

JAMIE KEMBLE

# BLUEBIRD HEAVEN

## CARDIFF CITY'S

TEN YEARS OF UPS AND DOWNS  
AND A RETURN TO THE  
PROMISED LAND



# BLUEBIRD HEAVEN

---

**CARDIFF CITY'S**  
TEN YEARS OF UPS AND DOWNS  
AND A RETURN TO THE PROMISED LAND

J A M I E   K E M B L E



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Foreword . . . . .	9
The start of something new . . . . .	11
Bluebirds flying high . . . . .	15
Back to reality . . . . .	26
Farewell Ninian Park – the end of an era . . . . .	32
It's the hope that kills you . . . . .	36
Trouble at the bridge . . . . .	45
If at first you don't succeed . . . . .	53
Dave Jones Departs . . . . .	62
Out with the old . . . . .	69
Another walk down Wembley Way . . . . .	74
The rebrand . . . . .	87
The Blues Reds are going up . . . . .	98
'We've finally made it' . . . . .	108
It wasn't supposed to be this way . . . . .	113
The end of Malky Mackay . . . . .	127
The fall from grace . . . . .	135
Back to blue . . . . .	146
'We're not shopping in Harrods anymore' . . . . .	157
Change of plan . . . . .	164
A close shave . . . . .	172
Here's to you, Peter Whittingham . . . . .	186
'Oh Kev McNaughton, you are the love of my life' . . . . .	190
The Bluebirds soar again . . . . .	193
'Told you we'd be back' . . . . .	229
The Warnock way . . . . .	236
What the future holds . . . . .	244
Bibliography . . . . .	250

# **The start of something new**

WE BEGIN our journey a decade ago, as the light finally begins to shine on the turbulent yet seldom dull life of Cardiff City following years of mediocrity and disappointment in the lower leagues. It's the Bluebirds' fifth season in the Championship following a stunning hometown play-off final win at the Millennium Stadium in 2003. Andy Campbell's extra-time winner may have felt like a giant springboard for the club at the time, but four difficult mid-table-at-best seasons have already dampened any hopes of putting together a surge through the English football pyramid.

However, this season would be the next springboard for Cardiff City and an ambitious manager in Dave Jones would discover that his work at the club could inspire a whole city to rediscover the optimism and ambition which had deserted them once again following dormant seasons in the second tier. It's not as if Cardiff fans were standing up and protesting about the lack of success in the Championship – there was no need – this was almost a treat given the years in the lower divisions that had preceded, and a decent season prior to the upcoming 2007/08 campaign kept supporters feeling content.

The 2006/07 season started incredibly, with Cardiff winning nine of their first 12 and striker Michael Chopra becoming the name on everyone's lips. But a wretched December would send hopes crashing, not for the first time in this tale, and another mid-table finish ensued. That opening few months was important, though, because you could say it whet Dave Jones's appetite.

The former Wolves boss is heading into his third season in charge for the 2007/08 campaign, and having been successful in the past with Wolves and Southampton, one can only imagine how difficult it must have been to rock up in the Welsh capital in the falling-down stadium that was Ninian Park and then being instructed to work on, well I would say a budget, but I'm not sure there was one. Still, undeterred, that small vision of success born of the shrewd signing of Chopra the previous season perhaps made him realise that he could achieve more with the club than many realised, even without a budget to support his vision.

Chopra enjoyed a good pre-season after scoring 22 league goals during the campaign before, but he would say goodbye to Cardiff for now as he returned to the north-east to sign for Sunderland for a whopping £5m – a big figure in those days, believe it or not, especially for a player leaving a Championship club.

Chopra supported Newcastle United as a boy and even graduated from the Magpies' academy. But with newly promoted rivals Sunderland, he was given another crack at the Premier League and as an ambitious young striker, it's not something he, nor Cardiff – who desperately needed the money – were about to turn down.

Why did Cardiff need the money? Well the Bluebirds rarely enjoyed the financial limelight following years in the lower leagues, but when the club appointed former Leeds United chairman Peter Ridsdale following Sam Hammam's stepping down, the club was reportedly £35m in debt and losing a further £10m each year; troubled waters indeed. Not least as Hammam-owned Langston, a major financial backer of the club, announced just after the first game that they would begin legal proceedings against the club over a £30m loan that hadn't been repaid.

