

NEIL MELDRUM

AFC
BOURNEMOUTH

The fall & rise

THE ASTONISHING RAGS-TO-RICHES
TALE OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE'S
SMALLEST CLUB

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INTRODUCTION

‘**F**OOTBALL, bloody hell.’ He was the doyen of winning, Sir Alex Ferguson. But he had all the tools to succeed – would you describe any of Manchester United’s 13 Premier League titles under the great man’s leadership as a sporting miracle? Probably not.

For all of the certainties in sport, though, like Phil Taylor winning world darts titles, the driver with the fastest car claiming Formula One’s world championship year after year, or Celtic lifting the Scottish Premiership crown by February, there are the moments of breathtaking wonder, where you’re not quite sure how something you have just witnessed happened. You just know it *did* happen. Stories of taking inconceivable odds, throwing them in the air and knocking them out of the park, into the stratosphere. Emotion, heightened by success and failure. Sport that makes us ‘feel’ and the triumph of the underdog that takes us even further into the wonder of the bright lights.

Ferguson might have used more colourful language alongside that most famous of soundbites when attempting to comprehend Leicester City’s 5,000-1 Premier League title win in 2016, Jamie Vardy, Wes Morgan, Robert Huth, Claudio Ranieri et al the Rocky Balboas of a season that will surely never be repeated.

Further down the table that year were AFC Bournemouth.

‘Bournemouth? What, skint Bournemouth by the beach, with the little ground in the middle of a park?’ Yes, that Bournemouth.

INTRODUCTION

‘How did they manage that?’ Good question, which brings us appropriately on to a sporting miracle that surely rivals the achievements of Ranieri’s men. Maybe even Boris Becker’s 1985 Wimbledon victory at the age of 17? How about John Daly’s 1991 USPGA title win, or Buster Douglas flooring Mike Tyson in 1990? Surely Liverpool’s Champions League comeback of 2005 on that sweltering night in Istanbul?

Like Leicester, the Cherries were forced to battle back from the precipice, but the achievement of Ranieri’s side in 2016 emerged from the ashes of a Premier League relegation near miss rather than falling through the trapdoor itself. Their success on the back of failure also spanned only two seasons, while Bournemouth’s saw them recover from what looked a certain drop into non-league, even extinction, before an assault on three divisions in seven years led them to the Premier League’s promised land.

Yes, Ranieri’s squad was formed on a shoestring by Premier League standards, but the likes of Morgan, Huth, Danny Drinkwater, Marc Albrighton and Ranieri himself all had good, solid experience. The mental strength and capacity to go again after disappointment. They also had genuine talent in Kasper Schmeichel, Vardy, Riyad Mahrez and N’Golo Kante.

Yes, Cherries owner Maxim Demin’s millions enabled Eddie Howe to take the club beyond the shattered imaginations of its loyal supporters by purchasing talent in the same vein.

But consider the years before Demin’s arrival in 2011. Howe was 31 and had never managed before when he took the reins in 2009, while his squad comprised the likes of Anton Robinson, Liam Feeney and Mark Molesley – hard-working, reliable, talented professionals but all rising from the lower reaches of non-league with only one Football League appearance between them.

Ranieri’s side received their wages each month, without fail, while they plotted the club’s pathway towards the Premier League title. Howe’s side in the manager’s early years often went several

months without their salaries, while also being forced to watch as the club publicly lurched from one crisis to another off the field. At one point during the administration of 2008, the Cherries were five minutes from being liquidated. Five minutes.

Does all that make little AFC Bournemouth's fall and rise more miraculous than Leicester's achievement or anything else that has gone before it? I believe it does. You may feel the same by the time you reach the end of this book. You may not.

But one thing is for sure, when it comes to sporting stories, the ones that make you 'feel', AFC Bournemouth's takes some beating.

PROLOGUE

DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

TOMMY Elphick moved his food from one side of the plate to the other with his fork, as if playing an imaginary match. His girlfriend Hannah looked on, a smile through gritted teeth masking her simmering displeasure at yet another meal spoiled by football distractions.

The Chewton Glen Hotel just outside Highcliffe, a small Hampshire–Dorset border town, is the kind of five-star luxury reserved for wealthy, successful businessmen and their families. Or Premier League footballers. But Elphick was trying not to think about that prospect.

Championship front-runners AFC Bournemouth were two games from the promised land. Its riches, its glamour and its glory. Sky Sports, though, had moved the club's penultimate match against Bolton Wanderers at Dean Court to a Monday night. The broadcaster had the same feeling Elphick was trying to keep penned in, a surge of emotion just waiting to break free.

