

HIGHS, LOWS AND BAKAYOKOS

EVERTON
IN THE 90s



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Foreword by Neville Southall



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Introduction

FEW football clubs enjoy uninterrupted success. And Everton are no exception. Throughout the club's long history there have been highs and lows, successes and failures, good times and Mike Walker times. Relegation has been suffered, mediocrity tolerated, lengthy periods endured when the trophy cabinet has remained resolutely locked.

But through it all, for most of the club's history, there was the belief that success was just around the corner. And so it often proved. The dreadful 1950s were followed by the glorious 1960s, and the disappointing 1970s by the bountiful 1980s. Even when the club was relegated in the 1920s, it bounced back a few seasons later to claim Everton's fourth First Division title.

Like others that had come before, the 1990s was another one of those difficult times. It was a period when title challenges fell by the wayside to be replaced first by seasons of mediocrity and then, more worryingly, with campaigns dogged by the threat of relegation. The club flirted with 'the drop' worryingly often and on two occasions, in 1994 and 1998, came within a whisker of being relegated to the second tier.

But unlike other occasions when struggle had given rise to success, the years that followed that decade would see no return to glory, Everton fell off the pace, surrendering the club's long-held position as part of the English game's footballing and financial elite. Why this transformation in the club's status occurred (and it was unquestionably a significant one) is a topic that has vexed Evertonians for decades.

Prior to the inauguration of the Premier League, Everton were one of the domestic game's big boys, a member of the self-proclaimed 'Big Five' along with Liverpool, Arsenal, Manchester United and Spurs. These were the clubs that dictated the terms of the game and who ushered in the birth of the Premier League.

The Blues were there by right of the club's relative wealth and because Everton were so good. Nine First Division titles, a record-breaking number of seasons in the top flight, four FA Cups; by that point the men from Goodison boasted a record that left modern 'giants' such as Chelsea and Manchester City looking like minnows by comparison.

But all that changed. Although David Moyes banished the spectre of relegation that haunted the 1990s and a decade of stability partially restored the club's financial and footballing reputation, the position enjoyed in the pre-Sky era has never returned.

One top-four finish since the Premier League began, out-earned and out-gunned by former peers, outpaced by former minnows, Everton are no longer the force they once were.

At some point in the 1990s something went wrong. Evertonians know the usual suspects; the long-term impact of Heysel, poor managerial appointments, a problematic boardroom, the changing nature of English football. But what role did each play? Are some factors more to blame than others? Was any of it avoidable?

In part that is what this book aims to explore, a guide to the events and decisions that changed Everton fundamentally. But along with this, it's also a book that seeks to redeem the 1990s, a time that is often neglected by Evertonians.

Like other decades in which the club struggled, the highs of the 1990s tend to get submerged under the lows, forgotten as time passes and the communal will of Evertonians frames the decade as one best suppressed.

But that does the 1990s a disservice. It was, after all, a time when Everton won silverware, when Liverpool were dispatched with satisfying regularity, when games that have seared themselves into the collective memory of Evertonians took place.

INTRODUCTION

It was a decade not without merit and even some of the 'lows', like Wimbledon in 1994 and Coventry in 1998, were matches whose outcomes produced almost as much celebration as any cup final victory.

As a Blue, I came of age in the 1990s and still remember it as a time filled with high emotion. Despite the brushes with death, the financial turmoil and the sense of a club always one bad decision away from disaster, it was rarely dull.

Football is meant to be an emotional experience and the 1990s was certainly that. Lows yes, and lots of them. But there were the highs too, and many of them all the sweeter for the struggle that surrounded them.

And Evertonians reacted to this decade in an interesting way too. Despite the adversity, the frustration, the sense of a club on the wane, we returned to Goodison in vast numbers. And the atmosphere created in that return was magical.

Marginalised by the media and the press, and fuelled by continual frustration and anger, Evertonians developed a stronger identity. Slightly insular but also passionate and fierce; it was one that set Blues apart from the herd at clubs/brands like Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal, a herd that had sacrificed their souls on the altar of corporate football.

When Evertonians today talk of following a 'People's Club' of being 'Born not Manufactured' and sum up our attitude with a simple 'We're Everton Aren't We?', we are participating in a trend that can trace its lineage back to changes that took place in that most vilified of decades.

The 1990s changed Everton, possibly irrevocably. And as supporters we should understand why. But just because the journey led somewhere none of us expected or desired when the decade opened, doesn't mean it wasn't thrilling at times. The 1990s was a rollercoaster, a time packed with heady highs and sickening lows. But it was also interesting in a way that ten years of finishing eighth could never hope to be.

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The Great Escape (Part I)

Everton v Wimbledon; 7 May 1994

IT started with two of us, me and my best mate Paul, two Evertonians from the south of the city, meeting on Allerton Road and jumping the bus up to Goodison Park. We flashed our school bus passes at the disinterested driver, raced up to the top deck and commandeered the back seat for those who would join us later.

