He inspired promotion, but soon wanted out. The following year Boro signed Christian Ziege who also only lasted a year. In 2000 Robson signed Alen Bokšić, who hung around for a few years, but judging by his work-rate and patchy form there was only one reason he was on Teesside. (Robson's successor Steve McClaren released Bokšić by paying off his contract. When he bumped into the Croatian maverick years later he worried he'd receive a frosty greeting; instead Bokšić hugged him, took out his phone and said, 'Thank you, *mister*, for letting me go, you helped me buy this yacht!')

They say it's the hope that kills you. In truth, it is often the hope you live for as a

fan. In the summer of 1996 Gibson and Robson inspired more hope than Boro fans ever dared to dream was possible. The way the season unraveled was almost operatic.

In Richard Foster's book *Premier League Nuggets* Simon Banoub wrote that nothing ever "quite reached the fever pitch that had gripped the area in 1996-97. Even the subsequent success of winning the League Cup and reaching the Uefa Cup final didn't have the same buzz as our first brush with attracting top talent to our beloved northern wastelands had."

Boro fans still harbour deep resentment over the Premier League's decision. It's been said if Alex Ferguson or Arsène Wenger had called a game off for the same reason they would have received a Get Well Soon card from the league. The fact that Boro acted on the league's advice and that it subsequently refused to accept responsibility is disgraceful, but there's no doubt that Robson and Lamb were naïve.

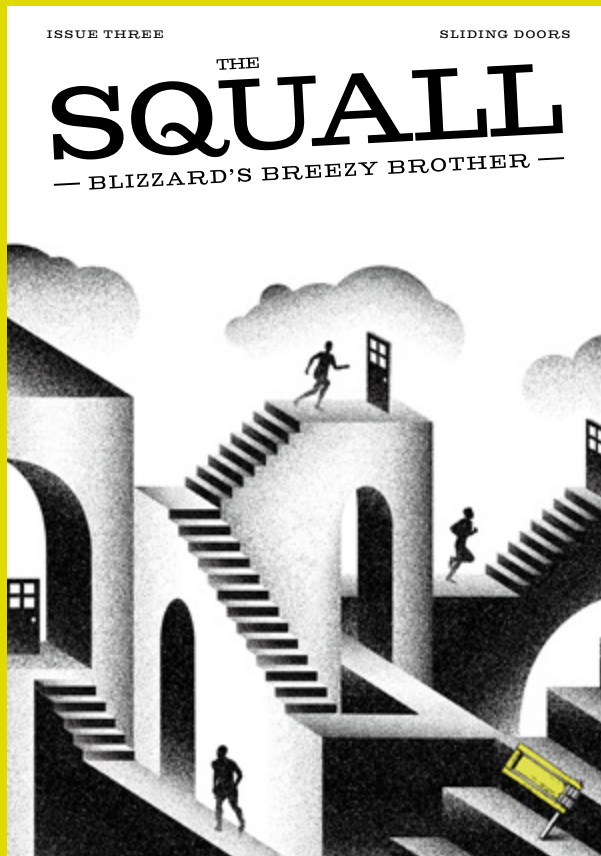
But at the same time, it was that naivety that bred the optimism and audacity to think they could pull off signings likes of Ravanelli, Juninho and then Roberto Carlos and Batistuta. It was a classic Icarus tale. And when they picked themselves up from the fall they found the footballing world a more cynical place.

Rob Nicholls, editor of the long-running Middlesbrough fanzine *Fly Me To The Moon* writes of that season, "Although we ultimately bounced back I wonder whether some of the glitter had gone for good. Maybe, in the massive, crushing disappointments of Middlesbrough people lost the ability to truly let

themselves go again and believe that dreams could come true.”

The 1996-97 season at times does feel like a dream. An almost cosmic whirl of drama and emotion that almost stands apart from the rest of the club’s history. Following relegation, the club awoke with a gasp. The days in which a locally owned

club like Middlesbrough could compete financially with the elite were already over. They had returned to their typical state of mediocrity and acceptance. If only Middlesbrough had played that game against Blackburn, the dream could have continued. Who knows how high they could have soared? 🗨️



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# THE FLAG OF FORTUNE

What might the consequences have been for Liverpool if Dortmund's equaliser against Hoffenheim in 2013 had stood?

*BY REY MASHAYEKHI*

*Jürgen Klopp and Roberto Firmino celebrate.*





**It was all over. As the Westfalenstadion exploded into rapture — as Marcel Schmelzer’s unlikely low drive from outside the box lay in the back of the net — it seemed certain that Hoffenheim were going down.**

The Dieter Hopp-financed transformation of the former amateur club, based in the village of 3,000 people in southwest Germany, was about to take a devastating step backward. Having risen into the professional ranks and attained Bundesliga status in 2008, Hoffenheim went to Dortmund on the final day of the 2012-13 season needing a win if they hoped to stay in the first division. Even then, goal difference meant that Fortuna Düsseldorf and Augsburg above them almost certainly had to lose their respective matches if Hoffenheim were to claw their way into the relegation playoff.

In their way stood Jürgen Klopp’s powerhouse, a team one week from the European Cup final. Dortmund may have failed to claim a third consecutive Bundesliga, but they had become the actualisation of Klopp’s vision for his team. The result versus Hoffenheim was practically meaningless for Dortmund; drastically more important was their condition and rhythm going into the final against Bayern.

Hoffenheim appeared doomed as early as the sixth minute, when Robert Lewandowski tapped Dortmund into the lead with his 24th league goal of the season. From there, Dortmund had several opportunities to finish off their opponents for good. In the first half, Jakub Błaszczykowski beat five men only to sidefoot the finish into Koen Casteels’s arms; in the second, İlkay

Gündoğan unleashed a curling effort from 25 yards that Casteels just managed to tip off the crossbar.

Yet Hoffenheim managed to stay alive. Their reward was a Dortmund meltdown that began in the 76th minute, when Mats Hummels clumsily fouled Kevin Volland in the penalty area. Four minutes later, Hoffenheim’s young Brazilian forward Roberto Firmino played a perfectly measured through-ball that released Sven Schipplock. Roman Weidenfeller rushed off his line and took Schipplock out, conceding another penalty and getting himself sent off in the process. (As Dortmund had no more subs, Kevin Großkreutz finished the match in goal.)

Sejad Salihović slotted in his second penalty to make it 2-1 to the visitors, and results elsewhere were going Hoffenheim’s way. But in the 93rd minute, Dortmund launched a free-kick up the pitch that penned Hoffenheim around their own box. The ball found its way to Schmelzer, who had just enough time to hit a drive from nearly 30 yards out. The shot dribbled past two walls of players, just missed Lewandowski’s outstretched foot and rolled past Casteels into the bottom corner.

Pandemonium ensued. Several Hoffenheim players sank to the ground in anguish, while those in yellow surrounding them celebrated wildly. But Casteels and others ran to linesman Benjamin Brand, and before long they were joined by referee Jochen Drees. After briefly conferring with Brand, Drees jogged over to the Hoffenheim penalty area, his arm raised. The call, rightly, was offside against Lewandowski; the goal was disallowed.

On the touchline, Klopp was apoplectic. He traded words with his counterpart Markus Gisdol, who reciprocated with a light shove. At the final whistle, when it was clear that Hoffenheim had survived one of the most extraordinary afternoons in the Bundesliga's recent history, an animated Klopp made a beeline for Drees and his assistants to voice his complaints. Hoffenheim would go on to make easy work of Kaiserslautern in the relegation playoff, preserving their place in the Bundesliga, where they remain today.

In an interview for a Bundesliga-produced TV series, Klopp recalled the game against Hoffenheim. It's both funny and striking how — though he readily admits the offside call was correct — part of him clearly remains annoyed at an ultimately irrelevant result for his side. "Düsseldorf got relegated because we lost that match," he said. "I haven't got any close ties to Düsseldorf, but it was all very unnecessary."

