

NEIL JAMES

STOKE AND I:

THE NINETIES



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Season 1989/90

A New Decade

AT the start of the 2017/18 season, a man stands outside the bet365 Stadium hawking the same pin badges he's been struggling to shift for the last decade. Nobody buys those things anymore. He's branched out though in recent years and diversified his stock a little.

For now, draped across the tired old chipboard displaying the array of tiny enamel club crests is a collection of *the* must-not-have accessory for all true football fans: the much-maligned half-and-half scarf. Fifty per cent of it's woven in the red and white of Stoke, the remainder in the dark blue of Arsenal's latest away kit. Today, the Gunners are in town. Look, there's the date on the scarf. It's a souvenir you see.

My son Daniel, three years old and walking alongside me, tugs on my arm. 'Can I have one, Daddy?' he asks in the same way he asks for anything brightly coloured that catches his eye. How can I explain to him in child-friendly language that only a complete twat would wear one?

'Those scarves aren't very good, mate,' I say, not untruthfully either. 'Give it one wash and it'll fall apart. I'll get you a proper one next time we're in the club shop.'

Thankfully, he's satisfied with this and we carry on walking without the hell of a three-year-old's tantrum being unleashed upon the innocent matchday crowd.

Everybody in Stoke hates Arsenal. Would you wear a scarf that's got 50 per cent of it dedicated to those scumbags? I'd

rather use it to strangle myself, thanks. Just make sure it's not left anywhere near my dead body afterwards.

Unsurprisingly, the scarves aren't shifting. Maybe it's just us – Stoke fans are old-fashioned types for the most part, not a bunch of tourists here on a day trip. Nobody's buying half-and-half scarves and nobody's stood in front of the ground taking selfies. It's just another Saturday at the match, the way it always used to be, right? 'A proper football club,' as our old manager Tony Pulis was so fond of saying.

Anyway, this Arsenal thing. It started when Arsene Wenger, bitter as always after a 2-1 defeat, called us a rugby team, and then it escalated when the press turned on our captain, Ryan Shawcross, for mistiming a tackle on Aaron Ramsey. Ever since that day there's been bad blood and ill feeling always bubbling under the surface of this fixture. You could call it a rivalry I suppose, even though that would suggest a level of parity that we know doesn't really exist. Arsenal don't like us though, and we absolutely *hate* them. This isn't a place for half-and-half scarves. This is old-school.

Yet look around you, because outside the ground, a few blokes in Arsenal gear are walking around freely, talking in loud, brash London voices, there's a family by the club shop – the kids all sporting shirts with 'Fly Emirates' across their chests. Nobody's bothering them and Stoke fans are milling around too out here, plenty of us, mostly wearing club colours, laughing, shouting, full of pre-match optimism as a new season begins in the late afternoon sunshine. In 20 minutes' time there'll be no one left outside, we'll all be in the ground in our seats awaiting the kick-off, a few of the stragglers left on the concourse watching the televisions showing Sky Sports News.

Ours is the second game of the weekend to be televised and we've only reached Saturday teatime. There'll be another two matches on tomorrow and maybe one on Monday night. Football's everywhere – the people who love it watch game after game, but those who don't are still always aware of it.

When I get to work on a Monday everyone knows whether Stoke won or lost and it's the first thing they mention. Football's mainstream.

SEASON 1989/90: A NEW DECADE

Travel back in time 30 years or thereabouts and this scene would have been very different. We were in another ground for starters – one that didn't have 30,000 shiny plastic seats and two electronic scoreboards, but crumbling terraces, leaky roofs and weeds growing up through the cracks in the concrete. Any Arsenal fans would be running for cover by now, probably being chased up the street by casuals or, in the case of the family, at home in north London, not even here, not even interested. A day at the football, Mum and Dad? Take the kids? No thanks, we'd rather not all go home in an ambulance if it's all the same to you.

The police would be all over the street too. I can't see a single one out here, just a few stewards carrying out body searches and directing a few confused non-regulars to the correct turnstiles. Policemen aren't really needed out here, not like in the old days when there'd be a riot van parked up and coppers on horses in the middle of the road.

I didn't exactly see it go off very often back then – Dad knew how to keep us out of trouble. We'd park up in the same place every week, the corner of Sturgess Street, then wander down past the old library, follow the road round past the police station, round the corner where the old Victoria Hotel once stood and the ground would be there before we could even complain our feet were tired.

The Boothen Stand was our destination – a monolithic block of 1960s architecture rising above the terraced rat runs that surrounded it. These streets were safe territory, relatively at least, as the away fans would be herded into the Butler Street Paddock on the other side of the ground or in the Town End behind large spiked railings. The train station was in the opposite direction too, so it was mainly just Stoke fans here stepping through piles of horse shit and getting barked at by moody-looking Alsatians.