Although smoking was technically illegal up there, the ban was recent enough for the culture of lighting up to persist. With the top deck empty and the driver looking less-than-officious, we both indulged in a sneaky bine, going halves on one of the ten Regal we'd just bought.

It was a necessary breach of the law. The nerves demanded it, a sickening sense of anxiety that had built during the course of the preceding week and which now sat there like a stone in the pit of our stomachs. It was anxiety rooted in one horrifying word: relegation.

For any fan of any club, relegation is a gruesome prospect. There's a sense of shame attached to 'the drop' that no amount

of mental accommodation and supposedly reassuring platitudes like ‘we’ll rebuild’, ‘we’ll bounce back’, ‘it’ll do us good in the long-term’ can ever hope to assuage. But for Evertonians at that time, this sense of shame was augmented by an equally powerful sense of bewilderment.

Just a few years earlier, the club had been enjoying the good times. The title-winning season of 1986/87 marked another highpoint in what had been a mini golden age for Everton. Silverware and success had become commonplace at Goodison during the mid-1980s as the sides of the first Howard Kendall era reasserted Everton’s place at the top of the elite. But football is a cruel game, as any supporter knows, and in the years after Kendall had left for pastures new, Everton’s fortunes deteriorated.

A sense of downward momentum appeared to permeate Goodison Park. The days of challenging for the title faded into the past as league positions trickled downwards. But even as the club slid into mediocrity, few Evertonians realistically considered the likelihood of relegation.

In part, the fans hoped that the good times could be recaptured once again. After all, hadn’t the barren years of the 1970s been followed by the bountiful 1980s? Despite a genetic propensity toward the pessimistic, back then the fans still looked upward rather than down and the hope existed that things would get better not worse.

But by the end of the 1993/94 season it looked as though this sense of hope had been seriously misplaced. Instead of mediocrity morphing into success, it appeared instead to have taken a more unsettling path.

After an average first half of the season the club went into a death-spiral.

‘We could barely win a game or muster a draw and as the season’s end approached Everton lay in the bottom three. For fans that had begrudgingly accepted mediocrity as a temporary state of affairs, this sudden decline and the stark reality of relegation was a shock to the system,’ explains the man behind ToffeeWeb, Lyndon Lloyd.

By the final game of the season the table looked like this:

THE GREAT ESCAPE (PART I)

<i>Position</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>Goal Difference</i>	<i>Points</i>
17	Southampton	-17	42
18	Sheffield Utd	-17	42
19	Ipswich Town	-23	42
20	Everton	-22	41
21	Oldham Athletic	-26	39
22	Swindon Town (R)	-48	30

Every club and every set of fans mired in this fight had spent the previous week going over the maths, studying the form, working out the likelihood of survival.

Oldham's chances appeared remote. They had to beat Norwich City away, hope that Everton drew or got beat and that the three teams just outside the relegation zone lost as well. They also needed to overturn a negative goal difference relative to their rivals. Frustratingly for their fans, the Norwich game would be Oldham's third that week, hardly an ideal way to prepare for a relegation showdown.

Although it was possible that even defeat would not put them down, and that a draw could be enough to ensure survival, fans of Ipswich Town, Southampton and Sheffield United knew that a win would guarantee Premier League football for the next season.

The Saints and the Blades were both in fairly good form, even for teams in such a predicament. Southampton had won three of their last five and Sheffield United had only lost one in 12. Although away from home, both were also facing mid-table teams (West Ham and Chelsea respectively) who had nothing to play for and could be forgiven for taking their collective feet off the gas.

From an Evertonian's perspective, among those three, Ipswich were probably seen as the weakest link. Not only did the Tractor Boys have to travel to second-placed Blackburn (who admittedly had little to play for after having recently missed out on the championship) but they had also gone ten games without a win, picking up just three points since mid-March.

But even taking that into account, Everton's position still looked precarious. Like Oldham, it was possible to win and go

down. Survival was out of the club's hands and all Everton could do was go for victory and hope for the best.

Worryingly for the fans, winning had become a rarity. In the past ten games there had just been one victory; a scrappy, narrow affair against West Ham.

'I wouldn't say at the time that the team was actually playing that badly, even though the results would suggest otherwise. We just seemed unable to turn chances into goals,' argues midfielder John Ebbrell, who had progressed through the ranks to become an Everton regular by the early 1990s.

'I remember,' he continues, 'the penultimate game of the season at Leeds which sort of sums our plight up. In the first half we played all right. We had chances and could have gone in at half-time with the lead. But we didn't. And ultimately we paid for this. In the second half Leeds took control of the game. By the final whistle they were 3-0 up and deserved winners. We had our chances, same as them. The difference was that Leeds took theirs.'