It's the sort of hyper-competitive attitude that epitomises Klopp's celebrated drive and intensity as a coach. And it's all the more amusing because, had things ended any other way — had Schmelzer's goal stood, had Dortmund converted any of their missed opportunities and dashed any chance of a Hoffenheim fightback — Klopp's time at Liverpool might look very different. Because by relegating Roberto Firmino's Hoffenheim, Klopp would have almost surely condemned himself to a future without Roberto Firmino. And that's a universe in which no Liverpool supporter, let alone Klopp himself, would want to live.

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In the hysterically hyped world of Brazilian football, where vaunted teenage prodigies are often whisked away to Europe in deals worth millions, Roberto Firmino Barbosa de Oliveira emerged from relative obscurity. This lends an almost mythic quality to his evolution into one of the world's most highly-regarded footballers — a player lauded as much, if not more so, for his intelligence and commitment as his technique, creativity and ruthlessness.

How did this unheralded young man from Alagoas become a player of seemingly one-of-a-kind qualities, a linchpin of one of this century's greatest sides? He parlayed his time in the youth ranks at his low-flying hometown club, CRB, into a move to the larger southern club Figueirense, which he helped promote to the Brazilian Serie A in 2010. Almost immediately Hoffenheim snapped him up, part of a recruitment strategy that lured Brazilians like Luiz Gustavo (who was out the door to Bayern just as Firmino arrived) and, later, Joelinton to the club.

By the time Hoffenheim went to Dortmund in May 2013, Firmino had become an ever-present in the team, usually supporting an inept hodgepodge of strikers up top. What the 21 year old lacked in final product — he had only five goals and two assists in 29 league starts that year — he made up with the work rate and link-up play that have since become trademarks. Those traits were burnished at a club still heavily influenced by the management of Ralf Rangnick, who had departed two years earlier. Still, Hoffenheim struggled terribly in 2012-13, sacking two managers and having the worst defensive record in the league to show for it.

At the Westfalenstadion that day, Firmino played Salihović through on goal in the first half, only for the finish to be hit straight at Weidenfeller. Of course, his most impressive contribution was the even better through-ball to Schipplock in the 80th minute, which drew the penalty that would save Hoffenheim's season. In that respect, Roberto Firmino is truly the master of his own destiny.

But what if Hoffenheim had failed to escape the drop? The following season was Firmino's breakthrough as a professional; in 2013-14, he scored 16 league goals and set up 12 more as Hoffenheim improved to a ninth-place Bundesliga finish. Perhaps he would have moved to another top-division club, in Germany or elsewhere, and put in a similarly impressive season to draw the attention of Europe's biggest teams. Or maybe Hoffenheim would have managed to retain him for a push to return to the Bundesliga, obfuscating his talents in the second division for the time being.

In any number of ways, his career would have progressed down a considerably different path. It was the following two seasons that saw Firmino cement his status as Hoffenheim's most influential player, and one of the Bundesliga's most promising talents. Those were the circumstances that led him to Liverpool, where he moved for a reported £29 million in the summer of 2015.

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There was a conspiracy theory that once made the rounds among Liverpool's sprawling online fan community, which suggested the club's infamous transfer

committee really bought Firmino for Klopp. Brendan Rodgers may have been the manager, but he was on borrowed time; Fenway Sports Group had eyes for Klopp and it was only a matter of time before they lured him out of his post-Dortmund sabbatical to replace Rodgers. Hoffenheim's highly rated attacker was effectively a housewarming present for the manager-in-waiting.

It's a far-fetched theory, albeit one enforced by reports that Rodgers had not wanted to sign Firmino, as well as the odd way in which the manager deployed his new player at the start of his Liverpool career. One lasting memory is the 3-1 defeat at Old Trafford in September 2015, when Firmino and Danny Ings were shunted wide in support of Christian Benteke (who scored a memorable consolation goal with an overhead bicycle kick). Firmino had a dreadful game — a makeshift winger, exposed for pace, drifting on the margins of the match before getting hauled off on 65 minutes.

Everything changed with Klopp's arrival. The German had witnessed Firmino's emergence in the Bundesliga firsthand; he needed no convincing of his qualities. What's more, given Firmino's training under a Rangnick-influenced regime at Hoffenheim, Klopp knew he had a player versed in the Gegenpressing principles on which he would build his Liverpool team. It was not long before Firmino established himself as central to Klopp's plans, in more ways than one.

Firmino would become the nexus around which one of the era's greatest football teams functioned. Operating through

the middle of Liverpool's frontline, he proved the perfect centre-forward to lead Klopp's press, and the ideal facilitator for the side's devastating counterattack. He remains one-third of the best front three in world football, a key link between the eight men playing behind him and the blistering threat posed by Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah ahead. How effective would Mané and Salah be without the selfless Brazilian between them, doing the hard yards and tying together the play?

It's no wonder that many consider him Liverpool's most irreplaceable player, and the hardest one to find cover for. Imagine, then, a world in which Liverpool didn't have him at all.

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The Anfield Wrap's Neil Atkinson once spoke of Firmino's "spiritual" importance to Klopp's Liverpool — a factor at once intangible and yet wholly essential to the ethos that has reared the club's sixth European Cup and its first English title in 30 years. Firmino is the embodiment of how Klopp's Liverpool should play football: an intoxicating union of skill and technique with effort, aggression, self-belief, and tactical intelligence. His is the swagger and exuberance of a man who has not let the grind of professional football dampen his love of the game, nor sand down his personality into something less eccentric.

For that, the man they call Bobby is adored by Liverpool supporters the world over. He is the recipient of perhaps the most infectious chant bestowed upon a Liverpool player since Fernando Torres, the refrain of "Si, Señor!" having now

boomed around grounds across the world. He has become one of the most beloved players in the club's modern history and for many fans it would be unfathomable to consider this Liverpool team's success without him.

And yet, all it would have taken was for the linesman's flag to stay down on that spring day in Dortmund seven years ago. Hoffenheim would have gone down, and Firmino would have probably made his way to another Bundesliga club, or perhaps tried his hand elsewhere on the continent. The only thing that seems likely, provided he stayed fit, is that he'd continue his progression as a footballer and eventually get a big move somewhere—though where, exactly, would be left to circumstance. It's not hard to imagine him as one of Diego Simeone's favourite sons at Atlético Madrid, or part of Leonardo Jardim's world-beaters at Monaco.

Where would that have left Klopp's Liverpool? Christian Benteke was not long for Klopp's world and even a fit Daniel Sturridge was clearly not in the manager's plans as a regular starter. Divock Origi has proven a serviceable player for Liverpool (and a cult hero to boot) but has never found the requisite consistency. Firmino's presence meant that Klopp could prioritise his budget in other areas — specifically on pace and quality in wide areas, hence the arrivals of Mané and Salah in consecutive summers. Firmino's absence would probably have led to a different recruitment strategy; perhaps Gini Wijnaldum wouldn't have arrived for £25 million in the same summer as Mané if the Reds had also needed another striker.

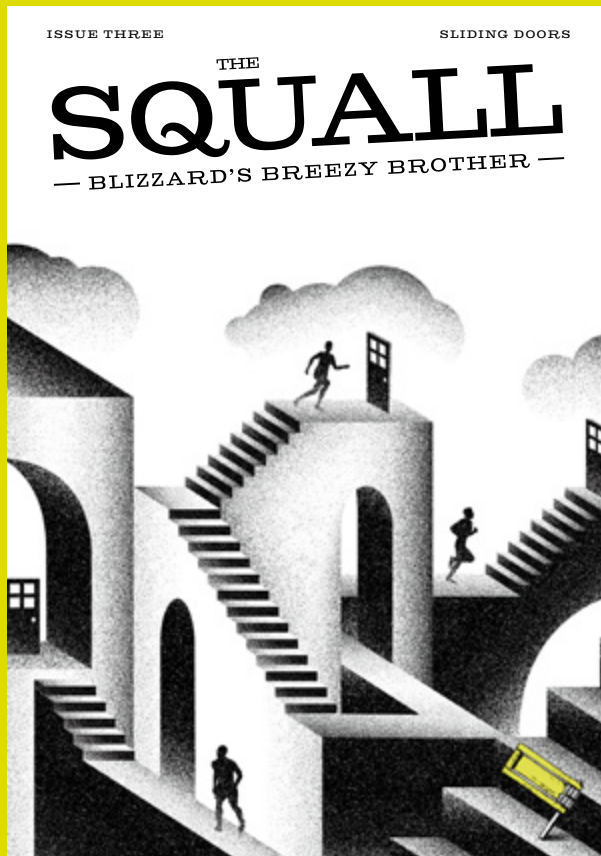
Prospective names from the recent past, like Nabil Fekir, come to mind as options they could have turned to. All in all, you'd have backed Klopp to figure it out and build a winner. But as his tenure at Liverpool has shown, the margins at the highest level are painfully thin. Replace Roberto Firmino with someone who gives you even 90% of what Firmino does and there's no guarantee that silverware awaits.