Most of the away followings were sparse in the old Second Division. A couple of hundred here, a couple of hundred there, only swelling into a threat when the big sides were in town: Leeds, Chelsea, Manchester City, Liverpool in the cup that time. Dad used to avoid taking me to those games. He'd seen what used to happen in the 1970s when those bastards were around and he'd rather not take the risk.

I'd seen the fighting on the news as well – fans on the pitch, tearing the place up. Millwall fans at Luton, smashing Kenilworth Road to pieces. Nan told me about how one man had his ear bitten off – it was in the paper, she said. The Heysel disaster was beamed live into our living room when I was seven. English hooligans running amok, the cameras catching more of the violence than they'd dare to film now, Barry Davies registering his disgust at the missiles being thrown into crowds of innocent spectators. Thirty-nine people dead at the end of it.

The fire at Bradford was another tragedy – an entire stand going up in flames. Fifty-six died that time, including that poor man, that poor, poor man we saw on the news, his hair and clothes ablaze, desperately trying to escape the most horrific death imaginable.

And Hillsborough. The FA Cup semi-final. Mum came out into the garden and told me something had happened at the football. It didn't register at first, only later when I saw the television pictures and people were lying dead or dying right there on the pitch. Ninety-six people killed at a football match like the ones Dad and I went to. One of them, Jon-Paul Gilhooley, was ten years old, a year younger than me.

These were the shadows cast across the game. Death, violence and neglect. Eleven-year-old boys don't understand the times they're living in – can't really grasp the answers that adults give them when they question why people are dying at football games. Sometimes the adults giving the answers don't understand what they're seeing either, they just read the newspapers and listen to the man on the television telling them it's all mindless violence and that football fans are the scum of the earth.

And when you look back as an adult and think about the lines of steely-eyed policemen with their horses and dogs at the games you went to, and the old death trap stands and terraces, the news footage of another disaster or another riot, the spiteful disdain in the voice of Colin Moynihan as he condemned football fans, and the lies and the cover-ups that went on for years and years after Hillsborough, only then do you understand the contempt in which supporters were held by the establishment and what the game you loved was truly like.

SEASON 1989/90: A NEW DECADE

Fans were seen as nothing but a bloody inconvenience – a mindless, drink-fuelled mob that needed to be controlled by any means necessary. Herded into pens in squalid stadiums, assaulted with batons and tear-gassed simply for being in a certain place at a certain time. This was the culture of football in the late 1980s – far removed from the stickers in the playground or posters in *Match* that piqued the interest of boys like me, who'd beg their dads to take them to matches, enthusiasm overriding the risk that entailed.

Sure, Dad could keep us as safe as he could, knowing which streets to avoid, or getting tickets for the seats not the terraces, but no one could truly guarantee safety at a match at that time because it turns out that nobody in authority was that bothered about keeping *any* of us safe. No one cared if we were injured or even if we died. If you went to a match and didn't come home then it was your own fault for being a dirty, horrible football fan wasn't it?

Many people outside Stoke-on-Trent won't be aware of this, but on 31 January 1989, Stoke played an FA Cup replay at Barnsley's Oakwell ground. Those who attended said that traffic congestion on the motorway caused thousands of Stoke fans to arrive late – this being a time when FA Cup ties were far more high profile than they are now.

Outside the ground a crush developed and a sense of panic began to ripple through the crowd as so many bodies pushed towards the turnstiles to gain entrance. The initial response from South Yorkshire Police was to send a mounted officer charging forward through the melee, only adding to the chaos and fear. Eventually, in a bid to ease the congestion, the police opened one of the huge exit gates, allowing the crowd to pour into the ground without tickets. This was the same response the same police force used two months later at Hillsborough. Had there been more Stoke supporters on the away terrace that night then we could have suffered a similar disaster and the same lies and cover-ups that Liverpool fans had to suffer for 30 shameful years. It really could have been us. It could have been *any* of us.

I don't think twice about taking my own children to the game now. They both attended their first matches at much younger ages

than I was before my dad took me, and no one raises an eyebrow or judges me when I say I'm taking my kids to the football. It's entertainment, and we can 'hate' the other team in that pantomime way we do and still stay safe as we walk home among the opposition fans who, minutes before, we were jeering at.

Maybe something has been lost along the way in the 30 years separating then from now, maybe the game has been sanitised a bit too much, and it's definitely too bloody expensive. But look around at the people smiling and chatting, walking freely in whichever direction they wish to. I'm giving my little lad a piggy back, he's enjoyed his day out and no one's looking nervously over their shoulders for flying bricks. Yes, something has been lost, but you can't help but realise that something's been gained too.

But 1989: it seems like a lifetime away.

