



Heroes and villains – published in the Fulham Review

By Rob Griffin

At 4.35pm on Saturday 9th May, as our home match against Aston Villa edged towards its jubilant conclusion, one of the most remarkable events that I have ever witnessed at a football match took place.

Emanating from the back of the Hammersmith stand, a simple chant: ‘Stand up for Roy Hodgson’, quickly spread around the entire ground with 22,000 grateful souls getting on their feet to applaud one of the game’s true gentlemen.

It was a spontaneous show of affection for a man who has endeared himself not only to those of a black and white persuasion, but to everyone in the game from pundits and fellow managers to opposing fans. No-one has a bad word to say about him. Even Alan Hansen has been fulsome in his praise, while Telegraph journalist Jim White was insisting in early May that Hodgson would be worthy of becoming the first Englishman to receive the manager of the year accolade.

“When he arrived at Craven Cottage last spring, most observers agreed that he had little hope of rescuing a club heading for the mire,” he wrote. “But after engineering an improbable escape from relegation, he turned a shower into serious contenders.” Only Mark Schwarzer has come close to revealing another side of his character. When asked about the boss in a BBC interview he revealed he could be an “angry little man” at times, although he immediately qualified it by saying that this was an essential quality in a manager and highlighting his wealth of experience.

At this point I would love to say how I always knew he was the man to pick up the pieces of the disastrous Lawrie Sanchez reign but that simply wasn’t the case. I actually groaned when I first heard the news, having been desperately hoping that a young buck like John Collins or Paul Ince was to be handed the reins.

I guess that’s why I’m not – thankfully - the chief executive. With the benefit of hindsight, Hodgson’s appointment was a masterstroke: A calming influence who had seen and done it all before; who refuses to get neither flustered after a bad result; nor overly optimistic at the first scent of victory.

However it was his handling of the Jimmy Bullard affair that impressed me the most as this was a potential public relations banana skin. Selling a fans’ favourite is always a risky business, but it proved our nice guy had a core of steel.

If Hodgson is clearly the hero of the season then Bullard must surely assume the role of villain. He might not fall into that category as neatly as Louis Saha or Steed Malbranque on their departures from the club, but in there he most certainly is. No-one in the modern era had become more popular with the supporters in such a short space of time. And it’s easy to see why because, on the face of it, there is a lot to love about Bullard: His infectious enthusiasm for the game, his non-stop running during matches; his ability to deliver a master stroke just when it’s needed most; and the smile that’s permanently etched onto his face.

However, he has also inspired more fiction to be written than Robin Hood. Read most articles about the shaggy-haired Londoner and the picture will be painted of someone who plays simply for the love of the game; a throwback to a simpler time.

It wouldn't matter to him if he was paid 20 quid and his bus fare home. Oh no, just as long as our Jim can kick a football about with his mates he'll be happy. The fact that he can actually make a living from the sport is just a bonus.

However, the manner of his £5m departure to Premier League new boys Hull certainly cast him in an unfavourable light as he appeared to lay the blame for the move at the door of the club's apparent refusal to discuss a new contract.

Yes, this was the very same club that nursed him back to health during the 15-months he was out with cruciate ligament damage to his knee. The club that – by his own admission – were “absolutely awesome” – and didn't rush him back into action.

Despite the fact he had only played around 40 times for Fulham since joining in April 2006 and still had 18 months left to run on his existing contract, Bullard seemed to feel that the fact he was actually back playing, and had warmed the bench a couple of times for England, meant it was time to revisit the terms of the agreement.

Bullard denies this was the case, claiming in newspaper interviews that he was impressed with Hull's ambition; just wanted to “play for a club that wants me, simple as that”; and had “never been interested in money”.

Hmm. Not sure about that last one. When he joined us from Wigan, Paul Jewell – then the Latics' boss, was quoted as saying: “If we had decided to match Fulham's offer then maybe we would have kept hold of him but I didn't want to be held to ransom. That would be extremely unhealthy.”

Now he has left us for a reported £45,000-a-week. Yes folks, that's around twice the annual salary for a man in Britain.

Maybe if he'd stayed and helped steer Fulham to a European slot at the end of this season he would have been in a better position to open negotiations. But no, Jimmy 'big time' Bullard didn't feel loved so he packed his bags and headed north.

Of course only a handful of people know the truth of what went on in the discussions between him and the club, but the view of supporters is pretty clear cut.

“Bullard in the Championship, Bullard in the Championship,” was the delighted chant that rang around the Cottage at our last home game against Everton as news filtered through that Manchester United had taken the lead at Hull's KC Stadium...and just before Newcastle once again pressed the self destruct button.

Whatever the reality the fact remains that Hodgson was right not to do everything in his power to keep Bullard. After all, why on earth should the club talk about a new contract? He hasn't come anywhere near repaying them for sticking by him during his injury crisis - and helping to fund both his fishing success and the lowering of his golf handicap – and is hardly in the first flush of youth.

His primary asset is his energy and with the best will in the world this will be on the wane now he is in his 30s. Also, the damage done to his knee will always be a concern so getting decent money for him was a very astute piece of business.

It also emphasised the importance of having the right man at the helm. While most of us will be spending the summer months sweating on whether or not Brede Hangeland & Co will still be here come August, my only concern is retaining Hodgson.

He has been the undoubted star of the past two seasons – arguably the most significant in our entire history - and all we can do is hope that come May 2010 we will be rising as one to show our appreciation.

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