

A man with light brown, wavy hair, wearing a light blue suit jacket, a white collared shirt, and a red and white striped tie. He is shown from the chest up, turned slightly to his right, with his mouth wide open as if shouting or speaking passionately. The background is a dark, textured grey.

ALAN
DURBAN'S
MISSION
IMPOSSIBLE

GIVE US

TOMORROW

NOW

DAVID
SNOWDON

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ALAN DURBAN'S
MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

DAVID SNOWDON



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Flashback: Some Like It Hot

It was the summer of 1981, and Alan Durban was enjoying a tour of Barbados with his Stoke City squad, the trip a reward for defying expectations and finishing in the top half of the First Division the previous season. Durban, however, was not a man to rest on past laurels. Rather than luxuriating in a glow of satisfaction at exceeding the modest demands of a chairman and board of directors with whom he enjoyed a first-class working relationship, this was one manager contemplating a fresh challenge.

The mission, should he choose to accept it, was to take charge at Sunderland; to relinquish the relative comfort of working at a club not harbouring unrealistic expectation levels and, in exchange, thrust himself into the white heat of a north-east football hotbed where expectation and realism rarely sauntered along hand-in-hand.

Sunderland had narrowly escaped relegation on the last day of the season with an unlikely 1-0 win at a Liverpool side preoccupied

with preparations for an upcoming European Cup final against Real Madrid. Mick Docherty had been the caretaker at the helm at Anfield after Ken Knighton, the man who had guided the Roker Park team back into the First Division in 1980, was dismissed with only four matches remaining.

Knighton had not enjoyed a good working relationship with recently elected chairman Tom Cowie, and eventually the millionaire local businessman oversaw the manager's sacking. Nevertheless, a dismissal at such a pivotal point in the fixture list had been surprising. The team had not dropped into the bottom three but, after another disappointing away defeat (ironically at Durban's Stoke), Knighton was not given the opportunity to preserve the team's top-tier status. The seemingly illogical timing of the sacking would become a recurring feature at the club in future years. As far as Durban's own decision-making was concerned, there was one predominant feature he was abundantly aware of; the passionate intensity of feeling in the Sunderland area and glare of attention that would be focussed on his efforts to revive the fortunes of a club that had often been somewhat complacently labelled as 'sleeping giants' while they yo-yoed between First and Second Divisions.

The challenge was appealing to such a natural sporting competitor as Durban, a man who had been on the county cricket club books at Glamorgan, Derbyshire and Shropshire, as well as playing tennis for Shropshire and being a low-handicap golfer – his energy also allowed him to cram in games of squash.

The Welshman had started his playing career at Cardiff City before making almost 350 appearances for Derby County, scoring 91 goals, starting as an inside-forward before reverting to midfield. At international level, he won 27 caps for Wales between 1966 and 1972 (captaining the team to boot). He finished his playing career at Shrewsbury Town and this would be the club where he would

serve his managerial apprenticeship, leading them to promotion, before graduating to take charge at Second Division Stoke City.

Early in 1978, Stoke had been dumped out of the FA Cup by Blyth Spartans and had conspicuously failed to mount a promotion challenge. They were stagnating, but Durban arrived and supplied the required discipline and tactical shrewdness. He also brought a keen eye for spotting talent, and gave a clutch of young prospects the opportunity to establish themselves. Under his three-year tenure, Paul Bracewell, Adrian Heath, and Lee Chapman had matured into first-team regulars. From a fan's perspective, most appreciated that Durban had grabbed the club by the scruff of the neck when they were in the doldrums, and had moulded the team into a disciplined unit containing a blend of seasoned campaigners and youthful energy.

Top-flight status was restored in his first full season but, once the elation had worn off, 'short memory syndrome' kicked into gear. Despite having finished in a creditable 11th position, some fans had grown dissatisfied with mere consolidation. Many regular supporters appreciated that Durban had stabilised the club and that hard-fought results were necessary in order for the club to progress to the manager's next planned stage. His starlets promised future improvement, but much of the Stoke public were tardy in displaying enthusiasm.

Stacking up against the element of local apathy he detected, Durban considered the excellent working set-up he enjoyed with the Stoke hierarchy. He would also need to dispel lingering worries over his two daughters' education as they embarked on their O Level studies. From a purely footballing perspective, could he succeed where so many had either failed or declined to attempt the feat? Dare he? Would the dormant volcano erupt with him at the helm?