"He is the connector for our team," Klopp said of Firmino after the 4-0 demolition

of Leicester City on Boxing Day 2019, in which his number 9 scored two. "He is not the only one who can play that position, but he can play that position in a very special way."

And so you're left to wonder whether one of the great football men of our time — someone who well understands the fickle nature of this game we love — grasps how close everything came to being so very different. 🤖





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Thank you in advance for helping out.

# THE WIDTH OF A CROSSBAR

What if Poland had equalised in the last minute of the final qualifier and England hadn't made it to Italia 90?

*BY BEN KOSKY*

*Bobby Robson talks with  
Paul Gascoigne.*



**Gazza's tearful night in Turin, Bobby Robson's redemption and the origin of a national hang-up about penalty shoot-outs – for England football fans, these are the abiding memories of Italia '90.**

England's unexpected run to the semi-finals, cruelly ended by spot-kick defeat at the hands of the Germans, would become treasured as a heroic near miss, a launchpad for rekindling public interest in football. That would swell into a large-scale rebranding of the sport just two years later under the Premier League banner and a first step towards the product that now generates billions of pounds around the globe.

Yet for England it might never have happened.

It's easy to forget, more than 30 years later, that Robson's under-pressure side were inches away from failing to reach Italia 90 at all. England had slogged their way towards qualification, sharing two 0-0 draws with Sweden and needed another point from their final game, away to Poland on 11 October 1989, to book their place at the finals.

Having not let in a goal throughout qualifying, the veteran goalkeeper Peter Shilton is still unbeaten in Chorzów as the clock reaches 90 minutes. And then... the Poland midfielder Ryszard Tarasiewicz lines up a 30-yard drive. Shilton stretches frantically but cannot get his hand to the powerful shot, which thuds against his crossbar and rebounds back into play. Within seconds the referee sounds the final whistle and England are through, albeit only as one of the best runners-up across the European qualifying section.

Cue sighs of relief from Robson, his players and all followers of the national team.

So what might have been the consequences had the trajectory of Tarasiewicz's shot been only fractionally lower?

## **Robson Out, Kendall In?**

Most obviously, defeat in Poland would undoubtedly have spelt the end for Robson as England manager (as it was, before the World Cup he accepted an offer to take over PSV Eindhoven when his contract expired) – his legacy very different from that of the avuncular elder statesman who came to be regarded with general affection throughout the game. Robson had been pilloried by the tabloids for some time. Only a year earlier, one newspaper branded him a "plonker" for confusing England's opponents, Sweden, with Denmark. He had also come under pressure to resign after England flopped at the European Championship in 1988, finishing bottom of their group with three consecutive defeats.

After the disgrace of a failure to qualify, Robson may not have gone on to pick up a series of plum coaching jobs around Europe over the next decade. Nor would the CBE and subsequent knighthood have come his way.

As to the identity of Robson's successor, there's a fair chance that the FA would have looked beyond the claims of Graham Taylor, the man eventually tasked with building on the Italia 90 platform. By then, Taylor had impressed by guiding Aston Villa to the First Division runners-

up spot – but in the autumn of 1989, the outstanding candidate to replace Robson would surely have been Howard Kendall.

Kendall had transformed Everton into genuine rivals to their city neighbours during the mid-80s, bringing the League title, an FA Cup and the European Cup Winners' Cup to Goodison Park.

Despite an indifferent spell at Athletic in Bilbao, his stock was still high and he would have been available – unlike the other outstanding English manager of the time, Terry Venables, who had recently taken over at Tottenham. So no "Do I Not Like That" documentary, no superimposing root vegetables on the face of the England manager – and a different term than 'wing-back' for that position. It was Taylor who popularised the term by using it in Moscow in 1992 to describe his deployment of Andy Sinton.

## No Italian Job For Gazza

Paul Gascoigne attained the status of a national icon the following summer, partly for his swashbuckling performances at Italia 90 and partly for his outpouring of emotion that captivated TV viewers. The Spurs midfielder's tearful reaction as it dawned on him that his yellow card in the semi-final meant a suspension – should England progress – would become a defining image of the nation's disappointment. It catapulted Gascoigne to superstardom, earning him a lucrative move to Lazio in an era when the Italian league was regarded as the pinnacle of the world game.

However, it's worth remembering that Gazza was by no means an automatic selection for England in 1989 – he didn't feature in that game in Poland and his place in the World Cup squad remained in doubt until a dazzling display against Czechoslovakia in a warm-up match. Without the World Cup to showcase his skills, would Gascoigne's career path have been different? Maybe the hype all went to Gazza's head, resulting in the loss of self-control that led to his reckless challenge on Nottingham Forest's Gary Charles in the 1991 FA Cup final and put him out of action for more than a year with a knee injury?

Of course, Gascoigne wasn't the only member of the England team whose achievements in Italy would usher him into the spotlight and ultimately bring about a move to a Serie A. David Platt, who formed a potent midfield partnership with Gazza during the tournament, boosted his reputation by volleying a dramatic last-minute winner against Belgium and then finding the net again in England's quarter-final win over Cameroon.

Platt emerged as a key figure during Aston Villa's title challenge that season and went on to sign for Bari in the summer of 1991 before moving on to Juventus and Sampdoria, as well as becoming England captain. However, the Villa midfielder did not even make his international debut until a month after that game in Poland – and who can be certain that his name would have been on the mind of Robson's successor anyway?

Platt might have ended up with significantly fewer than the 62 England caps he eventually won, while Peter



Shilton would certainly not have gone on to amass a final tally of 125 had he conceded in Poland. Having already broken Bobby Moore's England appearance record earlier that year, Shilton – who had already turned 40 – would surely have felt compelled to retire from international football there and then.

## England's Spot of Bother

England's elimination from the 1990 World Cup came about after their first brush with penalties, setting in motion a national inferiority complex that would endure for another 28 years.

Successive England managers would be quizzed ahead of every major tournament about the extent to which they had prepared the squad for the possibility of penalties – accompanied by an underlying tone of dread and foreboding. The English public became conditioned to expect failure from 12 yards out and those fears would be justified over and over again until Gareth Southgate's side finally triumphed on spot-kicks against Colombia at the 2018 World Cup.

Southgate, of course, had been one of the fall guys as a player – taking the kick that sealed another semi-final defeat to Germany at Euro '96 – and the fact that England's old rivals were beneficiaries again can only have increased the growth of this national trauma. But maybe Southgate – along with Paul Ince and David Batty (1998), David Beckham and Darius Vassell (2004), Frank Lampard, Steven Gerrard and Jamie Carragher (2006) and Ashley Young and Ashley

Cole (2012) – might have felt under less pressure if Stuart Pearce and Chris Waddle hadn't set the tone for such public misgiving about the team's penalty-taking abilities in 1990.

## Birth of the Premier League

English football wasn't in a good place back in 1989. Hooliganism had plagued the domestic game throughout much of the decade, resulting in the 1985 Heysel Stadium disaster and Uefa's subsequent decision to ban all English teams from their competitions. Football fans were widely regarded as undesirables, to be herded in and out of grounds and the tragic consequences of that approach had come home to roost at Hillsborough, six months before the qualifier in Poland.