We'll come back to the finances, but the short story was that Jones didn't have a pot to pee in as far as his budget for the 2007/08 season was concerned. The sale of Chopra helped things, because he could now reinvest some of that money, especially as the Langston court news hadn't arisen by the time he began scouring the market in pre-season.

And this is where Jones thrived: his decision making in the transfer market often left others in admiration and very few could

understand how on earth he convinced players to sign for a club like Cardiff, who were seemingly going nowhere.

That confusion was to be even greater when former superstars of the game began to rain down on Ninian Park during pre-season in 2007/08. Former Liverpool striker Robbie Fowler joined the Bluebirds on a free transfer in July and the signing of the famed English goalscorer immediately gave the whole of the city a lift as media attention doubled, while the season-ticket sales must have, too.

And if that shock deal wasn't enough, former Chelsea star Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink signed up in the August on another free and suddenly Cardiff possessed strikers who shared a mind-blowing 383 league goals between them from throughout their career. Yes, they were in their later years, but do you think the fans, who had grown used to seeing bottom-half Championship and League 1 players, with the exception of Chopra, really cared about their creaky knees? Absolutely not!

There was still magic in those old boots and the excitement around Ninian Park ahead of the season was something many hadn't experienced for years. It was fantastic to see the spotlight being shone on the club once again. Even former Manchester City winger Trevor Sinclair was added to the list of signings, and the Bluebirds' faithful began to lick their lips once more. There was an incredible air of excitement around the club and for the first time in a long while, there was a genuine feeling that something was lifting off, that City was going somewhere.

Yes, there were whispers of promotion during the good start to the previous season, and yes, there was excitement, but it didn't feel all that sustainable, and fans quickly saw first-hand that it wasn't. Why was this different? It's only signing a few high-profile players after all, isn't it? Well not quite, as the club had already announced the building of a brand-new stadium by this point, just across the road on the old Leckwith athletics ground, and that signified the building of the future of Cardiff City in many ways. In 2017 it doesn't feel like that big of a thing, perhaps because almost every Championship and Premier League club has a stadium they can be proud of.

The stadiums built in the last 25 years, or radically improved in that time frame, largely outnumber the old grounds like Brentford's Griffin Park, for example, but back in 2007, a new stadium was huge, especially for Cardiff, whose finances were all over the shop.

City fans loved Ninian Park like you wouldn't believe, it simply can't be put into words how special the atmosphere was at that old cathedral, but even back in 2007, it was widely recognised that if Cardiff wanted to keep up with their rivals they had to dream a little bigger, and a new stadium would symbolise that. While no one could quite understand how the stadium was being paid for at the time, the finances behind the new signings were a little easier to understand.

Dave Jones received £5m for his star striker during the pre-season and he opted not to spend a penny of it on transfer fees for the whole of the upcoming campaign. Instead, it would be put into wages to sign experienced players who had larger wages compared to the players already at the club.

It was bold and injuries were a concern, especially for Fowler and Sinclair, two players who had spent their fair share of time in the treatment room, but Jones had a tendency to take these risks and to be fair to him, when they backfired, he also dealt with it very well. Not everyone appreciated Jones, but his ambition for the club to achieve a little more than mid-table obscurity would set the tone for a football club and indeed a city whose passion wasn't matched by their local club's achievements on the football field.

# Bluebirds flying high

IN TRUE Cardiff City fashion, the optimism surrounding the league season died out as quickly as it had grown. Two wins in the opening nine games already gave Cardiff a lot to do and form didn't get a lot better. The Bluebirds were painfully inconsistent; in fact, they didn't put successive wins together until December, and that tells a tale in itself. So it didn't go to plan in the league, not as Dave Jones, who had assembled an mini army of star veterans, had hoped.

But a silver lining was cast Cardiff's way in the form of the FA Cup. The competition the Bluebirds won in 1927 – those four numbers are probably the combination to most supporters' credit cards to this day too. They're still immensely proud of winning the famous competition, even though 99 per cent of them weren't alive to see it. It's a competition special to every football fan in the English leagues, or at least it should be. It provides, at the very least, a welcome distraction to league football. A competition where anything can happen and indeed, anything does happen, as City would find out.

