

BARNSLEY FC

MATCH

OF MY LIFE

DAVID KUZIO



G.K. BECKETT

SUPPORTING SPORT IN THE COMMUNITY

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ARJAN DE ZEEUW



Arjan de Zeeuw

CENTRAL DEFENDER 1995–99

BORN: 16 April 1970, Castricum, Netherlands

HEIGHT: 6ft 2in

WEIGHT: 12st 12lb

SIGNED: 1995 from Telstar

DEBUT: 4 November 1995 vs Wolverhampton Wanderers

LAST GAME: 9 May 1999 vs Swindon Town

BARNSELY CAREER: 164 appearances, 7 goals

LEFT: 1999 to join Wigan Athletic

PLAYING CAREER: Stormvogels, Vitesse 22, Telstar (1992–95), Barnsley (1995–99), Wigan Athletic (1999–2002), Portsmouth (2002–05), Wigan Athletic (2005–07), Coventry City (2007–08).

Arjan de Zeeuw arrived in English football as basically an unknown. You would have found it very difficult to find one fan who knew who this player was – unless he had some amazing stats on *Football Manager*. But by the end of his football career, I think every fan in England knew who Arjan de Zeeuw was.

The giant central defender was a gentleman on and off the field and played the game in the right spirit and that instantly made him a hero in the eyes of Barnsley supporters. Even to this day, not one Barnsley fan has a bad word to say about the talented Dutchman.

In his own admission, he gave 100 per cent every time he pulled on the red shirt and he fully believes that's what made him a fans' favourite. In his debut match he managed to keep the lethal Steve Bull quiet, which was never a mean feat, and he went on to play 164 times for the Tykes while chipping in with seven goals.

He was at the heart of the Barnsley defence that gained promotion to the Premier League for the 1997/98 season and was fully respected by his opponents in that campaign. The Reds were unfortunately relegated at the end of the season and have yet to return to the top flight. After having a taste of the big time, de Zeeuw wanted more and he knew if he was to ever play in the top division again he would unfortunately have to leave Barnsley. He did so in 1999, but he still holds legendary status in the town.

Liverpool 0 v Barnsley 1

Premier League

Saturday 22 November 1997

Anfield, Liverpool

Attendance 41,011

David James	Lars Leese
Stig Inge Bjernebye	Adi Moses
(Sub, Danny Murphy)	Arjan de Zeeuw
Bjorn Kvarme	Peter Markstedt
Dominic Matteo	Darren Barnard
Jamie Redknapp	Nicky Eaden
Steve McManaman	Neil Redfearn
Patrik Berger	Eric Tinkler
Jason McAteer	Martin Bullock
Oyvind Leonhardsen	Ashley Ward
Karl-Heinz Riedle	(Sub, John Hendrie)
Michael Owen	Andy Liddell
	(Sub, Matty Appleby)

Ward 35

Referee: Jeff Winter

Arjan de Zeeuw admits there were a number of stand-out games during his three-and-a-half-year stay at Oakwell, but the one that seemed to mean a great deal to him was the one he has chosen here – the surprise 1-0 away win against Liverpool at Anfield during their one and only season in the Premier League.

Barnsley were always expected to struggle in the Premier League because of their lack of finances and basically that no big-name player knew where Barnsley was. The Tykes were written off before a ball was even kicked in that season, so when they were scheduled to go to Anfield in November no one gave them a hope in getting a result.

The players and manager Danny Wilson had other ideas. In this chapter, de Zeeuw explains a change of character from the manager gave them the belief to do the impossible at one of the most famous grounds in the world.

De Zeeuw also talks about how he joined the club and thought he had made a massive mistake as he made his way from the airport to South Yorkshire in the driving rain. He also regrettably speaks about what he thought was a lack of ambition from the club in regards to staying in and getting back to the Premier League, which in the end saw him leave the club.