In the wake of Hillsborough, the Taylor Report forced clubs to begin upgrading their stadiums and the need to finance that encouraged them to seek ways of increasing revenue through a reboot of the league and a new TV deal. But, while the Premier League was in the pipeline anyway, it was the appeal of Italia 90 and the performance of the England team that triggered a renewed public interest in the game, snowballing sufficiently to bring about that upheaval within two years. As the 1990s progressed, football's image changed and a second upsurge in its popularity after England had hosted Euro 96 made the Premier League an attractive option for the world's star players and wealthy investors.

It's also worth considering whether Sky Sports would have thrived – or even

survived – but for landing the contract to broadcast live Premier League matches in 1992.

At the time, the company had been struggling to broaden their audience, but the Premier League proved an irresistible hook to football fans around the country

and Sky turned their losses into a £60m profit at the end of that first season.

Perhaps they, like others, have reason to be thankful that Tarasiewicz was marginally off target that night in Chorzów. 🏹

# THE REGRETS OF VITALIY KOSOVSKYI

What if Bayern hadn't come  
back against Dynamo Kyiv  
in the 1999 semi-final?

*BY DAN CUMMERSON AND VADIM FURMANOV*

*The Dynamo Kyiv coach Valeriy  
Lobanovski during the game  
against Bayern Munich.*



**It is 7 April 1999 in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv – 82,000 fans are crammed into the roofless Olimpiyskiy stadium as the rain lashes down and the atmosphere reaches a deafening pitch – as the clock hits the 62nd minute, it's the opportunity every Dynamo Kyiv fan and player have dreamt about; a chance to make history and reach the Champions League final for the first time in the club's history.**

Through the 90s Dynamo Kyiv had become the dominant force in the Eastern bloc, having won the previous six Ukrainian League titles and three of the seven Ukrainian Cup finals. Valeriy Lobanovskyi, an institution at the club who had led them to seven Soviet league title and two Cup Winners' Cups, was back in charge for a third time after spending six years managing in the Middle East. The front pair of Andriy Shevchenko and Serhiy Rebrov were among the most feared strikers in Europe.

An eye-catching run the previous season, which included Shevchenko announcing himself on the world stage with a hat trick at the Camp Nou in a 4-0 dismantling of Barcelona, saw Dynamo reach the Champions League quarter-final before losing to Marcelo Lippi's Juventus. A season later, they had gone a stage further. After overcoming a tough group comprising Lens, Panathinaikos and the Premier League champions Arsenal, they had beaten the defending champions Real Madrid 3-1 in the quarters on aggregate.

The national president, Leonid Kuchma, despite being embroiled in scandal, visited the players in the dressing room after the 2-0 second-leg win over Madrid at the Olimpiyskiy, with Shevchenko scoring both

goals. He kissed Lobanovskyi three times on the cheek and said, "Not only Ukraine but the whole world saw your triumph tonight." The Dynamo squad were seen as representing the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine, for which the club president Hryhoriy Surkis was an MP.

After the historic victory, Lobanovskyi said, "This match showed that it is not only money, which allows you to acquire superstars, that decides the outcome of matches. Finances, of course, are an important component of football, but still not the main one. We fought on equal terms with Real Madrid, a mini-national team of the world." Dynamo, of course, were no paupers. Politically well-connected and financially well-endowed, they were the dominant force domestically. And this was a team with some European pedigree: two Cup Winners' Cups, a European Super Cup and two previous appearances in the European Cup semi-finals.

But they were still minnows compared to Madrid. In a post-Cold War Europe, soaring economic disparities between West and East meant that clubs like Dynamo would never be able to compete financially. Their presence in the semi-finals was a holdover of a bygone era, one where Central and Eastern European sides were able to keep hold of their best players and challenge the historic giants of Western Europe as near-equals. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Only Ottmar Hitzfeld's Bayern Munich stood between Dynamo and a place in the Champions League final. Bayern, on course for their 14th German league title and a historic treble – just like Manchester



United in the other semi – remained heavy favourites to reach the final.

There was some history between the two. In 1975, a Dynamo side fresh off their first Cup Winners' Cup Triumph thrashed European Cup winners Bayern 3-0 over two legs in the Super Cup. Oleh Blokhin scored all three goals in the tie on his way to a Ballon d'Or.

In the 1976-77 European Cup quarter-final Dynamo overturned a 1-0 first leg deficit with two late goals in Kyiv to eliminate the three-time defending champions Bayern from the competition, before losing their own semi-final to Borussia Mönchengladbach 2-1 on aggregate. More recently, Bayern had defeated Dynamo 1-0 in Munich and 4-1 in Kyiv in the Group Stage of the 1994-95 Champions League.

On the night of the first leg of the semi, the downpour was unrelenting, the wet surface aiding Dynamo's slick passing. Twice in the first half Shevchenko struck. Michael Tarnat pulled one back on the stroke of half-time but five minutes after the break, Vitaliy Kosovskyi took advantage of some uncharacteristic hesitancy in the Munich defence to steer Kyiv into a 3-1 lead. The Ukrainians seemed on course for their own historic treble, having secured another league title by nine points from their emerging rivals Shakhtar Donetsk and with a Ukrainian cup final to play at the end of May.

12 minutes later, Kosovskyi had the chance to make it 4-1, played through by Alyksandr Khatskevich. Score and Dynamo, even with two hours still left in the tie, were as good as through. As

Oliver Kahn advanced, Kosovskyi tried to chip him. He slipped on the wet surface as he did so and, as he fell, glanced over his shoulder to see the ball drift over the bar. His "grimace of disappointment", as he himself described it, told its own story. The newspaper *Sport Express* wrote that it was a "sin" not to have taken advantage of the opportunity.

Years later Kosovskyi himself would acknowledge that "had I scored, Bayern probably would not have come back." Bayern, as though galvanised by the let-off, pulled one back through Stefan Effenberg. Shevchenko had another chance to make it 4-2, but his effort was parried by Kahn and cleared off the line by Lothar Matthäus. Carsten Jancker then turned in the box to stab in an equaliser in the 88th minute.

Even though the match ended 3-3, it felt like a defeat. It was not so much that Bayern had three away goals, but rather the manner of the result. After being inches from a commanding three-goal advantage, Bayern's comeback was disheartening and mentally draining for Dynamo.

Afterwards Lobanovskyi rued his team's missed chances, remarking, "I got the impression that the Dynamo players could not imagine that they could score 6-8 goals against Bayern." The newspaper *Sport Express* tersely summed up the match: "Hitzfeld rejoices, Ukraine is in shock."

Lobanovskyi would later say the draw with Bayern was one of two matches during his three-decade long coaching career that he could not explain or understand. The only other was the 4-3

defeat of his Soviet Union to Belgium in the 1986 World Cup Round of 16.

In the return leg two weeks later, Dynamo looked lost and aimless. A solitary Mario Basler goal in Munich gave Bayern a 4-3 aggregate victory to set up their final in Barcelona – a game that had its own obvious *Sliding Doors* moment. Kahn made several key saves, but overall Bayern looked comfortable, especially after going up 1-0.

"If you want to talk about the match, you need to talk about two separate halves," said Oleksiy Mykhaylychenko. "If in the first we played good, solid football, then the second was agony and we lost our style. In games like this, you need to maintain a very high level throughout the match, which we could not do today."

In reality, the tie had already been lost in Kyiv.

"This is surely the last time they will reach the semi-final of the Champions League," Simon Kuper wrote in the *Observer* of Dynamo. "The team will break up."