Elphick is sitting, but leaning forward intently and speaking directly into my iPhone recorder, as if to be certain no memory is overcome by the din of a Friday lunchtime crowd in The Belfry's Brabazon Bar just outside Birmingham. Donning jeans, trainers and a fitted jacket, the Aston Villa defender is tall and broad, yet

unassuming, without the 'he's a footballer' look perfected by so many of his colleagues in the Beautiful Game.

He sips his cappuccino and takes up the story of Monday, 27 April 2015, AFC Bournemouth's day of destiny.

To Elphick, though, its build-up was more like a painful 72-hour boot camp for the mind.

'We'd trained on the Saturday and the gaffer got the lads together after the session and told us not to waste our energy watching the scores come in,' he reflects, his eyes locked on mine. 'We knew if results went our way we could get promoted against Bolton on the Monday, but he didn't want us to get involved so I made a point of booking the Chewton Glen restaurant at 3pm on the Saturday with Hannah so I could get away from it.

'Of course my intentions were good, but I couldn't help myself and wanted to have a look at the scores. I couldn't get a signal on my phone, though. It was agony. I spent most of the meal dithering with my food as I couldn't shake off the feeling of not knowing what was happening.

'My missus wasn't happy so I did my best to try to forget what was happening in the other games. By 5pm when we left the restaurant and I got a signal, my phone started going wild as all the messages and missed calls started flashing up. The lads had obviously totally ignored the manager but could you blame them?

'Our group message was going crazy. If we beat Bolton on Monday night, we were going up. The Premier League! Everyone was just so excited.

'On Sunday morning we trained again and everyone was flying. I promise you now, I would have bet my life on us winning that game. I was that confident. It was meant to be and we were giving it everything in that session.

'I woke up on the Monday morning and tried to be as normal as possible. I took a few phone calls from the family but I was trying to be normal. Of course you can't though, can you? I read

the papers and I was double-checking the league table every two minutes in case we'd got it all wrong.

'The *Daily Echo* had done a front page that day which was black and red stripes with the words "DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM" on it. It sent shivers down my spine – how could I be normal after that? I still have it today.'

For Howe, his role was keeping his men grounded. As it had been throughout a breathtaking season that had propelled little AFC Bournemouth into the mainstream media's hearts.

'The gaffer is a genius,' grins Elphick. 'He was great at producing key team talks at big moments in the season. We came in as normal on the Monday morning of the game and walked through a few set pieces, then he told us all to get to bed and do what we normally did. He was dampening it down as much as he could, but you can imagine what we were like.'

'We got to the warm-up before the game and then he called us in as he normally did. He was his usual self, but once we had sat down in the dressing room, the lights went off.'

'A big screen came up and he had produced a montage of footage on the club's history. This was five minutes before we were due to go out so he'd normally be doing his team talk.'

'The footage was incredible. I swear if you could bottle the feeling it produced, nobody would ever lose a game again. It was a stunning bit of management. We got up and my heart was racing, the hairs on my arms standing up.'

'We got into a team huddle in the dressing room and he calmed everyone down just enough, as we were revved up to the eyeballs.'

'It was a magical atmosphere inside the ground, a Monday night under the lights and in front of the Sky cameras, and we got off to a great start. Marc Pugh scored so early, I just knew it was going to be our night. Pughie had been at the club for a long time and it was just so fitting that he scored. Matt Ritchie made it 2-0

and then Callum Wilson got the third. By that stage everything was just a blur. We'd done it – we were going into the Premier League. The crowd poured on to the pitch and I was carried aloft towards the tunnel. It was just monumental.

‘It was probably one of our best performances of the season and some of the football we played that night was just stunning.

‘Every player in that dressing room had a story and it was just pure emotion after the game. I'd come back from a double Achilles rupture with people saying I'd never play again, Yann Kermorgant had battled leukaemia, Matt Ritchie had dropped down the leagues to rebuild his career, Harry Arter the same when he went to Woking, Simon Francis had got brutal stick at Charlton as apparently he couldn't cope, Steve Cook had gone out on loan in non-league and Charlie Daniels was released from Tottenham. It was band of brothers stuff as we were a complete bunch of misfits thrown together, but we just clicked.

‘We did it our way and when you actually look at the results like Leeds, Watford, Derby and Huddersfield and what these huge clubs were spending, we battered the lot of them. There can never be any doubt how much we deserved to reach the Premier League. We'd done it and proved everybody wrong.’