De Zeeuw is obviously proud of his time at Barnsley and always checks their score each week. The Dutchman has probably made a few mistakes in his life but he insists that joining Barnsley certainly wasn't one of them.

THERE WERE plenty of games that were memorable during my time at Barnsley. The promotion match to the Premier League was special because of all the emotions that got released. But the one that stands out the most for me in my time there was Liverpool away during the Premier League season.

Before the game, it was one of those earmarked as a must-win game for us because of the position we were in in the league. Other teams were looking at that fixture of us going to Anfield and basically saying ‘you are definitely not going to get a result there’.

We had lots of personnel problems; we had Lars Leese making his first appearance for us, Peter Markstedt was there and it was the first time we had played together at the back. Looking at that you think, ‘Oh god, we are going to Anfield with Michael Owen up front, Karl-Heinz Riedle up front,’ and they were doing really well.

We went there and nobody expected us to get any kind of result and Danny Wilson took us out the night before to try and break the routine because he felt he had to do something. Instead of a normal meeting, he called us all downstairs in the hotel and put us on a coach and drove us to the nearest pub. We all got out and had a couple of pints. He said we could all have two maximum but he’d be paying for them. We had a laugh that night and a couple of drinks. Some players played pool, some played darts and we all just relaxed and forgot about everything.

We got to the game the next day and he went through all his tactics of course, just as he normally would, but he told us to enjoy the game and make the best of it. We certainly did that, I think we had one or two attacks the whole game and scored from one of them – which was a great goal by the way from a good position.

We just spent most of the game defending, but we defended so well and the heart we showed as a team was fantastic. We beat them 1-0 away from home and everyone took notice of little Barnsley saying 'what the hell'. So it was amazing, it was just one of them days. When you needed a block it was there, when you needed to get a toe in, you got it in. Just everything Liverpool threw at us that day got stopped. Lars had a great game, Peter Markstedt, who I had never partnered before, was awesome.

At that time, I actually thought, you know we could survive this, we could actually stay in the Premier League. I'm afraid we didn't actually stay up in the end, but at that moment in time there was so much team spirit I actually really thought we had a good chance of staying in the league. Another thing I remember so vividly about that game was the whole Kop was silent, all you could hear was Barnsley fans cheering and that certainly wasn't expected before we kicked off.

That year in the Premier League was amazing because it was also my first experience of the Premier League. Turning out at home against Chelsea, standing in the tunnel with Gianfranco Zola next to me was so surreal. I'm stood there thinking 'this is great'. Playing against that calibre of player made me aware for the remainder of my career, I started to notice how the bigger teams not only had more players in their squad, they had fitter players. We could challenge most of them for maybe an hour or so, but after that we were gone.

The level of fitness and determination was a lot higher than ours. That is just how it is, as a newcomer to the Premier League it was a real wake-up call for me personally. I was then determined to train harder and be stronger, work harder in the gym afterwards and things like that. It helped me actually become a better player.

The season itself was a great experience. It was disappointing to go down but then again I was a little bit worried at the start of the season. The money we received for gaining promotion to the Premier League we spent a large part of on Georgi Hristov. No disrespect to Georgi you know, but he got injured at the start of his Barnsley career, so we didn't get a lot of joy from him as a player even though you could see he was a very good player. He just hardly ever played for us which was a shame, and the rest of the money was spent on the stadium.

I can't blame the chairman or people involved in the club, but it just made it tough for us because we didn't have a big squad. We had a decent first 11 and then that's when it got really tough. Again no disrespect to the players we had but we had a lot of youngsters and a lot of inexperienced players so we could have done with a few more bodies to strengthen the team, I thought. It wasn't to be but I still had a fantastic season, a great experience and it definitely made me aware that I wanted to play more in the Premier League.

Regarding my move to Barnsley, I can honestly say I had never heard of them. I was approached by an agent somewhere around October or November in 1995 and he said he had a club over in England who were interested in signing me, and did I fancy it? I actually didn't even know the agent, so I didn't have a clue what to expect. He didn't want to tell me the name of the club, he wanted to keep it hush hush in the beginning.

