

*Only the
Real Thing*

Aston Villa and The Coca Cola Cup

1993-1996

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Chapter 1

1990–1992: New Beginnings

THE 1990 World Cup was bad for Aston Villa Football Club. Firstly, England's campaign of uneasy joy in Italy had catapulted the club's best player and principal asset – David Platt – to the forefront of the footballing world's attention. Platt took centre stage on 26 June 1990 in Bologna as England laboured to break down a Belgium side some decades away from their golden generation. His last-minute volley in the last 16, assisted by Paul Gascoigne's lofted free kick, remains an iconic England tournament moment and set a tone for the national team's (via hindsight's rose-tinted lens) progress to the semi-finals. Platt picked up where he left off against the Belgians by scoring against Cameroon in the quarter-final, although England's ultimate win was unconvincing. Platt did return to play for Villa in the 1990/91 season, scoring 24 goals across all competitions, but the die had seemingly been cast. His successes for England on Italian fields had piqued interest and it was no surprise that he left for Bari in the summer of 1991.

The bigger impact of Italia '90 on Villa was off the field. For all of Platt's importance, England's exit at the

semi-final stage also prompted a change of management. Bobby Robson had been subjected to some scathing criticism over his tenure, much at odds with his later casting as a national hero. Italia '90 represented a natural end for Robson, who would go on to be much more appreciated in club management. The man who the Football Association anointed as his successor was the then Villa manager, Graham Taylor.

After finding his managerial feet at Lincoln City, Taylor had enjoyed a roller-coaster decade at Watford, in part alongside Elton John, before seeing a new challenge at Aston Villa in 1987. Villa had just been relegated but Taylor secured promotion back to the top flight at the first attempt and in the 1989/90 season he led the team to a shock second-placed finish behind Liverpool. Taylor had transformed the culture at Villa much as he had at Watford. He seemed to have the much-sought-after ability to help talented stars shine, but equally to initiate the best results from more limited players. Taylor was a hard-working man of high standards – from dress codes to training regimes. He wasn't universally popular at Villa – 1982 European Cup winner Gary Shaw, who passed away in the autumn of 2024, would have vouched for that – but his characteristics chimed with the FA, and he would take over England duties once the dust had settled on Italia '90.

Another character in the Italia '90 story, Dr Jozef Vengloš, would take the helm at Villa – the first non-British manager to lead a First Division side. Vengloš had coached Czechoslovakia to the quarter-finals at that summer's World Cup and was a vaunted tactician and man-manager. It's also likely that Villa chairman Doug

Ellis revelled in the fact that he was appointing a foreign manager and was the first to do it. Ellis was fond of telling Villa players he had invented the overhead kick; it seems likely this look abroad was another way of casting himself as a footballing pioneer.

Whatever the original intention from Ellis, he would have been dismayed at the 17th position Vengloš oversaw – a severe drop-off from the previous season’s title challenge. This was despite the core of Taylor’s team remaining, and Platt continuing to cast his reputation as the goalscoring midfielder *du jour*. In many ways Vengloš was a man before his time – at least where English football was concerned. Tony Daley – whose Villa career would span all these managers – speaks frequently about the changes to diet and health awareness that Vengloš brought in. Many players were not ready for this; many resented the changes, leading to disharmony. English football, moored adrift from Europe following the Heysel ban, seemed suspicious of outsiders. Vengloš came under huge scrutiny, especially when results didn’t materialise, although he did oversee one of the great Villa Park nights when Inter Milan were vanquished 2-0 in the UEFA Cup. It’s fascinating to think that later in the decade many of Vengloš’s ideas were echoed and implemented by Arsène Wenger at Arsenal, which bears out the journey of this book. The way English football operated changed intrinsically between 1990 and 1996. Vengloš himself had predicted a ‘great exchange of ideas, which can only be good for football’ as he foresaw many other players and coaches more freely travelling and working across Europe. Turned out he was absolutely on the money.

Vengloš's last team selection – for a 2-2 draw against Chelsea in May 1991 – is instructive of the mixture of stability and upheaval that would characterise Aston Villa's playing staff as they approached the dual League Cup wins. Villa lined up as follows: Nigel Spink, Chris Price, Kevin Gage, Derek Mountfield, Kent Nielsen, Paul McGrath, David Platt, Gordon Cowans, Gary Penrice, Tony Cascarino, Dwight Yorke.

Gage, Mountfield, Platt and Cascarino never played for the club again, all departing in the summer of 1991 to pastures new. Price, Penrice and Nielsen were around the squad initially but were all moved on eventually after a handful of appearances late in 1991. They were followed by the Villa legend Gordon Cowans, a member of the European Cup-winning team, who joined Blackburn Rovers in November 1991.