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow...

CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE SCENE

2003–06

INTERVIEWS with Warren Cummings were, at times, unnerving experiences for those of us in the media.

Daily Echo photographers past were squirted with water or forced to witness more than they bargained for when Cummings would yank down the shorts of his fellow players during the annual pre-season photo call.

A match merit mark of less than 6/10 in Monday's paper, meanwhile, would be followed by Cummings's unique brand of training ground banter come Tuesday morning. On one occasion, the defender requested my mobile phone to speak directly to *Echo* sports writer Ian Wadley, whose 4/10 in that Monday's paper had not gone down at all well. With Cummings, though, things were never truly serious, yet inside the joker lay a character of fearsome determination.

Those kind of characters gravitated towards the club between 2002 and 2015. The difference in that 13-year period? Four divisions, administration, two relegations, a Greatest Escape and four promotions. Hard to believe isn't it? But this is not a story of far-fetched fiction. Cummings is seated and ready to talk when I walk into a coffee shop in the popular Bournemouth suburb of Westbourne, close to his home.

He is a picture of calm, dressed in a fitted jumper, jeans and brogues. Nonetheless, given the Scot's decorated history with practical jokes, I drink my latte, generously purchased by Cummings before my arrival, with one eye on the contents and one eye on the subject...

In many ways, Cummings's spirit and humour, not to mention his talent in the left full-back position, tell the tale of AFC Bournemouth's fall and rise on their own.

A leader committed to the cause and a marauding full-back ahead of his time, the Scot would have become an international regular had injury not struck at the worst possible moment. Nevertheless, he did play for his country once or, as he prefers to put it, 'Me and Kenny Dalglish won 103 Scotland caps between us.'

Raised in the dressing room of Chelsea, alongside the likes of 1998 World Cup winners Marcel Desailly, Frank Leboeuf and Didier Deschamps, as well as close friend John Terry, Cummings could have been forgiven for thinking Bournemouth was somewhat beneath him when he arrived at the club on loan at the dawn of the new millennium.

'Far from it,' he laughs, sipping his coffee from a disposable cup. 'I went away after that initial loan spell in 2000 and did a year at West Brom then a year at Dundee United in 2002/03.

'Very quickly that turned out to be an awful move for me because the manager at the time was sacked and I couldn't wait to get back to Chelsea, even just to be in the reserves. I wasn't in the first-team picture at Dundee United and wasn't being treated particularly well, but I wasn't in the first team at Chelsea either.

'In January 2003, Peter Grant gave me a call. He was still at Bournemouth coaching under Sean O'Driscoll and asked me if I fancied coming back on loan again.

'I said I was up for it if they could get the paperwork done. Because I'd signed on loan at Dundee United for that whole

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season it was slightly difficult but they got it done and I arrived at the end of January.

‘My first game was away at Kidderminster Harriers and we lost 1-0 but I was just glad to be there. I’d loved my first spell at Bournemouth and it was great to be back.’

Inexplicably relegated from Division Two under O’Driscoll in 2002, the squad Cummings returned to in 2003 was brimming with talent and, with Dean Court having been spun around 90 degrees and rebuilt, albeit partially, in 2001, the infrastructure and belief was firmly in place for a return to the third tier.

‘Things had changed a lot while I’d been at West Brom and in Scotland,’ Cummings admits. ‘They had a new stadium which was fantastic and the squad was highly talented.’

‘But they’d had their difficulties in 2001/02 and been relegated to Division Three. They’d started pretty well in 2002/03 but had tailed off a bit in December and January and I think Sean had received an ultimatum from the chairman Peter Phillips that he had two or three games to get the team up the league as they’d had a poor couple of months.’

‘The squad was talented without a doubt. We had big Steve Fletcher up front, Carl Fletcher in midfield who was outstanding, Garreth O’Connor, Brian Stock and Wade Elliott, plus James Hayter up front.’

‘But when I arrived at the end of January we were fifth in the table and should have been higher. We knew we should have been in the top three with the squad we had.’

‘My first home game after the Kidderminster defeat was against Wrexham who were right up there with us but we beat them 2-0 and it was comfortable. Warren Feeney got both goals and we knew then we had a chance of going up.’

‘I signed permanently in April, but for whatever reason we didn’t get into the top three and ended up in the play-offs. I couldn’t tell you whether Sean was happy or angry about it’

because he was the same every day! You never got a huge amount out of him either way, but he was highly knowledgeable and we were supremely organised.'