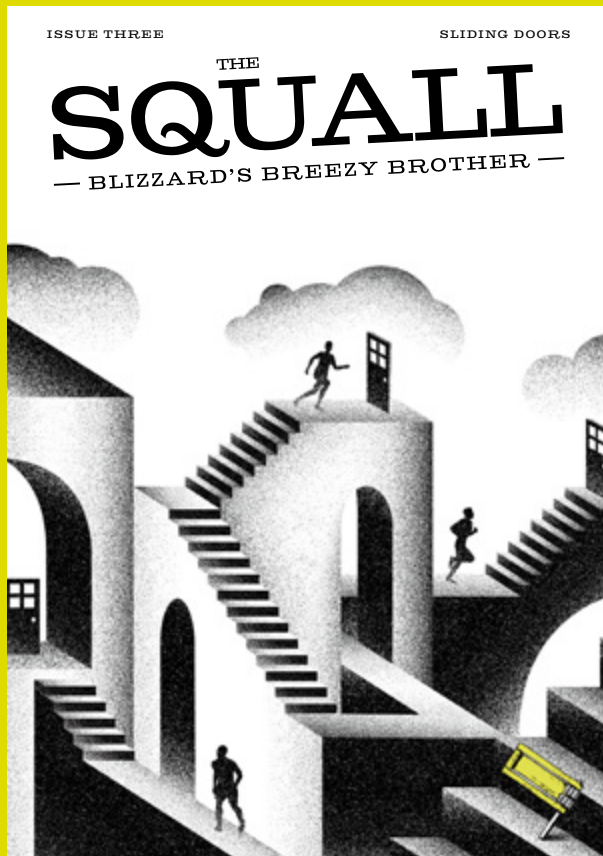
Kuper's words were prescient. Only Lobanovskyi and local political influence

had kept it together so long. There was a final Ukrainian Cup, Karpaty Lviv beaten 3-0 in the final with Shevchenko scoring twice.

That summer Shevchenko moved to Milan, while captain Oleh Luzhny signed for Arsenal after impressing Arsène Wenger in the group stages.

The following season Dynamo were still able to reach the second group stage of the Champions League, where they were drawn with familiar foes Real Madrid and Bayern. They were only eliminated thanks to Madrid's superior head-to-head record. That would be the club's last deep foray into the Champions League for some time. Rebrov, the other crucial piece of the 1999 side, followed Luzhny to North London in an ill-fated transfer to Spurs. It would take 15 years for Dynamo to once again appear in the competition's knockout stages.

Vitaly Kosovskyi's career was laden with trophies. He won six Ukrainian league titles and four Cups. He played 25 times for Ukraine. But he must still think back to that one-on-one and wonder what might have been. 🤔



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# NOT ALWAYS HIM

What if Agüero had gone  
down against QPR in 2012,  
leaving Mario Balotelli  
to take the penalty?

*BY HUW DAVIES*

*Sergio Agüero holds the Premiership  
trophy aloft, flanked by Mario Balotelli.*





**'93:20' has become a pillar of Manchester City's brand. Giving its name to a documentary, a podcast, a hospitality lounge and limitless merchandise, 93:20 was the time on the match clock when Sergio Agüero scored against QPR on 13 May 2012 to secure City's first top-flight title in 44 years. It was the moment they avoided 'doing a City'; the moment they ended decades of self-destruction and underachievement; the moment their £35m striker shoved out a foot and stopped those sliding doors from closing.**

Yet Manchester City's true *Sliding Doors* moment came on 93:19.

On 93:19, Agüero is fouled by the QPR defender Taye Taiwo. He's clipped. There's contact. He has Every Right To Go Down. But Agüero, with that poise and single-mindedness of a great goalscorer, rides the challenge and, without looking up, powers the ball past Paddy Kenny.

What if Agüero had followed the instinct of so many strikers and gone to ground instead?

There are infinite alternate universes branching from this second. In our world, Agüero stays on his feet and scores surely the most pivotal goal of 21st-century English football. In another timeline, he stays on his feet only to skew the ball wide, or straight at Kenny, triggering all manner of inquests from "Do City lack a winning mentality?" to "Was Agüero too honest?" and, inevitably, "Do we need VAR?" One moment, one decision, creates a Russian doll of Pandora's boxes.

But let's imagine that the first step in this flowchart takes us another way: Agüero

falls under the challenge and Mike Dean – who else? – awards the penalty. (There is no universe in which Mike Dean does not award the penalty.) After a long delay, up steps... Mario Balotelli.

Unquestionably it is Balotelli, denied what would have been his first and last assist in 70 Premier League appearances, who is on spot-kick duty. Why always him? Because the Italian is City's designated penalty-taker, always getting the nod ahead of excellent practitioners such as Yaya Touré, James Milner and Agüero, and boasting a record of five from five already in 2011-12, including a similarly high-stakes strike in the January rain against Tottenham, also deep into stoppage time, also with the score poised at 2-2.

As it happens, Balotelli is the character such an occasion demands, too. The 21 year old's second season in England has been eventful. In October, he set part of his house alight by letting off fireworks in his bathroom, before celebrating a well-taken goal in the next day's Manchester derby – a derby that City would win 6-1, at Old Trafford – by lifting his shirt to reveal a message that read "Why Always Me?" In November, he was sent off within 20 minutes of appearing as a second-half substitute at Anfield; in December, he shrugged in a goal against Norwich; and in January, that season-defining penalty against Spurs came after Balotelli had avoided immediate punishment for stamping on Scott Parker.

In fact, it's a surprise that Balotelli is even on the pitch to face QPR. A red card against Arsenal in April, bringing his third suspension of the campaign



and his fifth in England, had prompted an exasperated Roberto Mancini to say, "We have six games left and he will not play." And he didn't, at least until Mancini needed two goals in the season's final 15 minutes. Yet Balotelli has also shown his elusive genius more than once and Mancini knows he won't be cowed by the enormousness of this occasion.

Maybe Balotelli will dwarf the moment itself, even. There's no shortage of football fans who remember City's crushing 6-1 derby win earlier in the season as the "Why Always Me?" game, even though it represented so much more. It was Manchester United's heaviest home defeat since 1955, featured the most goals they'd conceded in a match at Old Trafford since 1930 and the emphatic scoreline would ultimately decide the title in City's favour, months down the line. But the chosen image from that historic clash is... well, always him. If this penalty were to end up in the QPR net, Balotelli could – even unintentionally – find a way to overshadow his club finally becoming champions of England.

Or, God forbid, he doesn't score. Balotelli is already at the apparent height of his fame and infamy, and such a pantomime villain that his likeness embodied a towering effigy for a Guy Fawkes Night bonfire. What happens if he then misses perhaps the biggest penalty in English football history? The striker's "Why Always Me?" shirt hit back at a media he perceived as obsessively critical; the fallout from this miss would be greater and probably uglier. And while he might well be cast as a lone sinner, Balotelli wouldn't be alone in facing the flak.

Certainly, from the stands to the pitch to the boardroom, any club would suffer psychologically from the blow of such an avoidable last-gasp failure – not so much falling at the final hurdle as tripping on a shoelace and landing face-first an inch short of the finish line. For Manchester City, however, getting over the trauma could be uniquely, even impossibly hard.

The way in which City have since doubled their all-time haul of major trophies, within just eight years, makes it easy to forget the inferiority complex that surrounded the club for such an extended period. Their history is steeped in anti-climax and farce. "Typical City" was the phrase. Or, as their own manager, Joe Royle, called it: Cityitis.

Up until 13 May 2012, everyone remembered that this was the club whose fans had watched David Pleat gallop across the Maine Road pitch as his Luton side sent City down in 1983; watched their own team somehow succeed in time-wasting their own way to relegation in 1996; watched City try their hardest to lose a third-tier play-off final in 1999, four days after their cross-city rivals had lifted the European Cup. In his book, *Manchester City Ruined My Life*, Colin Shindler – author, historian and City fan – wrote: "Cityitis is not a bacterial infection that can be cured by the antibiotics of running the club in a professional manner with a 'winning mentality'. Cityitis is a vitamin deficiency that we are born with."

That deficiency was laid bare for all to see as Mancini's City laboured against QPR. "The clock ticked round," David Conn recalled in *Richer Than God*, "and this Manchester City of superstars seemed

to shed layers of skin and discover the old City lurking within them." Balotelli was City's expensive young talent, who was just as preternaturally predisposed as his employers to shooting himself in the foot, possibly with a firework. If he were to miss the penalty that could define the club's future, not its past, this would confirm what everybody knew already: that whatever fineries they wore, Manchester City would always do this to themselves. Typical City.