Saturday 5 January is where it all started, in the FA Cup third round with a trip to Chasetown, who were playing in the eighth tier of English football at the time, and some occasion it was. The Bluebirds ran out 3-1 winners with young Aaron Ramsey scoring his first senior goal in front of just under 2,500 spectators. An expected result, but it was much more than that, with Cardiff City fans forging a friendship with their lower league opponents which would continue for many years to come and that, perhaps, is the true magic of the FA Cup.



With the third round out of the way, City received another favourable draw for the fourth – they were pitched against League 2 club Hereford United. A short trip across the border to a side who would end the season with promotion to League 1, but who would end this day with defeat to their Championship superiors. It finished 2-1 and produced a rare goal for Kevin McNaughton, a club legend defender who would only ever score two City goals, and this fine long-distance strike was the most memorable.

However, the main story was that Cardiff were in the hat again, this time for the fifth round, and belief started to take over when fellow Championship club Wolves came out of the hat for a clash at Ninian Park. The draw was kind and Cardiff didn't waste their opportunity. Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink curled in an iconic strike to put them ahead and Peter Whittingham made sure his team progressed once more. Very quickly, the Bluebirds found themselves in the quarter-final.

The cup run seemed to take hold so quickly at the time, it was rather strange. Former Bluebirds midfielder Gavin Rae recalls, 'We got off to a terrible start away to Chasetown when Kev [McNaughton] scored an own goal – then Whitts [Whittingham] and Rambo [Ramsey] got us through. Then it just sort of snowballed and we hit good form in the cup games. We got a good draw with Barnsley having put out Liverpool and Chelsea, then we got them out. It worked out well.'

The draw certainly helped, of course, but the belief was high among supporters after the win over Wolves. As a football fan, that sense of something special arrives and it's difficult to describe or indeed shake off. Sometimes you just know – and the City faithful seemed to know. They were right, too, as they travelled in their thousands to Premier League Middlesbrough in anticipation of securing a spot at Wembley.

The new Wembley stadium saw a change in format in the FA Cup and this was the first season that it would come into force. Semi-finals were now going to be played at the final venue, unlike previous years when the likes of Hillsborough or Villa Park hosted the penultimate stages. The decision from the FA sparked lots of opposition, but you wouldn't have found many complaints in South Wales.

The change meant the Bluebirds were just one win away from an appearance at the shiny new Wembley, completed less than a year earlier, and they believed they could do it, even against top-flight opposition managed by Gareth Southgate, who would become England boss a decade later.

There were over 32,000 in attendance to see this one but it was the away fans who were sent into pandemonium instead of the expectant Teessiders. Whittingham lit up the Riverside by tiptoeing his way through a crowd of bodies in the box before curling a fine strike into the top corner of the red-and-white striped net. And it got even better when defender Roger Johnson found the net with a diving header to all but seal Cardiff's place in the national stadium.

It was a historic win, and it felt like one throughout South Wales. Middlesbrough were a solid Premier League team at the time and they had won the League Cup in 2004. They had a nice new ground, it was full, and they felt like a massive club compared to Cardiff, and yet, still, Dave Jones and his men seemed to make relatively easy work of them in their now symbolic black kit. This was a day that would become etched in the memory of City fans, a giantkilling of sorts, but it was the special atmosphere created by thousands of fans who had made the mammoth trek to Teesside to back their team. The players celebrated on the pitch and the fans in the stand followed suit. 'We're going to Wembley', the flags and T-shirts read, and that, in itself, would take some getting over. This was a miracle.

The black kit became something of a lucky charm, just like the black cat, Trixie, during the Bluebirds' FA Cup win in 1927. The team wore black at Boro despite being able to wear blue, and it was quickly adopted as the lucky kit. They even wore it in the semi-final but before that even came around, while fans were jumping up and down in the away end at the Riverside, those at home were already plotting their travels to Wembley and pondering how they could get their hands on a precious ticket.

Cardiff received another favourable draw for the last four in the form of fellow Championship club Barnsley, although the Tykes had managed to beat Liverpool and Chelsea on their route to the semi and they too were pleased to avoid Premier League club Portsmouth and Championship leaders West Brom in the penultimate stage.

Having said that, they were still up against it. Barnsley were battling relegation and Cardiff were still fancying themselves for a late run towards the play-offs. But the FA Cup was now the very clear objective for both teams who sensed they possessed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, just like the supporters did, and that's what created such a huge clamour for tickets in South Wales.