For what O'Driscoll lacked in an extroverted personality, he more than made up for in coaching that was beyond its years in the lower reaches of the English league. Having endured criticism for taking the Cherries into the bottom tier in 2002, the Midlander was hell-bent on a return to Division Two to silence doubting supporters who had been scarred by the club almost going out of existence in 1997, owing the Inland Revenue £350,000 and Lloyds Bank £2.1m.

'I felt Sean was ahead of his time,' reflects Cummings with a smile. 'We watched DVDs and videos on the opposition in 2000 and that was unheard of for a Division Two side at that time. He also used to give us all a booklet, 16 pages long, every week detailing everything about that weekend's opposition. It had detail on set pieces, every individual on the team. It was amazing and he expected us to digest it all.

'His training methods were revolutionary, although I didn't always enjoy it as it sometimes lacked a competitive edge.

'But he was excellent and streets ahead of everyone else in the lower leagues at that time.'

But even O'Driscoll couldn't pilot his talented squad into the Division Three automatic promotion places come April 2003, despite six wins from their final nine league games.

'We were disappointed with missing out on automatic promotion but everyone always says if you can win them, the play-offs are the best way to get promoted,' says Cummings.

'We had Bury in the semi-final, who were difficult to play against, very physical and just not very nice.

'They had Colin Cramb up front and he was a real playground bully. He was horrible. We went up there for the first leg and the pitch at Gigg Lane was awful and they were getting right in our

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faces, which was their way. Nothing suited us but we scraped a 0-0 and took them back to Dean Court where it was comfortable for us. We won 3-1 and there was a bit of afters with Peter Grant and Cramb on the touchline, but it was straightforward other than that!

With a final against Lincoln City at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium to come, Cummings decamped north of the border while O'Driscoll toiled on the best way to overcome another side famed for their physical presence and single-mindedness.

'The final wasn't until ten days after the second leg against Bury so I went back up to Scotland to see some friends on the free weekend and it definitely helped remove some of the pressure,' Cummings recalls.

'We did training as usual in the week leading up to the game and from then on the build-up was all based around Lincoln.

'They'd beaten us 1-0 from a set piece in the last few weeks of the regulation season so we were aware of their presence and knew it would be difficult. But we were so organised and Sean went into overdrive the week before to make sure we were all over what we needed to do.

'Nothing bothered Sean. It didn't matter whether we were playing five-a-side or a play-off final at the Millennium Stadium – he was always the same. He knew if we were right, we would have a chance of winning every game and the final was just another game to him.

'But after we went to Cardiff on the Thursday before the game, we trained up there on Friday morning and I went over on my ankle.

'It blew up like a balloon straight away so they took me back to Southampton Nuffield Hospital and they confirmed I'd torn some ligaments. They said I could strap it up, have an injection and have a go on it in the game but said I'd probably do more damage to it and probably not even get to the end of the 90 minutes.

‘We drove back to Wales and I arrived on crutches with the ankle in an ice pack. We were staying at Celtic Manor just off the M4 so we decided I’d have a fitness test on the Saturday morning before the game.

‘Peter Grant took me out and really put me through my paces. I was running with my ankle strapped right up and I got through it so they said I could play. I didn’t have an injection as I knew I’d do damage and wouldn’t know about it. At least without the injection I’d be able to feel the pain and know if I had to stop.’

With only a 1984 Associate Members’ Cup win and 1998 Auto Windscreens Shield Final defeat to count as ‘success’ in the modern era, supporters flooded over the Severn Bridge in their thousands, a chance to say ‘I was there’ after many had thrown their contribution of £35,000 into buckets at the Winter Gardens concert hall in 1997, money which gave the club an immediate future when the threat of liquidation was a very real prospect.

‘The day was just magical as we drove into Cardiff and saw all the fans lining the streets and that was when the enormity of the game really hit us as players,’ reflects Cummings fondly. ‘It was a beautiful day and there was a real air of expectation and we got the perfect start through big Steve Fletcher.

‘The ball went forward and was flicked on and he volleyed it in but then they scored from a set piece again, through Ben Futcher.

‘Luckily we got a goal right before half-time through Carl Fletcher, but it was Stephen Purches’s goal just before the hour that really I remember more than anything.

‘Neil Moss punched it clear in our penalty area and James Hayter broke away and fed Wade Elliott down the line.

‘Purchey had run all the way from full-back and slotted it home. At 3-1 we really started to enjoy it and then Garreth O’Connor made it 4-1. The game got really stretched though and they scored to make it 4-2, but then Carl Fletcher got a fifth about ten minutes from time and we knew it was done.