"Nobody," wrote Conn, "would ever forget the Sheikh's expensively-bought club choked like this." Least of all Manchester City themselves.

What, then, is the outcome? What happens when Mario Balotelli, with the eyes of those at the Etihad, the Stadium of Light – where Manchester United have won, and sit top of the Premier League table as it stands – and the rest of the world on him, saunters forward to take a penalty that, one way or another, will change English football forever?

The waiting is intolerable, and not just in Manchester. As it had in our universe, the final whistle sounded in Sunderland while Manchester City were in their half, building the attack that led to Taiwo's foul on Agüero. But instead of the news of a goal reaching the Manchester United

fans and backroom staff within seconds, before filtering through to the players and Alex Ferguson, the news instead is: there's a penalty.

Celebrations end immediately. Abandoning their applause for the travelling supporters, who are no longer watching them anyway, Manchester United's hitherto happy players run from the Stadium of Light pitch to the touchline, searching for a screen to enlighten them. United and Sunderland fans alike are refreshing live feeds, or huddling around a stranger with Sky Sports on their phone, or searching for information from Twitter, from friends, from anyone, but this competing desperation for bandwidth means nothing will load, no one can get through. The rumours begin. There's been a pitch invasion at the Etihad; Balotelli and Agüero are arguing over who will take the penalty; City have scored; City have missed. Each rumour spreads, becomes distorted, then falls to the floor beside the discarded programmes and empty crisp packets. Not a soul can hear the announcer on the PA system. Something must be happening by now. Something must happen.

Balotelli steps up, and another set of sliding doors begins to close. 🚪

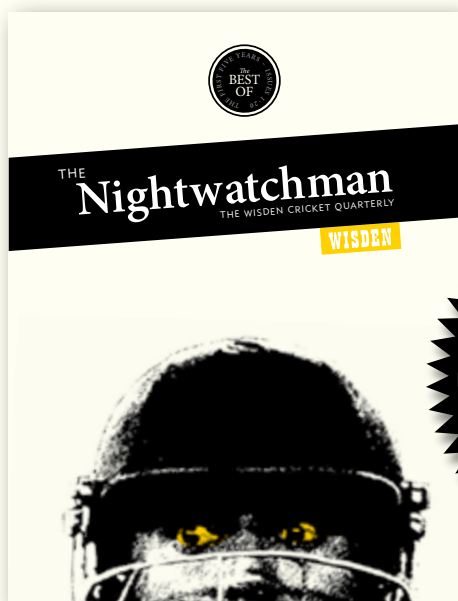


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# THE GOOD CHRISTIAN

What if López had  
fouled Fairclough and  
prevented him scoring  
Liverpool's winner against  
St Étienne in 1977?

*BY NIGE TASSELL*

*Emlyn Hughes and David Fairclough.*





**16 March 1977, Anfield. There are just six minutes left of the European Cup quarter-final between Liverpool and French champions Saint-Étienne. The visitors, 1-0 from the first leg, are 2-1 down but have that all-important away goal, thanks to an extraordinary swerving shot from the midfielder Dominique Bathenay.**

That crucial third goal looks unlikely. The home side are getting desperate, lumping the ball forward without much plan or precision. Back it comes into the Liverpool half and back it goes upfield again. But there's no John Toshack on the pitch now, no target man to hold up the ball while his teammates flood forward. His replacement, a copper-headed striker only a couple of months past his 20th birthday, isn't a target man. David Fairclough is a runner. But the ball isn't coming to him.

Until...

Just inside his own half, Ray Kennedy, ever the relaxed midfielder, calmly lobs the ball forward into the inside-left slot. Fairclough – on the pitch for only ten minutes and with legs still very much fresh – is on to it in a flash, bringing the ball under control while holding off the attentions of the Saint-Étienne defender Christian López. Fairclough is too quick for him and, after another steadying touch, he slips the ball past the keeper and into the net, where it disappears into a mass of discarded toilet paper. The Kop tumbles forward in ecstasy. Half a dozen minutes later and Liverpool are into the semi-finals of the European Cup for the first time since 1965. There they will brush past FC Zürich before beating

Borussia Mönchengladbach in the final in Rome. It will be the first of six occasions on which they'll be crowned champions of Europe. The seven years that follow will be the most successful period of the club's history. And all because of the nerve of the young man forever known as Supersub.

But let's play it again. Rewind the tape, adjust the tracking and see what might happen this time around.

Here we go. Kennedy's lob takes the same trajectory and, again, Fairclough races like a whippet to meet it. But this time López doesn't try to match him stride for stride, instead allowing the substitute an extra yard in which to control the ball. There's method in the Frenchman's thinking. López's left leg scythes Fairclough down, just two yards short of the box.

As the Dutch referee issues a yellow card, Kevin Keegan places the ball exactly 20 yards out. Having already announced his intention to leave the club at season's end, he knows these might be his final few minutes of European football in a Liverpool shirt. He missed a gilt-edged opportunity to score the third goal just a few minutes earlier and needs to make amends. That fluffed chance can't be the headline in tomorrow's *Echo*. This free-kick has to fly into the top corner. It must. He pauses. He charges towards the ball. He sends it high, wide and unhandsome, nearly clearing the Kop.

The last few minutes feel like an age for the Saint-Étienne fans squeezed into the Anfield Road End, but whizz by for the Liverpool faithful. Bob Paisley's men launch attack after attack, but the French



withstand each and every assault. Three sharp blasts on the whistle bring the flurry to a standstill. Les Verts are ecstatic. The Reds are numb. That march to Rome, that charge to a historic Treble, is over.

Even if their European ambitions have been put on hold for another season, Liverpool remain in a very strong position to achieve their first-ever domestic Double. But the left leg of López didn't only bring Fairclough crashing to the ground, it seems to have scythed through Liverpool's season. Confidence is shot. Keegan, the fulcrum around whom the rest of the team draw their energy, in particular suffers a dramatic loss of form.

Liverpool do still make the Cup Final, but Jimmy Greenhoff's backside intervenes, a cruelly freakish goal that takes the Cup to Manchester instead. Meanwhile, any ambitions of at least retaining the title implode in the final furlong. Liverpool become football's Devon Loch. Needing only five points from the final five matches of the season, they manage just one draw. The main beneficiaries of this collapse are Bobby Robson's Ipswich Town who, winning each of their last six games, pip Manchester City by a short head. Six years before David Pleat would show his own final-day fancy footwork, Robson's gallop onto the pitch at Loftus Road as the title is confirmed will become one of English domestic football's most heart-warming sights. There's no dancing for Bob Paisley down at Ashton Gate. A final-day defeat to Bristol City condemns Liverpool to third place. The season that promised so much, even in its last couple of months, ends without an addition to the Anfield trophy cabinet.

As announced, Keegan leaves the club at the end of the season. The club aren't panicking, though. They've lined up Kenny Dalglish as his replacement and a pre-signing visit to Anfield by the Celtic forward seems to go well. He heads back to Glasgow to talk things over with his wife Marina, but there's an intervention. As he relaxes in the first-class compartment of the train back home, mulling over the move south, Dalglish is joined by a passenger who boards at Carlisle. His name is Brian Clough and this is a heist. Clough spends the rest of the journey explaining that he believes post-Shankly Liverpool to be a busted flush and that there is a new force ready to dominate English football – a revolution that he just happens to be at the controls of. By the time the train slides into Glasgow Central, Dalglish has agreed to become the country's first million-pound footballer. He is now the star player of just-promoted Nottingham Forest, who've paid twice the fee that Hamburg did for Keegan. The country – and in particular the citizens of Liverpool – are stunned.

But Dalglish is level-headed enough to deal with the hype. At the City Ground, he forges an excellent partnership with his compatriot John Robertson and his 23 goals drive Forest to the title at the first time of asking, holding off the challenge of champions Ipswich. But the Tractor Boys aren't too unhappy at failing to defend their crown. A FA Cup triumph is decent compensation, especially as this their first season under player-manager Mick Mills, following the appointment of Bobby Robson – five years earlier than expected – to the post of England manager after Don Revie's surprise departure to the UAE.