Reversing this inability to win would be a difficult prospect for any club. When form deteriorates so too does confidence (and back then Everton appeared to be in short supply of this most vital of ingredients for success in football). But to make matters worse Everton would have to attempt to reverse fortunes against one of the league's in-form teams.

Since Wimbledon had made it into the top flight in the mid-1980s, following an improbable rise through the football pyramid, the south London club had consistently punched above its weight. Always difficult to play against and capable of beating any side, this football minnow was a persistent thorn in the side of many wealthier clubs during the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1993/94 campaign had been a vintage one for the Wombles. After some sparkling end-of-season form, Wimbledon sat sixth in the table. A win in the final match would give each player the reward of a holiday in Las Vegas, courtesy of the club's owner, Sam Hammam, who had challenged them to end the season strongly.

'It was always difficult playing against Wimbledon. Because they were so physical and tenacious, they were the kind of side

that could unsettle you and really make life uncomfortable. And they were like that even when they *weren't* playing well! But to play them on-form was probably as bad as it got. We probably had the most difficult game of the lot,' remembers forward Paul Rideout, who had moved to Goodison from Rangers in the summer of 1992.

In the face of the twin horrors of poor form and a motivated opponent, many Blues clung to the belief, however misguided, that even with the odds stacked against the club, Everton were simply too big to be relegated; our collective minds conveniently suppressing the reality that size didn't matter and if you weren't good enough to survive then down you went. A lot of fans of big clubs are guilty of this level of arrogance, as if the Football League wasn't littered with the carcasses of clubs that once played among the big boys.

But I recall this baseless sense of the club's 'right to survival' as the only effective check (however fleeting) against the rising tide of anxiety that threatened to overwhelm me on that journey to Goodison all those years ago. And I wasn't alone. As the bus we'd caught wound its way from the leafy suburbs of South Liverpool through to the grittier landscape of the city's north end, one by one our numbers swelled. We original two were joined by almost every Blue that went to our school and each of them, at some point muttered the same mantra about Everton being 'too big to go down'. Arrogant yes, flawed definitely, but can you really blame us for searching for something, anything that could ease the worry for just a few seconds?

Although football, certainly in the top flight, has changed beyond recognition over the past two decades, the approach to Goodison Park is barely any different today than it was 20 years ago; the narrow streets, the terraced houses, the chippies and greasy spoons. And like it always has done, Goodison looms out of nowhere as you approach it from County Road, this 'Grand Old Lady' incongruously set amid it all; a sight that never fails to cause a tingle of excitement to ripple down my spine.

Back then, I remember catching the first glimpse of the Main Stand as we all approached up Neston Street. Set against a clear

blue spring sky, it was a heartening sight. There was something formidable about Goodison. It had been there, in various guises, for over a century and suggested a sense of permanence, a bricks and mortar reminder of the club's durability. For a few seconds our group fell silent, as though each of us were struck by the same thought, imbued temporarily by the same sense of hope that the solidity of Goodison appeared to offer.

It was around 11am when the bus had finally pitched us off, an unearthly time to arrive at the ground. The reason was simple. All week the buzz around the city was that Goodison would be sold out and that if you wanted to get in it was advisable to arrive early.

The absence of anyone else at the ground and the eerie atmosphere that surrounded the stadium seemed to suggest that perhaps we'd all been slightly over-enthusiastic in our preparations. Not that it mattered. For the first and only time in my life I was at the front of the queue at a Gwladys Street turnstile. There would be no way any of us would be missing out on this most momentous of days.

Milling about outside and with time to kill, for a while we talked among ourselves, finding topics that would distract our minds, like how good the new Blur album was, whether the Stone Roses would ever return from their lengthy hiatus, or about the girls in school that we fancied but who would inevitably reject us.

Inescapably though, as distracting topics petered out and more and more Evertonians arrived, conversation zeroed in on the day's game, specifically the question, 'How had the season gone so wrong?'

The strange thing about the 1993/94 campaign was that it had begun so positively. Victories against Southampton, Manchester City and Sheffield United had, to the surprise of fans and neutrals alike, left Everton top of the league after the first three games; a position that had become disappointingly unfamiliar to the club.

'But then our form started to turn. We lost our next three games and began to slowly descend down the table,' recalls Tony Cottee, a player whose 16 goals in the league that season did much to ensure that the team's decline had not been more devastating.

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Victories became a rarity with Everton recording just two between the end of September and the beginning of January. Attendances were low and the once legendary home atmosphere was starting to dissipate as the fans grew despondent at the succession of sides visiting Goodison and coming away with all three points.

‘It was a hard time to go to the game,’ remembers Stan Osborne, one-time Everton apprentice and the author of *Making the Grade*, a memoir about his time with the club and his life as an Evertonian.