People who hadn't even been to a game all season were in the market, sensing their chance to get to Wembley and rivalling others, who had supported the club for so long, and that's just the way it is in such games. Season ticket holders got theirs but that left many more without. Season ticket holders weren't quite so common back then. Cardiff certainly didn't have the 14,000 or so they have in the modern day, and walk-ups or ticket collections were relied upon more to bump up attendances. So for those without season tickets, it was a case of attending a midweek league game against Hull City. You had to possess a ticket stub from that night to be in with a chance and predictably there was a spike in the attendance as more than 17,000 turned up to see a 1-0 win thanks to Steve McPhail's stunning strike from outside the box.

However, many actually missed the goal. The demand for tickets was unprecedented for a midweek game and many were left queuing outside to collect their tickets while listening to the roar from inside the ground – it was the only goal of the game, too! But it wasn't about the game on this occasion, just like it wasn't really about the league competition for Cardiff anymore. It was about the FA Cup run for the players, the fans and probably even the manager.

The excitement surrounding the semi-final was huge in South Wales and it was intensified because not only did the club take around 33,000 fans to London, but each one of them believed that they would be returning for the final in a month's time. That belief remained and again it was helped by the draw. The Bluebirds' faithful weren't over confident, as Barnsley had earned even more credit for getting to this stage after their tricky run of ties while still managing to pull through. But Cardiff were the better team on paper, despite drawing 1-1 with Barnsley in the league.

And so it proved to be. There were 82,752 in attendance to watch the all-Championship FA Cup semi-final and to appreciate

the magic of the FA Cup, which could be strongly felt with the draw guaranteeing at least one second-tier team in the final. In fact, three of the four semi-finalists were from the Championship. That's not something you see often.

Wembley was painted blue, with supporters from South Wales outweighing those from South Yorkshire, and it took just nine minutes for the Welsh side to send their fans wild. A trademark long throw into the box from Tony Capaldi found its way to Joe Ledley, and the born-and-bred Cardiff boy found the top corner with a stunning volley, despite having to lift his leg as high as his head to make contact, and he drifted off towards the corner doing his trademark celebration with his palms pointing simultaneously out to his side. A special moment for all connected with Cardiff City, and one that will go down in folklore, for sure. A strange occurrence, too. In 2008, Cardiff hadn't won the FA Cup for 81 years, and the goal arrived with 81 minutes remaining. Each one of those minutes passed by slowly, too.

The Bluebirds controlled things well, with the exception of the 67th minute. Kayode Odejayi was sent clean through and the stadium went silent. Everyone present, even the Barnsley fans, couldn't bear to even squeak as they watched on in expectation of a goal. Even Cardiff's supporters were resigned to an equaliser as their defenders hopelessly chased back. Perhaps it was the pressure, or even the lucky black kit, but somehow, the striker slotted it wide and on to the side-netting. A cruel blow for Barnsley, who knew there and then that they had missed their big chance and that it wasn't going to be their day. By contrast, Cardiff, at that moment, probably knew luck was on their side and it became a day of joy, one of celebration.

There's a fantastic clip of a section of Cardiff fans in Wembley all doing the famous 'Ayatollah', smiling, in celebratory mood as a 'do the Ayatollah everyone' chant echoed around the impressive stadium. This was City's moment in the limelight after years of struggle and everyone wanted to make the most of it. The celebrations continued until the final whistle and way beyond. The players celebrated on the pitch afterwards, waving flags. Match-winner Ledley raced around the pitch with a Welsh flag draped over his shoulders and

the players created a special image, sliding towards the supporters while linking hands. It was iconic and it was a moment the city and the football club deserved. One they knew they would treasure forever, long after the final, whatever happened there, and long after it all died down. But it wasn't going to die down yet.

The Bluebirds had upset the odds to reach the final, but it wasn't all by chance or by luck. They possessed this tremendous team spirit and anyone in football will tell you that having a good dressing room is half or even two thirds of the battle. Gavin Rae says of that special team spirit and how it helped the Bluebirds to achieve something special, 'We had a great team atmosphere in that season, the cup run certainly helped that too. The camaraderie and characters we had made for a great team spirit and I loved that season, my first outside Scotland.'