Dalglish seems to have made the right decision. Liverpool, having persevered with Bob Paisley for another trophy-free season, abandon the Boot Room principle in the summer of 1978 and instead appoint a tail-between-the-legs Revie on his return to the country. It doesn't work out. The following season, only a final-day 0-0 draw at Elland Road – Revie's first match there in the opposing dug-out – ensures Liverpool's survival in the top flight. He's given his cards within 24 hours. Over the following few seasons, a string of similar short-term managerial appointments – including those of Ron Saunders, John Bond and Terry Venables – fail to bring the glory days back to Anfield. With no-one to match him, the beatification of Shankly is complete.

Clough is similarly anointed. After the league title in 1978, he takes Forest to European Cup glory the following season, when Dalglish launches himself at a hanging Robertson cross to nod home the only goal against Malmö. Forest retain the trophy against Keegan's Hamburg in 1980 and Real Madrid 1981. Keegan doesn't score in either final. Dalglish scores in both.

This international success finally gives Clough the reward he's been craving. Having been overlooked for the job in 1974 and 1977, he is summoned to the FA headquarters at Lancaster Gate, emerging an hour later to inform the nation that he is the new England boss. "They've finally seen sense," he tells the gathered press pack. "Took them long enough, didn't it?" But he's got a proper task in front of him. The steepest of inclines. Robson's departure comes after he fails to secure England's qualification for the 1982 World


Cup; it's the third tournament in a row that the national team will be absent from.

The Nottingham Forest board obviously still rate Robson as a club manager, though, and appoint him as Clough's successor. It's effectively a job-swap. The board are right to put faith in his abilities. In 1983, at the end of his second season in the East Midlands, Robson leads Forest to the domestic Double, pipping his former charges Ipswich to the title as well as beating them in the cup final, much to the disappointment of his former captain Mick Mills. Both sides enjoy successful adventures in Europe throughout the 1980s. The Robson/Mills rivalry extends into the following decade when they are appointed as the respective coaches of Real Madrid and Barcelona.

And what of Clough? Having taken England to the runners-up spot at the 1984 European Championship, he goes one better in Mexico two years later. After publicly applauding his goalkeeper Peter Shilton for taking out an airborne Diego Maradona during the quarter-final, Clough guides England to the World Cup final against France. Two-nil down to a couple of Michel Platini penalties, a monumental comeback sees Peter Beardsley score a hat-trick in seven second-half minutes, single-handedly winning the trophy for England and pipping his team-mate Gary Lineker to the Golden Boot. (Beardsley will later enjoy a highly successful media career on the back of this, ultimately becoming the host of *Match of the Day*.)

Clough is generous in the praise he offers to the crestfallen France manager. His counterpart is a young man whose playing

career, like that of Clough, was cruelly cut short by injury. He wasn't the victim of a savage tackle; he was the one dealing out the medicine, but sustained a career-

ending injury in the process. It happened in 1977 when he was just 24 years old. His name was Christian López. 

# THE REJECTED RETRACTION

What if Alex Ferguson had retired  
in 2001, and Sven-Göran Eriksson  
had replaced him at Old Trafford?

*BY RICHARD JOLLY*

*Sir Alex Ferguson and  
Sven Göran Eriksson.*



Sir Alex Ferguson rang Maurice Watkins. He had changed his mind, the Manchester United manager reported. Or rather it had been changed for him. The Ferguson family, corralled by Cathy, his wife, had informed him he was not retiring at the end of the 2001-02 season. He was only about to turn 60, anyway, and his friend Bobby Robson was almost a decade older and still going strong. So could he have a new contract? Three years would take him up to 2005. It would allow him to build a new team.

It was then the conversation turned awkward. Watkins said he and the United board had needed to plan for the future. They had thought a man as decisive as Ferguson would not perform a U-turn. They had identified their preferred candidate, approached him and agreed a deal. Only a select few knew because they were aware there would be a storm when it was revealed United had poached England's popular manager in a World Cup year, but Sven-Göran Eriksson would succeed Ferguson at Old Trafford.

For once, Ferguson was speechless, defeated by himself and a foe he did not understand. Eriksson, with his bland façade, seemed to lack his iron will but had outmanoeuvred him. Ferguson was further annoyed when the storm broke and some of his least favourite journalists and pundits suggested United had got an upgrade in Eriksson, who had ended the northern giants' domination of Serie A to make Lazio champions and then had orchestrated historic England's 5-1 thrashing of Germany. He turned his attention to his final few months at Old Trafford but there was no happy ending. December defeats cost United and they

could not catch Arsenal in the Premier League. They came behind Liverpool, leading Gérard Houllier to claim United had been knocked off their perch as cocks of the north. There would be no Champions League final at Hampden Park, the ground Ferguson called home in his days as a Queen's Park centre-forward: Bayer Leverkusen knocked United out in the semi-final; Ferguson's critics attributed it to his decision to sell Jaap Stam the previous year, interpreting it as a sign of decline.

His mood was not improved as he stewed in Wilmslow during Eriksson's extended honeymoon period. The Swede had been hounded out of the England job but his reputation was then enhanced when his replacement Steve McClaren was outwitted by Argentina's Marcelo Bielsa during a wretched group-stage exit from the World Cup and burnished as United reclaimed the Premier League title in 2002-03. Eriksson repeated his England formula and appointed David Beckham captain, leading to record revenues for United's commercial department as the sponsorship deals flowed in. Beckham had never been more prolific and Juan Sebastian Verón produced his Lazio form for United, leading to further unflattering comparisons with Ferguson. Pelé declared Nicky Butt was the best player in the Champions League after watching him combine wonderfully well with Paul Scholes in a holding-midfield duo in Verón's absence. But when the Argentinian returned, Scholes was soon exiled to the left wing. Eriksson, some said, could not find a way to resolve his Verón-Scholes conundrum. Eriksson had spent heavily on his Lazio loyalists, capitalising on the financial problems at



his former club by bringing in Hernán Crespo, to partner Ruud van Nistelrooy in his preferred 4-4-2 formation, and Alessandro Nesta. The Italian defender's arrival sent cash-strapped Leeds, who had had hoped to sell Rio Ferdinand to another United for £30 million, on a path that led to administration.

The odd man out in Eriksson's midfield was Roy Keane, who had propelled Ireland to a World Cup final he missed after collecting a self-sacrificial caution in the semi-final. But his mood took a turn for the worse after losing the captaincy. He clashed with Eriksson's explosive assistant, Roberto Mancini, and struggled to hide his disdain for the Swede. "You can stick your Abba up your bollocks," he told a bemused Eriksson in one row. "Fucking Dancing Queen." Keane was dropped for the Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid, came on and scored twice, goals he pointedly did not celebrate, but United went out in a thriller that persuaded a watching Russian billionaire, Roman Abramovich, to buy a club. He swooped for Chelsea.

Ferguson, who had cabin fever at home, was quick to put feelers out. Abramovich was swift to sack Claudio Ranieri and appoint a serial winner. Ferguson had one aim: to take down Eriksson and United. He started off by outbidding his old club for some young players he had identified before retiring, in Damien Duff, Arjen Robben, Petr Čech, Joe Cole and Glen Johnson. He tried to raid United, making a series of bids the men he deemed his disciples: Keane, Scholes, Ryan Giggs and Ole Gunnar Solskjær, who had been dropped for Crespo. Eriksson was happy to take the opportunity to offload the

outspoken Keane, exploiting Lazio's lack of money by replacing him with Diego Simeone. The notion that United could prosper when one of their star players had got another sent off in a World Cup struck many as anathema. Eriksson wondered what all the fuss was about.