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‘The celebrations were epic and we went out that night. The most surreal moment for me was standing in the nightclub’s VIP room with Sean having a glass of Champagne. He was the same even then though and didn’t really celebrate – he was more interested in talking about the game!’

O’Driscoll left his players to the rest of the night, distracted by more pressing matters.

Back in Division Two, how would he keep them there, let alone make progress?

Summer signings were non-existent, while the club was far from out of the woods off the pitch. With Phillips having replaced Tony Swaisland as chairman in 2002, the latter walking away after his proposal to sell and lease back Dean Court was met with despair by supporters, the new man at the helm was preoccupied with a partially completed new stadium, not to mention sums of money owed to builders Barr, Swaisland, Lloyds Bank, Bournemouth council and club president Stanley Cohen – a black hole to the tune of £5m just six years after the Winter Gardens buckets were put away.

Phillips would eventually seek board approval for Swaisland’s sale and leaseback proposal himself in 2005, handing over Dean Court to London landlords Structadene for £3.5m in favour of paying around £30,000 a month in rent.

‘We always had a feel for the fact the club wasn’t too stable off the pitch,’ admits Cummings. ‘Our wages were late pretty much every month so we knew things weren’t good.

‘That didn’t change for the next two seasons back in Division Two after the play-off win and when the club sold the stadium and leased it back in 2005 we knew it was getting worse.

‘We also lost a lot of players between 2004 and 2005. Garreth O’Connor and Wade Elliott went to Burnley and Warren Feeney went to Stockport, but the biggest loss was Carl Fletcher to West Ham. He was outstanding and sold for a pittance, but we knew

the club would have their leg lifted quite easily because the financial situation was so bad.'

With Structadene talks well under way in the spring of 2005, Cummings was to suffer injury agony that would stall both his international ambitions and a play-off push sparked by defender Eddie Howe's signing from Portsmouth. In peak AFC Bournemouth fashion, supporters started an 'EddieShare' scheme that raised £13,000 in 48 hours to secure the centre-half's return to Dean Court from Fratton Park.

'We almost got to the play-offs in 2004/05 and should have done really,' Cummings recalls solemnly. 'But I broke my leg at Swindon in March and I was never the same after that.'

'I'd won my only Scotland cap in 2003 but was doing well in 2004/05 and I was looking at a recall. It was a very tough thing to go through for myself and the team. We had a very small squad and we didn't win any of our remaining six home games after I broke the leg so it killed our season really.'

'We needed a win against Hartlepool on the last day of the season to make the play-offs and we could only draw 2-2. There was a fire sale of players like John Spicer, Brian Stock and James O'Connor and we knew it was going to be difficult after that.'

'We had a very poor second half to the season in 2005/06 and finished 17th and I think Sean knew he was done after that. He wouldn't have *wanted* to leave but I think he knew he had to in 2006. There was no money and the squad was not as talented as in previous years. He was constantly trying to pull rabbits out of hats and I think it took its toll on him.'

'We'd lost Peter Grant and Richard O'Kelly had come in as a coach but Sean only really had Richard. Everything else he was doing himself and I think that also got to him.'

'I'd signed a new contract while I was laid up with the broken leg, but I think I would have left that summer in 2005 if I'd been fit. Sean knew that, too, but with the situation I was

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in with the injury I was grateful that he wanted to offer me a new deal.'

Phillips, too, had endured enough and decided to 'step off the rollercoaster' at the start of September 2006. Just over a week later, O'Driscoll left to become the new manager of Doncaster Rovers.

'Peter Phillips stepped down and his vice-chairman Abdul Jaffer took over,' Cummings says, before breaking out in a wry smile. 'Days later, Darren Anderton signed and Sean left the same day!

'It was an odd situation and even though Darren is now one of my best friends, his signing at the time just didn't feel like a Sean O'Driscoll signing, so it was not a huge surprise when Sean left for Doncaster. I think Darren's signing was instigated higher up in the board room for PR rather than playing reasons and that was probably the last straw for Sean.

'You could see from that point, with other people getting involved in transfers, he knew he had to go.

'He was the only manager I really knew and so I went and got some bottles of Champagne for the end of his last game against Crewe. A couple of us stood up and said a few words and it was an emotional moment.

'But it was typical Sean when he told us to halt the Champagne because we had another game on Tuesday!'

With Jaffer in place and perhaps enjoying the limelight that comes with a managerial search a little too much, a host of other big names were rumoured to be following midfield signing Anderton south – but into the Dean Court dressing room as manager.