‘I think one of the low points was a match against QPR at home. They beat us 3-0,’ he continues. ‘Everton were awful, totally out-classed by a side that we should have been beating. I remember leaving the game and hearing two arl’ fellers in front of me discussing the horror show they had just sat through. “Always the bridesmaid never the bride, that’s us isn’t it?” one said. To which his mate replied, “Bridesmaid? We weren’t even at the f**king wedding today!”

By the mid-point of the season the side was also managerless. Howard Kendall resigned in December, citing the board’s unwillingness to sanction the £1.5m transfer of Dion Dublin from Manchester United as his reason for leaving the club.

Kendall had spent the summer and much of the season trying to find and purchase a ‘target man’, the kind of player he hoped would ignite his second managerial spell at Everton, much as the purchase of Andy Gray had done first time around. But the board, unimpressed by Dublin’s credentials and cautious with Everton’s increasingly fragile finances, refused to back the manager in the deal. It was a decision that undermined Kendall, making his position at the club untenable.

Despite promising so much, Kendall’s second spell had been mired in mediocrity. The magic that he’d been able to sprinkle around the place back in the 1980s appeared to have disappeared. Unquestionably hampered by a lack of finance and a board that appeared aimless, the second coming of Kendall was more about mid-table consolidation rather than the restoration of Everton Football Club to the pinnacle of the game.

With Kendall gone, reserve team coach Jimmy Gabriel was installed as caretaker manager while the board searched for a replacement.

‘What should have been a quick appointment, ended up taking too long, which was typical of the Everton board at the time. They never seemed able to do anything decisively,’ argues Dave Prentice, the *Liverpool Echo*’s current deputy head of sport and someone who covered the Blues for that paper during the 1990s.

One man who did emerge as an early frontrunner for the job was the Norwich City manager Mike Walker (a name that still sends chills down the spines of most Evertonians).

Despite limited experience, in his short time as a manager Walker had impressed. In his debut campaign with the Canaries, the new boss had transformed Norwich, turning them from relegation candidates into title contenders. Despite meagre finances and pretty much the same squad of players that had struggled the season before, Walker’s Norwich stormed the Premier League. At Christmas, they topped the table, standing three points clear of their nearest rival.

Walker won plaudits not just for what he had done but also the manner in which he had done it. Swift on the counter-attack and comfortable in possession, Norwich played the kind of football that would soon become endemic within the Premier League. The days of meaningful success originating from long balls or relentless crossing were beginning to fade.

Back in the January of 1993 there was serious talk of Norwich actually winning the league. But it wasn’t to be. Form faltered during the second half of the season and they fell off the pace. Ultimately, the inaugural Premier League title went to Manchester United. Norwich ended up third, 12 points behind the league winners but with a place in the following season’s UEFA Cup and the sense that the club had defied the form book in the most stylish manner possible.

Despite talk of ‘difficult second-season syndrome’, the good times actually continued. Although the club only reached the third round of the UEFA Cup (after being knocked out by

eventual winners Internazionale), the Canaries' first European adventure was not without its high points. Not only did Norwich convincingly dismiss Vitesse Arnhem in the first round, their next opponents, the mighty Bayern Munich, were also dumped out by Walker's men. For many City fans, the 2-1 defeat of the Bavarian giants at the Olympiastadion rightly stands as one of the club's greatest achievements of that era.

In the Premier League, despite faltering more often, Norwich continued to get results, one of which was a particularly impressive display at Goodison Park. It's a game that John Ebbrell remembers well, 'It was one of those matches that you just wanted to end. We went one up and appeared to be in control. But then, Norwich pulled one back and the sides went in level at half-time.'

Although Everton weren't playing that well, there was nothing to suggest what would come next.

'In the second half Norwich simply outplayed us,' continues Ebbrell. 'They got four more, without us replying to the onslaught. Mike Walker organised his team in a way that made Everton look very ordinary. They were a brilliant and it's hard not to come to the conclusion that what happened during that game had a lasting impact upon the board.'

Tempted by the move to a bigger club and tiring of the increasingly fractious relationship he endured with Robert Chase, the Norwich chairman, Walker made it clear to Everton that if the club wanted him, he was willing to come.

It took a while, but eventually Walker got his wish and Everton got their man. When he ultimately pitched up in early January, despite coming from a smaller club, Walker arrived filled with hope and confidence, extolling his belief in several interviews that with a bit of work, the sky was the limit at Everton.

The positivity was welcome. Hope and confidence had been in short supply during the caretaker leadership of Jimmy Gabriel. Under his charge, Everton had only managed to take a solitary point from seven games.

For the first time that season stories began to appear in the local press discussing the possibility of relegation. The Age of Walker couldn't begin soon enough.