Two managerial greats hovered into view. Ipswich Town manager Bobby Robson's comments that the Manchester United

vacancy had not interested him but an offer of the Sunderland position had made him waver made a huge impression on Durban. And there was Brian Clough. The significant influence of that idiosyncratic and mercurial figure had presided over most of Durban's time at Derby. Clough, who had been in the throes of establishing himself as a Sunderland goalscoring legend when injury had prematurely ended his playing days, had waxed lyrical about north-east fervour and playing talent. Had Clough ever shirked a managerial challenge in favour of the 'soft option'?

The potential of Sunderland Football Club throbbed. It was almost palpable. Durban had witnessed the phenomenal devotion that had emanated from the visiting Sunderland support the previous season not only when they came to Stoke but when he had been on a watching brief at Coventry as Knighton's team had earned plaudits for their entertaining approach but finished with another defeat. It was the level of loyal support that fired Durban's enthusiasm, and he relished the challenge to harness this juggernaut. There was untapped energy here.

Mulling matters over in the tropical climate, Durban slowly, but unflinchingly, made the momentous decision. He would go where others had feared to tread; he would occupy the hotter-than-hot seats that that had been reserved for him on Wearside in the Roker Park manager's office and dugout. On Thursday, 11 June 1981, Alan Durban resigned as manager of Stoke City.

Enter The 'Miracles' Man

As far as the Sunderland public were concerned, once the club's interest in making Durban their next manager had been revealed, matters moved relatively swiftly. There had been much media speculation that the deal would hinge on whether his former right-hand man at Shrewsbury, Richie Barker, was prepared to leave his assistant role at Wolves and renew their partnership on Wearside.

Having been deprived of their esteemed manager, however, the Stoke board moved for Barker and he accepted their offer to take up the reins. Working in a relatively successful spell under John Barnwell at Molineux, Barker's stock had risen, and this provided some consolation for the large portion of disappointed Stoke players and fans sorry to hear the news of Durban's departure.

Not for the first or last time, newspaper reports were wide of the mark; Barker's non-accompaniment was not the deal-breaker portrayed. It was the fervour of the Sunderland fans that had clinched Durban's decision, and he had even recommended Barker to the Stoke board as management material. On Friday, 12 June, the day after his resignation, Durban drove up from the Potteries and strode into Roker Park to be unveiled as the new Sunderland manager. On his arrival, as he walked towards the main entrance, photographers took the snap that would adorn the front page of the local evening newspaper. Holding his jacket and tie, and with loosened shirt-collar, Durban stood bathed in sunlight, exuding the aura of a man ready to get down to work. Allied with his proven management experience and tactical acumen, the overriding perception was that here stood a man who would, both physically and metaphorically, roll his sleeves up and graft for the cause.

As Durban was officially unveiled at the ensuing press conference, he chose his words carefully to convey a feeling of cautious optimism and to evade a situation where over-expectant supporters, starved of top-flight success, got carried away with unrealistic dreams of mixing it with the 'big boys' and challenging for major honours straight away, 'Don't expect miracles overnight. I hope the supporters will realise that we have the basis of a side to build on, but I am coming into a very tense situation – I would prefer to use the word tense rather than pressure – but I am confident that we can develop on what we have here.'

The chairman welcomed Durban, remarking, 'I have checked on his track record and am very impressed with his achievements. He has worked minor miracles on a tight budget and I believe he is qualified to take over a club of our status.'

Was this the first glimmer, on the very first afternoon of a new working relationship, that manager and board were not reciting the same mantra? Despite Durban's protestation that he could not transform a team of perennial strugglers overnight, Cowie had declared that here was a man who '*has* worked minor miracles'. Even an ardent Sunderland supporter might have afforded themselves a wry chuckle at the chairman's inflated reference to 'a club of our status' as he offered a stinting concession that Durban was adequately qualified to take the helm at such a 'big club', but most in the game felt that it was the club that had struck lucky.