The other three starters in Vengloš's final game would all have a more lasting influence on the club and the League Cup successes. Nigel Spink, like Cowans, was a member of the team that won the 1982 European Cup, and he would go on to play for Villa until January 1996. Spink was an unused substitute in the 1994 final and had departed before Villa beat Leeds in 1996 but despite his lack of impact in this story his legacy at the club is undimmed, making a magnificent 361 league appearances over 19 years. Spink was the oldest player in the team that drew with Chelsea, and the youngest was Dwight Yorke. Yorke would also go on to bridge both League Cup successes, from a valued squad member in 1994 to an integral starter in 1996. Last mention here is to Paul McGrath, another bona fide legend at the club, born out

by fans wearing ‘GOD 5’ on their replica shirts to this day. McGrath would start both finals and in that sense is the key carry-over from the Taylor–Vengloš era. It’s also worth mentioning that the substitutes against Chelsea – young full-backs Bryan Small and Neil Cox – would both endure into the 1994 final era, Cox coming on as a substitute in the final and Small (alongside Yorke) as a tracksuited squad member at Wembley.

With Vengloš having graciously handed in his cards, the question for Ellis as chairman was where to look next. It had been a strange half a decade for Villa that encompassed relegation, promotion and a second-placed top-flight finish alongside two dalliances near the bottom of the league. It felt like a pivotal moment for the club and the man given that responsibility was of course Ron Atkinson.

The appointment of Atkinson seemed a natural fit. Born in Liverpool (he tells a good joke about his pram being stolen) but schooled in youth football at Villa, he made his name as a manager in the Midlands. He was extrovert and ebullient but believed that self-confidence was rooted in an innate understanding of – and success in – the game. He also had a point to prove after, in his view, being cast aside by Manchester United despite, at that time, being the most successful Old Trafford manager since Sir Matt Busby. Although what unfolded under his successor Alex Ferguson would put him in the shade, two FA Cup wins and five successive top-four finishes was not to be sniffed at. Atkinson had begun to rebuild his reputation as Sheffield Wednesday manager, and indeed cemented his cup winner reputation by leading

them to League Cup success in 1991. His departure from Wednesday was not well received by their fanbase, not that his new employer Doug Ellis cared, clearly viewing Atkinson as something of a kindred spirit and a key driver for the success he desperately wanted for Villa.

The watchword for Atkinson (and Ellis) was clearly going to be change – both in style and personnel. When Big Ron paraded his eight new signings in the summer of 1991 few could have imagined the significance many of them would have on the club, and the intertwined stories and tragedies each would bring to Villa and us as fans. Time also lends us a sadder and more introspective view on those featured here – it is incredibly hard to believe that half of the players brought in are no longer with us. ‘Holte Enders in the Sky’ indeed.

As football fans of a certain longevity or vintage, we draw associations with particular players and resonate with others more than some. No matter how long or short your Villa fandom is, however, what remains true is that all those players who don the claret and blue grab a place – however big or small – in our collective memory as supporters and as our own lives progress those memories grow but also diverge as players move on and careers develop.

When Les Sealey joined Villa, it was on the back of winning the Cup Winners’ Cup with Manchester United, so it was no great surprise that he was the starting goalkeeper for the 1991/92 season. However, Nigel Spink replaced him midway through and Sealey never played for the club again. Indeed, the overriding memory of Sealey is playing against Villa in the 1994 Coca-Cola Cup Final after first-choice United keeper Peter Schmeichel was

suspended. I vividly remember the front of the *Sports Argus* leading with the fact Schmeichel would miss the game after he was sent off in a league match – clearly perceiving it as a boon for Villa. Sealey was helpless on that glorious day at Wembley, but his presence underlines those strange connections and links football can throw up, further embellished by the fact the goalkeeper he replaced that day ultimately ended up at the Villa too. Sealey passed away in 2001, aged just 43, the first of this group to leave us.

The League Cup campaign of 1993/94 includes memories of many of these players – not least Shaun Teale and his diving headed goal (and iconic celebration) in the seminal Tranmere Rovers semi-final. Signed from Bournemouth, Teale formed a strong partnership with Paul McGrath through the Premier League runners-up campaign and then the League Cup win. Ultimately, he was replaced by another, younger defender also brought in by Atkinson in the summer of 1991. His tally of 147 appearances for Villa is certainly nothing to be sniffed at, and in another twist of the footballer's journey Teale left to join the very club against whom he scored that iconic goal – Tranmere. Teale was last seen 'modelling' Villa's 2019/20 third kit based on the legendary green, black, and red Müller away kit from 1994.

Paul Mortimer had already left the club long before the League Cup campaign of 1993/94, making just 12 appearances after failing to establish himself under Atkinson. Arguably The Valley and Charlton Athletic was his spiritual home with 199 of his 265 career appearances coming either side of his brief Villa spell. Incidentally, he

is the only player signed by Atkinson that summer who I don't remember seeing play.