Along with relief that Everton now had a manager in place, there was also excitement regarding the appointment, as Rob Sawyer, member of the EFC Heritage Society and author of *Harry Catterick: The Untold Story of a Football Great*, explains, ‘They might have taken too long to get someone in place, but Walker’s appointment was still a bold one by a board not known for taking risks, and that got the fans engaged. Walker was a lesser known quantity on Merseyside but his achievements at Norwich City suggested that he was a young manager who could do exciting things at Everton.’

On arrival at Goodison, Walker had stated that his principle aim was to reverse Everton’s slide down the table and ensure that the nascent talk of relegation was banished. And judged by this aim, the early signs were promising. During his first game fully in charge, a January home fixture against Swindon, Everton battered the opposition 6-2.

‘Although Everton’s last three goals came in the final ten minutes, the opposition wasn’t of the highest calibre, and had pulled the game back to 2-2 with ten men, there were still encouraging signs. Goals had been rare at Goodison for a while and so putting six past the opposition, any opposition was something to cheer,’ says James Corbett, author of *Everton: The School of Science*.

The following few weeks did little to dispel an incipient sense of optimism generated by that win. While never reaching the heady heights of the Swindon game, over the course of the next five fixtures, Everton managed to amass a further eight points, only losing once (and that was a tricky, emotionally-charged away game at Old Trafford just days after the death of Sir Matt Busby).

The sole blot on the copy book was the side’s exit from the FA Cup at the hands of Bolton in mid-January, when a jittery Everton managed to blow a two-goal lead and lose the game 3-2. With improvement evident in the league, few saw this as any sort of omen or warning sign for the months to come.

‘There was a sense back then,’ says Phil Redmond, co-editor of the Everton fanzine *When Skies Are Grey*, ‘that the board might have made a good call. Not only had Everton picked up points and

got results, the team played some decent football, which hadn't been the case for quite a while.'

But the good times were not to last. After beating Oldham at home in early March, Walker's Everton then picked up a miserly five points from the next ten games. Damningly, the team also managed just four goals. Hope pretty quickly morphed into despair as players and fans alike watched the club slide inexorably towards the bottom three.

'I can't remember exactly when I realised we were in really deep trouble but it was probably around the last month of the season,' says John Ebbrell.

According to John, recognition of the team's plight was something that crept up upon him, 'I associated Everton with success and top-flight football. It never really occurred to me that this was a club that would go down. Even as our league position dropped lower and lower I suppose there was an ingrained belief that things would turn around. But with a few games left I began to get the feeling that maybe everything wouldn't be all right and that the reality was we were in massive trouble here.'

Despite the dire situation, the strange thing on that fateful day against Wimbledon was how few fans blamed Walker alone for the predicament that Everton faced.

'Back then there was a feeling among a lot of Blues that Walker had been given a tough job and that he hadn't really had a chance to stamp his personality on the side. Although none of us were particularly happy with the way results had gone, I think he was given the benefit of the doubt. There were certainly few calls for Walker to be sacked,' recalls Lyndon Lloyd.

Although the fans hadn't turned against the manager yet, for some of the players it was a different story. The local papers might have been free from tales of disharmony in the dressing room, but few of those within the squad appeared to think that the former Norwich boss was the right man for the job.

Tony Cottee recalls, 'I wasn't excited by him at all. Our coaching was really boring, the kind of schoolboy stuff I'd been doing as an apprentice at West Ham. It was all very flat and uninspiring.'

Barry Horne adds, 'I understood why he had caught the eye of the board. Norwich had enjoyed a wonderful season. But a lot of players there had the best season of their careers. It was also too difficult to make the transition from a club like Norwich to one like Everton for a manager with as little experience as he had. Walker simply wasn't ready to manage at that level.'

Mark Ward believes, 'He had the biggest ego you've ever seen. I think he was more concerned about his tan than results. He was a total phoney who was destined to fail. He'd arrive halfway through training sessions, dressed in a suit, as if he'd just stepped out of Burton's window and stopped off at the sun-bed shop en route to Bellefield. He was a joke.'

After all these years, it's impossible, in football terms at least, to find a player who has anything positive to say about Walker. At best he's seen as out of his depth, at worst utterly clueless. Whatever the perspective there was a clear sense among those playing under him that he was an ill-fit for the manager's position. His appointment created a side low on confidence, unsure of how to approach games and imbued with a sense of downward momentum that was drawing Everton towards 'the drop'. It was also a side that appeared to lack any fight.

'I remember watching several home games during the run-in and being staggered at how poor we could be at times. There might have been periods of good football, but when your team is near the bottom, it's more important to get something out of the game, even if that means playing "ugly"' argues Graham Ennis, co-editor of *When Skies Are Grey*.

The absence of 'fight' in the side was a concern voiced by many who had joined the ever expanding queue that had begun to form at our turnstile on Gwladys Street. Not long after we had arrived a trickle of other fans had appeared, a trickle that soon turned into a torrent as more and more Blues sought to secure their place in the stands.