Another player who was a huge part of the dressing room was striker Steven Thompson, whose iconic words ahead of the final are now brandished in the club shop. The Scotsman played a big part in the camaraderie around the club and he also remembers a special atmosphere among the players during the cup run. He reveals, 'The changing room was brilliant that year. We had big characters and superstar players like Robbie Fowler, Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink and Trevor Sinclair. It was almost surreal. We all enjoyed a night out as well so we became good friends. I remember coming back from Wembley after the semi and we stopped the bus to get a carry out, and after a few beers, Roger Johnson decided to see if he could fit in the overhead luggage on the bus. He managed it as he's so skinny, but then was stuck!'

Back to the football, with another clamour for tickets ensuing, and this time it was even more difficult for supporters. The task this time was to buy a season ticket. That saw hundreds and even thousands of fans, even just neutrals, buying them to get their hands on a final ticket, but many couldn't afford the luxury. These weren't easy times financially around Wales and over £300 was a lot of money to lay out.

Thousands of Cardiff supporters were left without tickets and it left a bitterness in their mouth with so many neutrals seizing the opportunity through having the luxury of being able to buy a

season ticket. Still, some were lucky enough to get their hands on some through other avenues. There was a general sale window but tickets flew off the shelf quicker than milk on a snow day in the UK. Everyone from South Wales and around the country knew this was probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to watch Cardiff City at Wembley in the FA Cup Final and that it was something special. It hadn't happened since 1927, and that tells you that you're not likely to see it again for as long as you'll live. This was a Championship team with an average attendance of 13,900 reaching the final of a country-wide competition which includes the likes of Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea, and you had to see it to believe it.

Portsmouth were the opponents, the second Premier League club Cardiff would meet during their run, and they would provide a stern test, too. They had secured a top-eight finish under Harry Redknapp, at his peak, and it was the side many associate him directly with to this day. The likes of Hermann Hreidarsson, David James, Lassana Diarra, Glen Johnson, David Nugent, Sulley Muntari, Niko Kranjcar, Sol Campbell, Pedro Mendes and Nwankwo Kanu. England international Jermain Defoe had signed during the season, too, but Cardiff thanked their lucky stars that he was cup-tied.

Nevertheless, this was going to be a big test for the Bluebirds, who had just finished mid-table in the Championship following a disappointing league season, but it didn't dampen their spirit. That's what the FA Cup is all about, after all, the underdog believing in themselves, and in this case, they had reason to. They had got to the final just as Portsmouth had and in 90 minutes in a one-off game, anything can happen.

The supporters, even had two songs for the final. One was by Cardiff fan and singer James Fox, who wrote a catchy 'Bluebirds Flying High' track. And there was a much lighter effort from fans called 'Do the Ayatollah', which took the comedy approach. Though, they were both fine efforts in their own respects and it just encapsulated the excitement surrounding the club at the time. Even striker Steven Thompson had a go with his guitar during the player awards two weeks before the final.

The spotlight was firmly on once again and Dave Jones probably didn't enjoy that as much as other managers would. He'd had a hard

time in the past with journalists and he wasn't too kind to them; he wasn't even a fan of the local media in South Wales. He liked to stay out of the public eye and he liked his players to do the same, but his relaxed approach with his players would catch up with him later on.

When the players arrived at their hotel in London, the approach they took to avoid the media was clear. Each one stepped off the bus on a phone call, or pretending to be on one, which is a standard trick in trying to avoid being asked questions. Fans got their opportunity to meet the players but while the television cameras filmed their arrival, it was a case of avoiding conversation with them at all costs for the team. Their attention had to be on the game, and there was no room for distractions. Supporters, funnily enough, took the same approach – no distractions. Work didn't matter, nothing mattered but the cup final in the lead-up to it and that, beyond anything, encapsulates what the FA Cup is all about. It may be lost on big clubs, it may become just another trophy, but not for others and certainly not for Cardiff City in 2008.

Wembley was a sea of blue, mixed with the free black and yellow flags given to supporters on 17 May 2008. You had to see it to believe it as Cardiff City and Portsmouth filled the stands with a record crowd for the new stadium of 89,874, which remains at the time of writing in 2018 the highest attendance for a football match there.

Cardiff volunteered to play in their 'lucky' black, allowing Portsmouth to play in their traditional blue, but the majority of the Welsh supporters wore the traditional colours too, so it made for an unbelievable sight. It was quite the occasion and many from South Wales were reduced to tears as the Welsh national anthem sounded around Wembley. Welsh singer Katherine Jenkins sung it, battling with the yet-to-be-perfected Wembley PA system, and she also did a duet of the traditional FA Cup song 'Abide With Me' with Lesley Garrett, who had sung the English national anthem.