It's easy to forget that Kevin Richardson joined Villa having previously won league titles at Everton and Arsenal – along with the FA Cup and, like Sealey, the Cup Winners' Cup. He was ever-present in his first two seasons at Villa Park and became an integral part of Atkinson's dressing room and side – ultimately captaining the team. The abiding memory will be of him lifting the League Cup in 1994 – but we should remember he was also named man of the match that day, controlling midfield with a panache and industriousness we came to love. Somewhat bizarrely, I was a mascot at Wembley and will always remember Richardson's kindness in involving me. It felt a proud day for the club when he won his solitary England cap later that season against Greece. He followed Atkinson to Coventry in 1995 as he made way for another future League Cup winner and all-round cult hero, Ian Taylor, in Villa's midfield. Richardson remained involved in the game once his playing days were over, including a spell as assistant manager to his former Villa team-mate Steve Staunton at Darlington, and most recently coaching Newcastle's under-18 academy sides.

Steve Staunton was signed from Liverpool for what would turn out to be the first of two spells at Villa Park. In the first, beginning with his signing by Atkinson, he made 208 appearances and cemented the left-back spot over the Premier League runners-up campaign and then 1994 League Cup win. He was also on the bench when Villa beat Leeds at Wembley in 1996 and in his second spell he won the Intertoto Cup in 2001. His international

career with the Republic of Ireland also reminds us of the pride we have with those connected to Villa and part of this shared history. In USA '94, along with McGrath and Andy Townsend, the Villa connection with Ireland gave life to a World Cup for which England failed to qualify. I will always be incredibly fond of the Irish white away kit worn over that campaign and 'Stan' was a big part of that. When he became Ireland manager, although I was a little fearful on his behalf, again those Villa links and memories served as a quasi-support and well wishing.

Of all the players signed by Atkinson in this period of change, Ugo Ehiogu is the one I saw most for Villa and arguably formed a lynchpin to my own developing support – as his career progressed, I could align that with my own fervour. When he died in 2017, I was genuinely shaken and sad, a knock to your own consciousness as those who you have built your own memories and ideas of, depart. My first memory of Ugo is at best hazy, and at worst made up, but centres on an under-21 game Villa played against Inter Milan. I'd somehow ended up in a box, watching this rangy centre-back called Ugochuku being shoved up front and scoring a couple of goals. I'd decided he was the best player on the pitch. The die was cast. Later memories are firmer – another player involved in the 1994 League Cup campaign although with a non-playing involvement in the final. When you are drawn to the images and videos of the non-playing, tracksuited players celebrating that final win you are reminded of the ebullience and freedom of youth displayed in the likes of Ugo and Dwight Yorke. It is only made sadder when aligned with his early death. I was aggrieved when he left for Middlesbrough but prefer

to fondly remember his return to Villa Park in 2001 when he scored for England there against Spain. Incidentally, that would rank second in my list of Ugo goals at Villa Park – after the ultimately fruitless 90th-minute ‘winner’ against Trabzonspor in the 1994/95 UEFA Cup. A giant of a man sadly missed.

Yet another sadly departed player among Ron Atkinson’s initial tranche of signings is, of course, Dalian Atkinson, unlawfully killed by police action in 2016. Dalian made just 85 appearances for Villa but among those are some truly iconic moments that will remain pivotal pieces of Villa history – just ask my 12-year-old son. *Match of the Day*’s goal of the season for 1992/93 was rightly his stunner against Wimbledon in the rain, umbrella and all. The partnership with Dean Saunders that developed was my first experience of what a strike pairing could do and was finely captured by the now departed *Heroes and Villains* fanzine as ‘Deano and Dalian’s Excellent Adventure’ in the style of Bill and Ted. Again, the League Cup campaign is awash with fine and lasting memories of Dalian – of course the final and the joyful first goal, but let’s not forget that crucial consolation at Prenton Park in the semi-final to make it 3-1 going back to Villa Park, and no less important the only goal away at Arsenal in the fourth round, resplendent in green and black. RIP Dalian, another of the Villa family dearly departed.

Finally, Atkinson brought in Cyrille Regis, whom he had famously managed down the road in West Bromwich. Perhaps best – and rightly – remembered for his exploits at other Midlands clubs, Regis made 52 appearances for

Villa, scoring 12 goals. His picture still hangs in the academy building at Villa Park, visible for all to see in the Family Fun Zone, an important reminder of a genuine Midlands footballer and stand-up bloke. Another ‘Holte Ender in the Sky’, Regis left this earth in 2018.

In line with the expectation of change, Ron Atkinson’s debut season as manager was one of ups and downs. On the surface there was improvement – a seventh-placed finish, up from 17th under Vengloš. However, this glossed over an appalling run of form starting on New Year’s Day 1992 which saw Villa win just once and score only an almost unbelievable two goals across 12 league games. Spring brought some solace with wins against Chelsea, Liverpool and Spurs, but there remained work to be done. The expectation of transition was well founded, the season being characterised by debuts for the eight news signings detailed in this chapter but also the likes of Dariusz Kubicki, Earl Barrett, Alan McLoughlin, Garry Parker, Steve Froggatt and Mark Bosnich. Many of these would prove to be important players for Atkinson, and in the case of Bosnich for a succession of Villa managers. Goalscoring duties were shared largely by Regis and Yorke – with the Trinidadian scoring 17 times across all competitions. As the season drew to a close, more change was to come both on and off the field. What was to unfold across the next two seasons under Atkinson would be unprecedented.