But if 'fight' was a quality absent from the side, it was certainly one not absent from the supporters that had arrived at our turnstile. Keen to get in as early as possible they jostled and pushed, swelling and expanding the queue in the process. Around

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1pm, when the decision was made to open the gates, we'd gone from being at the front to around 30 back. Our group seemed cursed by the same downward momentum that had infected Everton and I'm pretty sure that if the gates had remained shut much longer we might have eventually found ourselves back on County Road.

The atmosphere in the queue had been a strange one. Although anxiety was certainly evident, inevitable considering the predicament the club was facing, there was also a tingle of expectation in the air and a feeling among those gathered that despite the odds, Everton would come through. Maybe the spring sunshine helped and the fact that the game hadn't begun, that a positive outcome was still a possibility. But whatever the reason, there was a lively atmosphere. Songs would chorus from nowhere, fellow Blues would strike up conversations with strangers, the air around us seemed to crackle with nervous expectation; it was like nothing I had experienced before. Once the gate had opened, each of us raced to get as close to the pitch as possible. Social niceties, and other people, were pushed aside in the dash to the front. Despite the size of our entourage, we managed to get roughly seated together; six rows back behind the goal, better than I'd hoped during my journey down the length of the queue.

Ahead of us stretched the pitch and beyond the work-in-progress that was the Stanley Park End. The redevelopment of that section of the stadium had been going on since the February of 1994 and in part, through the huge gap the work had created, had contributed to the flat atmosphere that had characterised Goodison during the closing months of the season.

Everton's home, as many away fans can attest, is one of those grounds that can be a daunting place to visit when it's rocking. It might be in need of some tender loving care, adhere to the rectangular shape less common in the top flight today and carry with it a sense of faded glamour (like a structural version of Torquay) but on its day Goodison can match any in the world for its atmosphere. Having a big chunk of the stadium missing reduced the cauldron's capacity to bubble and boil, lessening the club's ability to intimidate opposing teams and fans.

But despite the absence of Park End, some fans were still looking on from that part of the ground, as Matthew Burke, who'd travelled up with his family from Bristol, recalls, 'We had lined up to go into the Gwladys Street End, made it onto the edge of the pavement and BANG! The turnstile doors slammed shut. That's it. No more allowed in. All that way and we won't see the game. So, we hung around outside for a while before the rest of my family made other arrangements to go to the town centre and take me along with them. But my Dad stayed at Goodison and headed back towards Stanley Park and came across a man up a tree with a radio listening in to the game, while trying to peer in through the gap of what is now the Park End. And that's where my Dad spent the rest of the game!'

For those who did make it into the stadium, the atmosphere before kick-off was an odd one, as Tony Murrell, who was sitting in the Family Enclosure, remembers, 'You could tell that lots of people had doubts. It was there in the pockets of quietness that would occasionally settle over the ground. I was feeling okay, but like lots of people at Goodison, there were moments when my bubble of shaky optimism got pricked. I remember at one point, looking around our majestic stadium and thinking, "Christ, we could be hosting the likes of Grimsby here next year." There were plenty of moments like that before kick-off; little reminders that threatened to flatten the atmosphere.'

One of the strangest possible outcomes around that time was the outside chance that the following season's Merseyside derby could still have taken place but with Tranmere Rovers replacing Everton in the fixture. Tranmere had been enjoying a golden spell under the management of John King, successively making the second tier play-offs in the early-to-mid-1990s. In 1993/94 the club had done it again and a two-leg semi-final against Leicester City was due to take place later in the month. In the horrified minds of Evertonians, a red versus white derby fixture would be another reminder of just how far the club had fallen.

Understandably, at the time, most Blues were consumed by how 'the drop' would affect them personally; the shame of being relegated, a future watching games against the likes of Grimsby

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Town, Southend United and Luton Town, and the prospect of dealing with the smug grins of every Kopite in the city. Little thought was given to how the players were feeling.

According to midfield stalwart Barry Horne, who had joined from Southampton in 1992, there was a determination in the dressing room to not be part of the team that took Everton down, 'The players there cared about the club and knew what relegation would mean both to it and the fans. And it wasn't just the local lads, like John Ebbrell, Dave Watson and Gary Ablett, or those who'd been there a long time, like Nev [Southall] and Ian Snodin. Most people in that dressing room understood what the day meant.'

But just because you're focused doesn't mean you're inured to nerves. For one of those local lads, someone who'd spent his whole professional career at Goodison, the entire week had been a traumatic experience.

'Before any game, you normally get a feeling of nervous excitement that morning. For the Wimbledon game, that feeling started on the Monday before. And if I'm, honest it was more nerves than excitement. I remember not being able to sleep properly during the week, worrying that the occasion would be too "big" for me to perform properly and feeling sickened by the thought of what relegation would mean for the club,' admits Ebbrell.