So I spoke to the agent in a hotel in Amsterdam the day after and we had a chat. I think they liked what they heard and I was quite keen on playing in England and I was interested to see what would come out of this. The next day I got a phone call saying they were ready to offer me a deal.

I was really interested, but I said, 'I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me the name of the club I would be joining

and what level they play at.' I was told they played in the First Division, the Championship as it is known now, and then I was told the club was Barnsley, which didn't help me at all because I still didn't have a clue who they were. Then I started to investigate.

I've got to be honest, when I first got to Barnsley I wasn't sure at all. I got picked up by Eric Winstanley and was with my then father-in-law. We were both quite tall people and we were squashed in Eric's sports car. We went from there through the Moors in the pouring rain and arrived at Ardsley House. I thought, 'Jesus, where have I ended up,' everything was dark and it was raining and basically it just looked awful. But the next morning when I woke up, the sun was shining and I could see the stadium on the hill top and I thought who knows, it might be a good adventure and it turned out to be a great adventure to be fair. I loved it.

You know, inside it was probably the best club for me to start with in England. There were a lot of passionate people who appreciated the working men's mentality which I think I had as a player. They were all really supportive and kind towards newcomers and I really enjoyed it. I got the appreciation from the fans just by trying 100 per cent and some games that came out better than others, but in general the least I can do is give 100 per cent and you could tell that even if you didn't have such a great game.

I remember my first game at home to Wolverhampton Wanderers. It was my debut game against Steve Bull, who was then the top goalscorer in the division. I played quite well and stopped Bull from getting on the scoresheet, plus we won. So I made a good first impression among the Barnsley fans and everyone really appreciated me.

Then, the next game away at Grimsby Town I scored an own goal and instead of slaughtering me, because some players did

get slaughtered for mistakes, they all just went, ‘Oh it happens, it doesn’t matter.’ I was like, okay, this is good, they can see that I tried my best. Nobody wants to score an own goal but these things happen. Generally people who try to stop goals going in end up sticking their own foot on it. That is part and parcel of football.

It was a weird change for me to leave Barnsley and go to Wigan Athletic, who were like a full division below Barnsley. The chairman, Dave Whelan, and his plans, along with the manager John Benson, sold the club to me and I could see the ambition they had and thought it could be a good club for me to be a part of. It didn’t turn out to be a bad choice, even though it took me a while to get in the Premier League with them.

It was a difficult decision to leave in a way, because I really enjoyed my time at Barnsley. But what I didn’t like was that I had been there for my first season, then the season in the Premier League which was fantastic, just awesome, and then John Hendrie took over and we just had one of those seasons. People still expected a lot but we didn’t really invest in the team, we had a very inexperienced manager and it was one of those seasons that just made you disappointed in yourselves and everything.

For me, it was a good time to change the scenery. I loved it at Barnsley, but it was just a good time to change clubs and get a new boost of energy. I appreciated Barnsley as a club, but at that moment in time with that kind of season behind you, you missed the feeling of ambition within the club. I’m sure they had it, but I didn’t feel it at the time, partially because of the season we had just had.

Sometimes it’s good to change and I’ve noticed that during my time as a player. I’ve changed clubs a couple of times and it always gives you a boost when you arrive at a new club with

new players and a new manager. It gives you more energy and in a way makes you try a little bit harder. I always tried as hard as I could, but at a new club you always find that little bit extra. I was in the Second Division with Wigan, although it wasn't what I wanted in playing terms because I wanted to go as high as I could in the Premier League, but I still really enjoyed those first three years with Wigan. I could feel the club had the ambition. It didn't come off but it was definitely there.

This book is a great idea because I would love to read the tales from other Barnsley players. It's one of those things; every weekend or midweek I check out the football scores and the first thing I always do is check out how Barnsley did, how Wigan did and how Portsmouth did. That never leaves you.