Meanwhile, Arsène Wenger picked up a young Portuguese prodigy who had been on his radar. He loaned Cristiano Ronaldo back to Sporting Lisbon for a year and scarcely needed him as Arsenal went through the season unbeaten while Chelsea and United continued their footballing arms war by staging a bidding war for the 17-year-old Wayne Rooney. Ferguson won. Wenger accused both of "financial doping" which Eriksson shrugged off. Ferguson took particular delight when his Chelsea knocked Arsenal out of the Champions League but the cracks in Eriksson's United started to show when they were eliminated by Porto: "first half good, second half not so good," said the Swede, but that had started to feel a theme. His reliance on 4-4-2 left United outnumbered in the middle of midfield, his side felt more of a star vehicle than a genuine team and selling Solskjær to Ferguson deprived him of a super-sub; Eriksson had instead pursued an expensive reunion with Christian Vieri which few thought had worked. Meanwhile, that unheralded Porto side proceeded to win the Champions League and Liverpool, looking for a successor to Houllier, hired a boyhood Liverpool fan: José Mourinho.

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It is of course all fictional. And yet the pertinent element is how much of

what happened between Christmas 2001 and the summer of 2004 set the direction of the Premier League for the next decade, if not longer. Most obviously, Ferguson remained at Old Trafford for a further 11 years, winning six more Premier Leagues, reaching a further three Champions League finals and lifting his second European Cup in 2013. He defied predictions of his decline. In his own way, he outlasted everyone: even Wenger, in the sense that his last league title, in 2013, came nine years after the Frenchman's. It was Ferguson who emerged as the major rival to Abramovich's Chelsea; as his family suggested, he could build another great team, and indeed began to do so soon after reversing his decision to retire. A four-year wave of significant signings began: Ferdinand, Ronaldo, Rooney, Ji-sung Park, Edwin van der Sar, Patrice Évra, Nemanja Vidić and Michael Carrick were all to start the 2009 Champions League final.

Ronaldo was one of many on Wenger's radar who eluded him; perhaps, otherwise, the Portuguese could have formed a very different successor to Dennis Bergkamp or Robert Pires. It is certainly possible to bracket Ronaldo and Thierry Henry as the two best ever Premier League players. Had Arsenal secured both, they surely would not have gone nine years without a trophy. They probably would have won the Champions League. They might now be seen as English football's real superpower; maybe Wenger would even have Ferguson's status as arguably its best ever manager.

Without Ferguson's last 11 years, he may rank behind Sir Matt Busby, the builder

of three great teams, at Old Trafford. Without the post-2002 Ferguson, too, would Scholes and Giggs have retired as one-club men, even if they came closest to leaving in the time after the Scot rescinded his retirement? It feels implausible to suggest that, without Ferguson's influence or his time as his reserve-team manager, Solskjær would be in charge today or, indeed, that his recommendation David Moyes would ever have been given the United job.

It may strike some as fanciful to suggest Eriksson could, like Ferguson, have piloted United to the 2003 title. After all, it remains the case that only Ernest Mangnall, Busby and Ferguson have made United champions. Louis van Gaal and José Mourinho have arrived with more silverware-studded CVs than the Swede and not even staged a proper title challenge. There is a temptation to date Eriksson's decline from the 5-1 in Munich, or perhaps the 1-0 World Cup win over Bielsa's Argentina, but he was at the peak of his powers when Ferguson contemplated standing down. Perhaps an Eriksson-Mancini double act would have been formidable and the Italian had gone from being the on-field manager to the Swede's No.2 at Lazio.

Maybe Ferguson's on-field legacy would have been better had he quit in 2002. By 2013, his aura and winning habit had compensated for other deficiencies and he bequeathed an ageing defence and a substandard midfield. In 2002, the Class of 92 were all in their prime; so were Van Nistelrooy, Solskjær and Verón and it is tempting to wonder if Eriksson, either at Old Trafford or Stamford Bridge, could have turned the Argentinian he twice


signed into a success in England. And yet, especially considering the 2006 World Cup, it is hard to escape the sense that United's descent into celebrity culture would have come sooner had he replaced Ferguson. The Scot lacked the damaging big-name fixation United exhibited after his eventual retirement. Certainly Beckham may not have decamped to Real Madrid in 2003, when Ferguson was far-sighted enough to make the young Ronaldo his replacement.

Ferguson was implacable in some respects, flexible in others. A tactical chameleon adapted to the era of Mourinho and to the changing demands of the Champions League: while Eriksson was stuck in his 4-4-2 straitjacket, Ferguson would usually field three in the centre of midfield against elite European opponents (and erred, as in the 2011 Champions League final, when he did not), and that shift accounted for United's most consistent spell as a continental force in their history.

Most damagingly, Ferguson's second coming brought the row with United investors John Magnier and JP McManus over Rock of Gibraltar. Without that, they might not have sold their shares to the Glazers and United would not have been loaded with debt and laboured with repayments. The more amenable Eriksson, who seemed to glide through life without amassing enemies or bothering with grudges, presumably wouldn't have had any sort of fallout. The Swede sometimes stood his ground against Ferguson, but the animosity felt one-sided.

Perhaps anger drove Ferguson. Certainly relentlessness did and, as his family

recognised, retiring at 60 would have been too early for a man of his incessant drive. It would have rendered him the preeminent candidate for any ambitious club once hints emerged he regretted his departure. That he succeeded at clubs as different as East Stirlingshire and Manchester United, over times as distant as 1974 and 2013, suggests his methods were sufficiently transferable and his personality so forceful that he could have flourished anywhere. And yet part of his strength stemmed from control; the most important person at United, he said proudly more than once, was the manager.

The last great dictator would not have been afforded the same authority elsewhere and an owner as impatient as Abramovich might not have stuck with him during United's awful autumn of 2005, for instance. Ferguson can be called a genius, but it took time to bring trophies to both Aberdeen and United. It took time to develop a winning mentality. Once he did, United benefited for two decades but that seemingly permanent domination ended with his departure. Probably United would have fallen away sooner without him and without his extraordinary Indian summer; maybe, though, an early successor would have been better positioned to become the fourth United manager to win the league. Ferguson could have facilitated Eriksson's triumph, though the younger man surely would not have sustained success into his seventies. 

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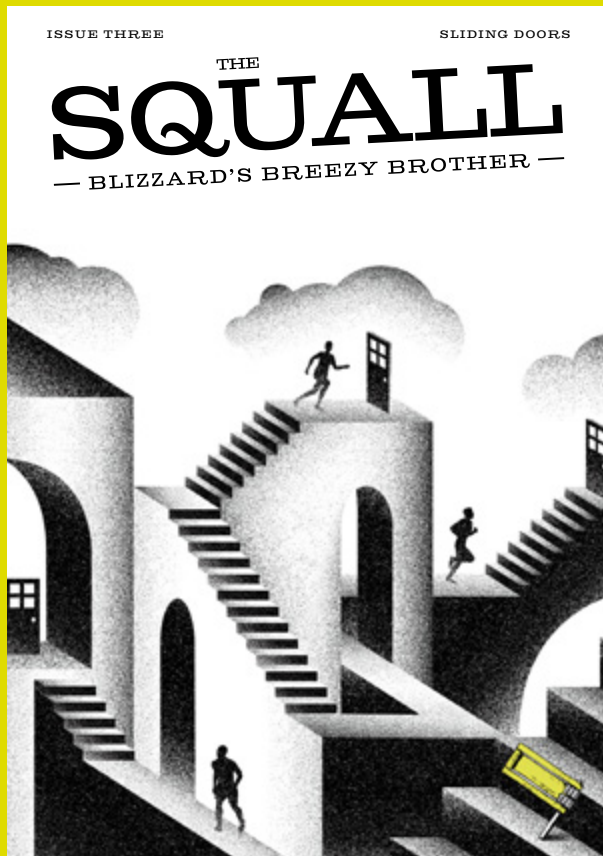
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— BLIZZARD'S BREEZY BROTHER —

Issue 3, July 2020, Sliding Doors

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Jim Keoghan, For the Want of a Nail...

James Eastham, Houllier, Ginola, and Two Men without Visas

Tom Flight, Down the Pan

Rey Mashayekhi, The Flag of Fortune

Ben Kosky, The Width of a Crossbar

Dan Cummerson and Vadim Furmanov, The Regrets of Vitaliy Kosovskyi

Huw Davies, Not Always Him

Nige Tassell, The Good Christian

Richard Jolly, The Rejected Retraction