Although there had been an inherent tenseness rippling through the atmosphere all afternoon, that changed, albeit briefly, the moment the theme from *Z-Cars* piped up. Goodison erupted, and an authentic roar of excitement greeted the players as they streamed out of the tunnel. The sight of them made hope, however ephemeral, surge within those who had come to lend their support. I looked across at the faces of those around me and could see the same belief. How could we think about anything other than success with the tannoy blaring and the sight of those blue shirts in front of us? The team would deliver.

It was a surge of optimism that affected the players too, as Paul Rideout remembers, 'The sound was incredible. I'd played in big games before and played in others since but that was one of the

most impressive atmospheres I've ever experienced. It was a huge boost to our confidence as we came out.'

To those accustomed to the passing mentality dominant in today's game, the match would make an uncomfortable viewing experience today. From the beginning, balls were launched up-field, crosses whipped repeatedly into the box, momentum geared toward the wings.

In part, this was symptomatic of the times. English football was still in transition. The Charles Hughes mentality, one that espoused direct play and the belief that the ball should be quickly advanced into 'positions of maximum opportunity', remained a potent force in the game. A 'long ball' was not considered a waste and a high ball pumped into the box was still thought to yield results. What today is often disparagingly referred to as 'Plan B' was still considered 'Plan A' in many quarters.

At the time though, Walker's sides were rarely so one-dimensional. Everton might have become serial losers but they'd done so with some style and grace, essentially passing their way into the relegation zone. But on that day, whether through nerves, the realisation that something had to change or the belief that the 'Hughes' mentality offered a short-route to success, Walker decided that the adoption of a much more 'direct' approach was the way to go.

During those early exchanges, a time when you would imagine that Everton would briefly be dominant (the need to stamp authority on the game being paramount) Wimbledon already looked the more accomplished side. Among the fans, there had been a hope that the infamous Goodison atmosphere would cow Everton's opponents and put them off their game.

But according to former Wimbledon player Marcus Gayle (who featured that day), that was never likely to happen, 'There was a really intense atmosphere in the place but Wimbledon weren't a side you could intimidate. The night before some locals had set fire to our coach and burnt it out. Our kit, which had been in there, still stank of smoke! But we weren't fazed in the slightest. We had a strong mentality, a great team spirit and a belief that Everton could be beaten. We were on great form,

they weren't and no amount of shouting from the terraces could change that.'

What Everton needed more than anything was a quick goal. Not only would that unsettle the opposition, it would also give the players some much needed confidence and provide the crowd with a huge boost. But when the first goal came, it would be the visitors who went ahead and the lead would be gifted to them in an almost inexplicable manner.

'It's fair to say that Anders [Limpar] had not become a crowd favourite since he'd arrived from Arsenal a few months earlier,' says Neil Roberts, lifelong Blue and author of *Blues and Beatles, Football, Family and the Fab Four – the Life of an Everton Supporter*.

'Despite an unquestionable talent,' he continues 'Limpar could be a frustrating player for many people to watch; capable of changing a game but equally capable of some appallingly lacklustre performances, an approach that had not been appreciated by a crowd desperate for its players to fight for every point.'

Wimbledon were given a corner on the left hand side around the five minute mark. The ball was pumped hopefully into the far edge of the box, not really going anywhere. For some reason, still unfathomable after all these years, Limpar chose that moment to leap up, stick out his hand and palm the ball away.

'It was probably the first time he'd been in our box since he'd arrived at Goodison,' laughs Barry Horne.

No question that it was a penalty. And the referee duly gave it. The torrent of abuse given to the Swede was one of the worst I've ever heard directed to one of our own players in all my years of following the club.

'I felt awful,' admits Limpar. 'I can still remember the ball coming over and knowing that I'd misjudged the header. Instinctively, my hand went up. It was one of those things that happens but you're not sure why. I was so disappointed.'

Goodison held its collective breath as Dean Holdsworth stepped up to take the penalty.

'There was a moment, when it looked as though Southall had saved it. A cheer began to emerge from the crowd. But to

the horror of everyone watching, the ball, although slowed, continued its trajectory and found its way into the back of the net,' remembers Phil Redmond, who was sitting in the Paddock.

'A hush descended over the blue part of Goodison that was complete,' recalls Tony Murrell. 'We'd gifted our opponents a goal for no reason whatsoever and made an already difficult job that much harder. It was the worst of all possible starts. I know I wasn't alone in thinking at that moment that we could really be in trouble here.'

For the following quarter of an hour Everton tried unsuccessfully to get back into the game. Balls were pumped hopefully forward, crosses whipped into the box, tackles sent in with crunching intent. The atmosphere fluctuated wildly, with moments of raucous support suddenly being replaced by eerie silence, only for the shouts and screams to return again seconds later.