Many supporters were not old enough to recall the last time that Sunderland had managed to persuade one of their top short-listed targets to assume the Roker hot seat. Not only that, here was an established *current* First Division manager who had proven his ability to keep a team in a relatively comfortable top-flight position. This was a situation almost unheard of at Sunderland who had all too often witnessed a string of convenient stopgap appointments or simply figures who failed to excite anticipation, and who usually affirmed these misgivings by producing a correspondingly disappointing level of performance before exiting.

Amazingly, for a man possessing such a wealth of experience, and in his managerial prime, Durban was only 39; he would hit 40 the following month. This job was not one for those who wished to preserve their youthful looks, but Durban touched on part of his motivation for moving to the north-east, 'I felt the enthusiasm and progress created within the club was not accepted by enough of the Stoke public. As a result I have felt a lack of enthusiasm myself.' Enthusiasm, devotion, mania; Durban would certainly feel all

that now in abundance. The new arrival spoke of his immediate vision of attainable goals and, crucially, also identified those that should be considered non-starters. For the present at least, the primary aim would be one of consolidation, 'It would be stupid to talk about winning the championship but I can promise you Sunderland will do a lot better than they did last year.'

As an incoming prime minister might be taken to task over any deviation from victory-day pledges, Durban may have later regretted issuing what amounted to an assurance. Although the *Sunderland Echo* ran with the new man's 'Don't Expect Miracles' headline message, some supporters keenly latched on to the prospect of 'a lot better' immediate future. After all, a 'promise' had been issued that, for the majority of Sunderland followers, implied finishing well clear of the bottom three and not having to endure the emotional turmoil of a nail-biting final game with their First Division status teetering on the brink of the abyss. Yes, mid-table paradise; that would do very nicely Mr Durban, thanks.

Not one to court popularity, Durban went on to spell out the policy he envisioned, 'I will do what I think best, and if that means not playing entertaining football away from home then that is what we will do. I am not paid to entertain and my sole aim will be to get points.'

This was not unfeeling; it should be remembered that a large percentage of supporters would gladly swap a pulsating, unfortunate 3-2 defeat for a scrappy 1-0 win any day. Durban underlined his point, 'Sunderland were one of the best sides for entertainment last season but it got Ken Knighton the sack.' He might have added that an attack-minded policy had not compensated Sunderland fans for the frustrating repetitiveness of bright performances ending in dismal results.

It had been 60 days since the sacking of Knighton, who had been in charge of team affairs for 22 months and was still only 37.

One 'bright young thing' had made way for someone with similar attributes, but Durban was the finished article. He had the nous, and he possessed foresight. That vision for the future was evident as he reproached the club for a past major failing, 'Too many top-class players have left the north-east over the years and it is time this was stopped. You can go back years and reel off the names of players who have gone on to carve out international careers.'

Durban proclaimed caution, and had been plain-speaking enough to chide and mildly rebuke in crucial areas, but he also instilled confidence and positivity for the future. It seemed appropriate that this day of new beginnings should also see the publication of the forthcoming season's fixture-list. Sunderland would start against the two teams that had recently vied to be crowned champions, Durban taking his team to face Bobby Robson's Ipswich at Portman Road followed by a Roker Park baptism against Ron Saunders's Aston Villa. In these heady days, rather than provoking trepidation, the feeling generated by these opening fixtures was more of tingling anticipation. Sunderland had got their man, and the chosen one inspired confidence. These were days when optimism prevailed – and the sun shone.

Send Back the Clowns

The new man's first-day comments had served notice of his fundamental priority 'to get points', and that providing entertainment would be a secondary concern. Such a stance did little to dispel a major myth that hung around Durban's neck; one that led some to think that a brand of drab, negative football would be the fare on offer for the coming season. The misconception sprung, primarily, from Durban's peevish riposte to some antagonistic journalists grilling him about his team's unambitious set-up in a defeat at Highbury the previous year. The version of that infamous remark subsequently bandied about usually has Durban

‘growling’, ‘If you want entertainment, go and watch clowns.’ The practice of trawling out and perpetuating the misquotation, while completely ignoring the context, has continued from many hacks and pundits lazily seeking to convey general sentiments about negative tactics.