'The speculation on Sean's replacement started straight away,' laughs Cummings. 'Les Ferdinand and Robert Lee looked like the early favourites and then Kevin Bond, Andy Hessenthaler and Phil Brown came into the running. I know they were all

interviewed. I didn't enjoy that period, to be honest. People like Les and Rob Lee were massive names and it just seemed like a little bit too much for Bournemouth.

'It was too much of a change and I wondered how people like them would have reacted had they come in and then suddenly seen everything that they *didn't* have. If they had known what a state the club was in when they were interviewed they wouldn't have touched the job with a barge pole.

'It was all done very publicly too and people were getting photographed going into the ground. It was like the club was running a competition to win the job – it just wasn't done professionally.

'It went on for about six games at the start of the 2006/07 season and during that period Joe Roach, the youth team boss, and the goalkeeping coach Stuart Murdoch steadied the ship pretty well as caretaker managers.'

Jaffer's planned 'Bond is Back' moment in the press conference unveiling had been spoiled by the *Daily Echo* revealing the former Dean Court defender was the board's choice the day before. Nonetheless, the miffed chairman sat alongside the new man and chief executive Laurence Jones as the gathered handful of scribes and broadcasters fired questions.

'Kevin Bond was a good appointment on paper,' says Cummings. 'He had a connection with the club and a good relationship with his dad John and Harry Redknapp. It wasn't as left-field as Ferdinand and Lee and seemed like a good option at the time.

'But Kevin did too much too soon. In 2006/07 he didn't really bring in too many new faces and we ended up finishing 19th, which was poor but at least we had stayed up in tough circumstances after Sean had left.

'But the following year he brought in too many bodies. He took Jo Kuffour, the striker, who turned out to be a good signing for

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us but he also brought in a lot of loan players during the summer of 2007/08.

‘He took Paul Telfer from Celtic and we were thinking, “He’s got to be a good signing. He’s only just finished playing in the Champions League!” Jason Pearce also came in from Portsmouth. He didn’t play much in 2007/08 until the end of the season, but I could talk about that boy all day. What a player. He was just outstanding and his attitude was as good as I have ever seen.

‘Darren Anderton was fantastic too. He was at the end of his career and it had initially seemed a bizarre signing the previous season, but he was superb in 2007/08.

‘I’d never rated him as highly as I should have when he was playing at Tottenham and for England, but he was just outstanding on the ball and was a great lad to have around. He really bought into the club even though it was very different to what he was used to.

‘Kevin used to give him time off during the week because his legs weren’t what they were and he was picking up a few injuries, but he was a real globetrotter and would text us on a Wednesday after a Saturday game and he’d be somewhere like New York or Miami with a tight hamstring!

‘He trained like a demon when he was back here though and was a huge influence on that team and is still close to a lot of the boys from that era now. His ability was outstanding.

‘In his first game for us against Scunthorpe in 2006 we had a free kick from 35 yards and we were both stood over it. He said, “I’m having this one. I’m going to fade it.”

‘I said, “What do you mean, fade it? Like a golf shot?”

‘He said “Yeah”, struck it and it bent like a banana and went into the top corner. I just thought “wow”.

‘Several of Kevin’s signings just didn’t work though. The worst decision he made was to bring in four lads from Reading, Jem

Karacan, Scott Golbourne, Alex Pearce and James Henry. It really upset the apple cart.

‘They were decent players but they just didn’t fit in and we were struggling as a group anyway. The four of them arrived in October and November of 2007 and I understand why Kevin did it as he really didn’t have much choice. We’d played Northampton at home in September and I broke my arm, Ryan Garry broke his leg and Russ Perrett tore his hamstring, all in the same game!

‘Three defenders were gone in a flash so Kevin had to do something, but it was the wrong option to take four from one club.

‘Individually they were good players and all of them have gone on to have good careers above the level we were at at that stage, but it created a huge divide in our dressing room. It was a “them and us” scenario and they were divisive in my eyes.

‘When young players come in on loan from bigger clubs, they have to be selfish because they are trying to make a career for themselves. I get that.

‘But in that situation you don’t have an affinity for a loan club and the divide it created couldn’t be overcome, although there was worse to come.’

Indeed there was. Off the pitch a further divide had been created when Jaffer, part of a three-man consortium bidding to take overall control of the club from fans’ group the Community Mutual, resigned as chairman in February 2007. The two men remaining pressed on with their takeover as Bond’s men toiled for the rest of the year, but choppy waters were on the horizon.