It didn't help the mood that news spread through the crowd of a goal for Oldham at Carrow Road. As the scores stood they put Everton second from bottom. It was around then that I remember turning to my mate Paul, who was seated next to me and saying how much we needed a goal. He turned towards me, a look of heavy resignation etched on his face that I will never forget, and said, 'Knowing our f**king luck, the next goal will probably be theirs.' And he was dead-on; the bastard.

The way that Wimbledon went 2-0 ahead after just 20 minutes seemed to confirm in my mind that perhaps the footballing gods were not on Everton's side that day.

An innocuous free kick from the right was launched towards the penalty area by Warren Barton. It was knocked on by Wimbledon forward Andy Clarke into the box where two Everton defenders, David Unsworth and Dave Watson, had it covered. Or at least that's how it appeared. What none of us watching expected was for those two to collide and knock the ball into the path of the onrushing Clarke.

At the moment of that collision my heart sank. I just knew a goal was coming. That it ultimately did, came courtesy of Gary Ablett, who threw himself at Clarke's shot (which was heading

wide) and deflected the ball into the back of the net. As own goals go, it was a great one; possessing all the ingredients of a perfect collective cock-up. Everton had effectively gift-wrapped the game to Wimbledon and, for those watching, probably ensured relegation.

‘Their second goal felt like one of those moments when someone famous dies,’ recalls Kev Symm, who was sitting in the Family Enclosure. ‘You can remember clearly exactly what was going on around you and how people were reacting. I can remember a fella in his 50s sitting completely motionless for about two minutes, then as play resumed he just stood up and said he couldn’t sit by and watch this happen and left without coming back. It felt like we were really done once the second goal went in and it was the realisation that your worst nightmare was actually happening right in front you and there was nothing you could do about it that killed.’

‘I could do something about it and yet even I felt pretty hopeless,’ admits John Ebbrell. ‘We weren’t playing well and we’d given the opposition two goals in 20 minutes. It seemed so unlikely that a team that had struggled to score for months would be able to pull three back and not let in any more goals.’

Ironically though, despite the two-goal deficit, from that point onwards, Everton began to improve.

‘I think the deficit actually took the pressure off slightly. We seemed to play with more freedom from then on. Personally, my game got a lot better and I was able to get on the ball a lot more,’ remembers Anders Limpar.

But the side’s gradual improvement would count for nothing without a goal, tangible reward for the effort. Fortunately, Everton’s cause was given a huge boost just a few minutes later when Limpar did much to redress the mistake he’d made with the penalty. Never one to shy away from a bit of simulation, Limpar made the most of a soft challenge in the box, tumbling over the outstretched leg of Peter Fear and falling to the ground as though he’d just been shot in the back.

Although he acknowledges that some contact was made, the Swede admits that he made the most of the collision. ‘I dived,

plain and simple. But in my defence, I think the situation called for it. As a team we desperately needed a change in luck. So, yes, I dived. But although it's not very sporting, it was the right decision. We needed that penalty and we needed it converted.'

Everton demanded a hero. Enter Graham Stuart. Since he'd arrived at Goodison from Chelsea in the summer of 1993, Stuart had appeared to be a capable yet unsensational acquisition; a busy sort of player, cut from the same cloth as someone like Steven Naismith. His industry was appreciated but his final product often lamented. In short, he never appeared the kind of figure to go down in Everton folklore. But that was about to change.

Stuart had only taken over penalty duties a month earlier, telling the *Liverpool Echo*, 'I can just see it now. We'll get one in the last match against Wimbledon and I'll have to score to keep us up – and I'll be terrified.'

Most Evertonians were probably unaware that Stuart had blasted his only other penalty over the crossbar while at Chelsea. But with supreme confidence, considering both that and the situation, he stepped up and calmly slotted the ball into the bottom left hand corner.

'The noise when that goal went in was incredible,' recalls Neil Roberts. 'It was such an important strike. We needed something positive to happen and we had to get back in to the game. For the first time in a while you could feel a hint of belief return to the crowd.'

It was a sense of belief shared by the players too. 'Psychologically, that goal was hugely important. At 2-1 the match was neatly poised. Wimbledon were in reach once again and the prospect of us getting something out of the game felt more tangible. Looking back, that is probably one of the most important goals ever to have been scored at Goodison Park,' thinks Limpar.

But despite the renewed sense of hope, it was Wimbledon who would continue to look the more threatening of the two sides. Twice, Holdsworth missed headed opportunities, one of which was a gift. I remember watching the ball pass over the bar on that occasion and sail above me into the crowd behind and

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thinking how incredibly lucky Everton had been. Nine times out of ten that ball would have gone in. Amid the palpable sense of relief the germ of a thought was blossoming, 'Maybe our luck is beginning to turn?'

When half-time eventually came, 30,000 Evertonians gave a collective sigh of relief. The supporters were drained by the toughest 45 minutes of football most of them had probably ever endured and could recognise that what they and the team needed more than anything right now was a break.