Let the record be set straight. Are we sitting comfortably? Stoke arrived at Highbury in September 1980 having suffered a couple of heavy defeats in their preceding two away fixtures, and Durban’s defensively-geared formation sought to stop the rot. It was very much a case of a manager applying a practical ‘horses for courses’ approach for that day’s specific task. It was not an instance of some malevolently negative policy that he extended to home matches, or a tactic employed for every away trip. The ploy failed to avert a 2-0 defeat however and, at the post-match press gathering, an already fractious Durban eventually looked a plaintive journalist in the eye, saying, ‘Who are we running soccer for? If you want entertainment, you could go out and get a bunch of clowns. If obtaining pleasure from matches is the only concern, then you could get rid of all the coaches and let the players go out and get on with it.’ Anarchy!

Of course, it was the reference to clowns that was appropriated and twisted into a tasty sound-bite by the press and media. The butchered rendition of Durban’s vexatious retort subsequently became an almost ubiquitous accompaniment to outpourings from football ‘purists’ bemoaning the state of the game. This was, and is, unfair. In subsequent years, many a manager has emerged fresh from suffering the agonies of an end-to-end, incident-packed match, and declared: “It was a good game for the neutrals”. Being partisan shifts one’s perspective dramatically. A team’s true supporters will fret and panic throughout what non-committed spectators or armchair viewers rate an ‘exciting’ or ‘thrilling’ contest. Ultimately, some football ‘experts’ might sniffily adopt

high-minded principles, and preach for the masses to be served an entertaining product, neglecting the immediate welfare of your beloved team. But, for the devoted, those who have a vested emotional involvement, it is not so simple.

Harking back to that 1980 episode, there is also the overlooked fact that Stoke's trip to Highbury was the first of two consecutive away fixtures. Seven days later, Durban marshalled his team to a 2-1 win over Malcolm Allison's Manchester City at Maine Road with goals from Loek Ursem and Lee Chapman. The facts plainly refute the many subsequent disparaging and misguided comments about 'clowns'.

Adding fuel to the myth for Durban's new congregation on Wearside was that two months after 'Clown-gate' Stoke were the opposition in one of the poorest matches seen at Sunderland that season as the crowd endured a goalless stalemate. However, supporters needed to accept that a lacklustre home team were as much to blame as Durban's visitors that day (to the extent that Knighton ordered his squad in for Sunday training). Nevertheless, it should have been apparent that, in the new manager's initial season, fans going to Roker Park would be foolhardy to expect a thrill-a-minute 'pleasure dome' extravaganza.

Down to Work: The Machine Needs Parts

As Durban settled down to assessing the situation he had inherited, one of the initial tasks he earmarked for attention was to check on the physical condition of two of the club's prime playing assets, Shaun Elliott and Stan Cummins, who were spending the summer playing in the North American Soccer League. Experienced goalkeeper Barry Siddall had also been allowed to play with Vancouver Whitecaps. It had become a trend for clubs to generate extra income by 'leasing' their star men to USA franchises but, depending on their respective teams' progress in the play-offs,

most players returned to Britain after the start of the domestic league programme.

This practice was one that Durban strongly disapproved of, and it was clear that a commercially motivated decision had been made at board level to the detriment of the playing side. An extra bugbear for Durban was that even if returning injury-free, there was the issue of men being physically jaded by playing through the year with little break.

In addition, Football League club chairmen had inexplicably voted to start the season two weeks later than usual, with a blank fixture weekend in November thrown in to help England prepare for their final World Cup qualifier. To extend a season's duration in what was to be a World Cup summer (1982) was baffling in itself, and made no allowance for the risk of a fixture backlog caused by a bad winter. Therefore, Durban was nonplussed by the schedule organised for the club's pre-season build-up, 'The players are due to report back on 23 July and expect to be match fit by 1 August, but there is no way I want them in peak condition by then with the league programme not starting until 29 August.' From the word 'go', the Sunderland executive hierarchy had succeeded in riling Durban with dubious decision-making that hindered his new team's preparations for the season ahead.

Sporting attention in the early summer of '81 had focussed on Ian Botham's battle to hold on to the England cricket captaincy for the Test series against Australia. Botham claimed not to be worried about being appointed one match at a time, 'Pressure doesn't bother me.' That was one story that would run. Although a keen cricketer, Durban was more concerned at the estimated late arrivals of Elliott and Cummins, 'It could be that we have to operate without two main cogs – and how much machinery can do that – then pitch them straight in the minute they arrive back.'