It was a proud moment for Cardiff City, a sight they thought they'd never see, and there was a real sense of that inside the stadium. Whether Cardiff, who hadn't won it since 1927, or Portsmouth, who hadn't won it since 1939, went home with the trophy, no one could deprive either side of the pride they felt in their team during the moments leading up to kick-off. Hearing 'Abide With Me', which was

introduced for the first time the year Cardiff won the competition, and then the Welsh anthem, which invoked that sense of pride in being Welsh, of being a people who are always willing to upset the odds, to punch above their weight, was emotional.

The game itself wasn't one for the neutrals; an incredibly tight affair which was ultimately decided by a goal from veteran striker Nwanku Kanu eight minutes before half-time. Cardiff keeper Peter Enckelman parried a low cross into the Nigerian's path and he made no mistake.

There was some controversy when Glenn Loovens was denied a goal having found the net. The ball hit his armpit and a handball decision was given. It was one you could argue either way but Cardiff fans, of course, felt a little hard done by. Portsmouth ground out the win and the afternoon ended in disappointment for Cardiff, who had come so close to making history, but perhaps they had anyway. They missed out on the £1m prize money, they missed out on European qualification but beyond all that, the supporters were still immensely proud of their team and it was clear even after the defeat that the feeling of pride remained.

Lifelong Bluebirds fan Kevin Ellis says, 'Personally I enjoyed the semi-final more as it was my first time at the new Wembley having previously visited the grand old ground for an England v Wales game in the late '70s in what was known as the Home Nations tournament. What stood out for me in the final was the tremendous party atmosphere generated by both sets of fans, and in particular the colours, painted faces, banners, flags, hats and scarves and of course the walk down Wembley Way.

'It was very surreal seeing the team you've supported since 1970 playing in the FA Cup Final when one remembers all the great teams to have graced these occasions. Thoughts went back to the old Fourth and Third Division days when we struggled and our attendances were very poor, but you only truly appreciate the good times when you have experienced the bad. It was something that the true fans of the clubs involved will never forget and it was a memorable day.'

It was a missed opportunity and you always feel that after losing in the final, but this team had no right to be in a final with



Portsmouth. Not given the size of the club, the size of the budget or the level of the team. However, they had proved everyone wrong to become the talking point of the nation. It would put City back on the map and whet the appetite for more success.

Not that supporters were able to see that amid the depths of disappointment felt after the final and among the raw emotions you feel after such a setback. Striker Steven Thompson reflects on the final after coming on as a substitute. He adds, 'I still can't believe I've played in an FA Cup Final. We had belief after the Middlesbrough game and got a decent draw in the semi. I was convinced we'd win the final but it wasn't to be. The Pompey team, on paper, was frightening. It's definitely one of the best moments of my career and something I'm proud to have been part of.'

Gavin Rae also played in the final and, similarly, he reflects on the occasion with nothing but pride. He says, 'The final itself was a massive occasion and probably only one of a handful of games that I got a little nervous about before the game. Just understanding the magnitude of it really. It was awesome to play at Wembley in the semi and final of course. I had all my family down and the reception afterwards was a good night – although a little bitter-sweet as we never managed to win the cup. But for my family to be mixing it with Jimmy Floyd and Robbie Fowler etc. – They are good memories.'

The Bluebirds' faithful have been hardened by failure, they are used to disappointment like so many other football fans of teams outside the top four in the Premier League, and it would serve them well on this day as well as days to come in the next few years.

After the final, Dave Jones revealed his disappointment: 'You've got to let us wallow in our self-pity. I've just lost a cup final. Being a Championship club doesn't soften the blow. I wanted to win.'

That probably summed up the feeling among fans, too. Yes, Cardiff were the underdogs, but they also believed they could do it and how close they pushed Portsmouth shows you that on another day, they might have. But there was to be no FA Cup gold, and that would create regret given the opportunity of being in the final, although progress had to be made from this pivotal moment in time.

Youngster Aaron Ramsey signified that, in many ways. His presence suggested that there was a future beyond the cup final and after that initial feeling of disappointment, it was quickly realised by those in the club, as well as the fans, that this achievement of reaching the final had to be built upon. Going backwards from here simply wasn't an option.