Another experienced player unavailable for immediate selection was Ian Bowyer. The midfielder had won league championship and two European Cup medals in the past three years with Nottingham Forest, and had been Knighton's penultimate signing in January. Rarely ruled out at Forest, Bowyer had sustained a serious knee injury in a March training session and now Durban regretfully reported that the medical team were 'unable to say how long he will be out'.

Ever a pragmatist, Durban turned his attention to matters he could do something about. Two pre-season fixtures were arranged against local rivals Newcastle United. Despite not possessing the insane intensity of later years, these Wear-Tyne 'derby' matches would serve as spicy appetisers before the start of the new campaign.

Another issue that Durban addressed was the appointment of an experienced captain. Defender Rob Hindmarch had been handed the position the previous season aged 19, and Durban had been scrutinising available TV footage. His admission that he would be seeking a change in on-field leader did not represent a criticism of the rookie skipper, Durban explaining that the switch was natural, 'Young Hindmarch is only learning the trade himself. From what I saw on the video recordings there was just no one to take the game by the scruff of the neck and slow it down.' Durban had been particularly disturbed at viewing the team's lack of resilience and caution as they conceded an injury-time goal in their final home game against relegation rivals Brighton.

Talking calmly and with common sense was all very well, but the one thing guaranteed to excite the imagination of fans and press alike was speculation over new signings. A couple of weeks into the job, a gaggle of reporters posed the inevitable questions about prospective breakthroughs in the transfer market. Durban

responded by saying that he would not be 'poaching' from Stoke, as well as outlining his view on bringing foreign players to the country, 'I am a great believer in temperament and think the best players suited to our game are from Holland and Germany who have similar climates. I am not over-enthralled with the South Americans as it takes them too long to settle down and, basically, they are not suited to our game. They are great passers of a ball in hot climates but our game is based on running.'

Durban was unlikely to face any dissent on airing this opinion as Sunderland fans' memories were still raw over the record signing of Argentinean Claudio Marangoni for over £300,000 in 1979, and the player's failure to make an impact had hastened the demise of Knighton.

Durban favoured scouring the market much closer to home and, although not openly criticising the club's scouting system, he mused, 'It is amazing how few Scots are here and yet Sunderland are the nearest First Division club.' He then followed up remarks made on his arrival about the top local talent that had been permitted to slip through the club's fingers, lamenting, 'It is a disgrace that so many lads are going out of the north-east and it is time that it was stopped.'

'For this to happen it is essential that the first team be successful so that boys want to play for the local team.' These were laudable ideals, but also flagged up a potential 'catch 22' situation – hoping that a young prospect's decision-making would not be predominantly swayed by the glittery attraction of how successful a club appeared.

In addition to strengthening the team, Durban was eager to secure at least one signing that would increase the club's general cachet, 'The fact that there are no internationals here reflects on the lack of success in the area and, as we are the only club in the First Division without one, we must do something about it.'

Presumably, Durban was referring to a lack of current internationals, or the seven England caps held by right-back Steve Whitworth were being harshly neglected.

Do Things My Way (The Right Way)

Clearly irked that three of his senior players were playing in the USA, Durban emphatically declared, 'The position will not repeat itself. I am very much against players continuing to be involved in matches when they should be relaxing and recharging the batteries. It's too much of a strain.' Durban soon learned that Cummins was out of action with an ankle injury, and promptly wrote to the player suggesting he terminate his Seattle contract and return to the UK.

The manager also sought to remedy the inadequate scouting arrangements that he blamed for the club failing to secure the prime talent from the local area and Scotland. He made it plain that he expected the coaching staff to take in as many matches as possible in a scouting capacity. Although stating his desire to bring international experience to the squad, Durban ruled himself out of the running for Everton and former England centre-forward Bob Latchford who was a free agent, 'The last thing I want to be doing is patching up and make do with short-term buys. It is essential that I bring players here of character and proven qualities who, if things did not work out, would be saleable assets again. I don't like taking gambles on older players and I certainly won't be making any enquiries for Latchford.'

Exasperating as it undoubtedly must have been to be constantly harried over newspaper gossip about transfer permutations, Durban's almost throwaway dismissal of Latchford's suitability for his grand plan at Sunderland appeared somewhat hasty, and was perhaps borne from his irritation at media speculation. With the benefit of hindsight, Durban would come to realise that Latchford