What Went Before

The 1989/90 campaign was the first season when I attended the Victoria Ground properly. I'd been an occasional visitor during the previous three seasons, but only on Saturdays when Dad wasn't working and we were facing opposition he considered to be low risk. This year though, we attended pretty much every home game, usually managing to secure the same seats in the Boothen Stand.

At this time, Stoke were becoming used to their role as Second Division also-rans. Manager Mick Mills had been a breath of fresh air at first, but by 1989/90 things had gone stale and boredom was creeping in.

We really need to start the story though by jumping back to the calamitous relegation of 1984/85 – a footballing famine of three wins in a season and a record low points total of 17. At that time, the Stoke support held a genuine fear that their team was about to plummet all the way through the divisions. The squad that had relegated us was painfully incapable of competing at the highest level – a bunch of kids who hadn't started shaving yet and a handful of ageing pros with dodgy joints. There was nothing there for anyone to work with.

Mick Mills, 36, a former England full-back with 42 caps, was given the task of stabilising a ship that was looking more like a

submarine: a demanding task for someone with no managerial experience as the team could only be described as crap. Not crap in the casual way we might describe a bad performance to everyone in the pub either, but crap as in 'breaking all known records for being crap'.

Mills kept his boots on for the first 12 months. He was getting on as a player, but we were short on numbers. Putting faith in the same youngsters who'd pretty much burst into tears every week in the unforgiving environs of the top flight wasn't a choice he *made*, it was the only option he had. Unsurprisingly, the season started badly, but the players grew a bit of hair on their chests, began to find a little confidence and Mills guided his team of damaged fledglings to a respectable tenth place.

Winger Phil Heath was one such youngster. He remembers Mills as having a hugely positive impact on his own career and lifting a demoralised squad. 'When Mick Mills arrived he did a great job in steadying the ship under extreme financial pressures,' he recalls. 'Mick came in at left-back and instantly gave my game a great lift with his vision and experience. It was this two-year period where I played my best football for Stoke. Mick gave me the confidence and belief that I could become a top player.'

Using the money brought in from a few player sales, Mills added well to his squad in the summer of 1986. The likes of Lee Dixon and Tony Ford arrived – good signings for small fees. A blistering run in the middle of the 1986/87 campaign, which included 7-2 and 5-2 home wins over Leeds and Sheffield United, saw Stoke go unbeaten for 11 games to put themselves in contention for the promotion play-offs, which were newly introduced that season.

Alas, it wasn't to be. A collapse in form towards the end of the season saw the challenge peter out. Nevertheless, Mills had improved Stoke's standing from the previous year and an eighth-place finish hinted that he was somehow panning gold from the septic tank of a squad he'd inherited.

Where did things go wrong? Well, 1987/88 simply never got going for Stoke. The side spluttered along in mid-table for the whole season, eventually finishing 11th – a long way from the play-offs.

The following year was worse still. Stoke finished 13th but ended with a customary collapse in form that, worryingly, seemed more pronounced than in previous seasons. From March onwards, Stoke won only one of their final 14 games. We were even beaten 3-0 at home by already-relegated Walsall. Stoke looked for all the world like a side that had gone beyond stagnation and had started to rot from within.

It was clear that Mills had long since run out of ideas. The number of flops in the transfer market became more noticeable with every passing year, and he failed to adequately replace some of the key departures from his squad. Stoke were going nowhere but backwards and supporters had been campaigning for change for quite some time. 'Mills out' was a regular chant at games and became an iconic piece of graffiti in Stoke-on-Trent. Spray painted on to a wall clearly visible from the A500, the message remained in place for years and years after the departure of its subject!

However, Peter Coates and the rest of the Stoke board were clearly in no mood to acquiesce to the demands of supporters who'd lost patience. They handed Mills a new contract as well as a transfer kitty of £1m with which to overhaul the squad.

'We had about seven directors at the time,' recalls Coates, 'and although I was on the board, I didn't own the club, so we had a collective viewpoint that prevailed. Mick Mills had been good for us up to this point so we decided to make this money available and try to push on.'

This was a real statement of intent from a board that would normally have made Ebenezer Scrooge seem profligate in his spending, a seven-figure sum being a significant amount of money at that time. Whether Coates and company were panicked into doing so by the abject form shown by the team at the end of the 1988/89 campaign, or genuinely worried by the presence of local rivals Port Vale following the Valiants' promotion is unclear. However, fresh optimism surged through the supporter base, many of whom saw the gesture as a likely catalyst for promotion.

Mills Builds His Squad

There were, however, those who remained concerned that Mills had completely lost his mind in the transfer market, recklessly

buying any old tat as soon as he had money to spend. The manager always seemed to have more success when shopping in the bargain basement. Give him money and he couldn't wait to flush it down the toilet.

The most disappointing of all his signings, and a contender for the worst player to ever wear the red and white stripes, was Dave Bamber. The striker had cost somewhere north of £100,000 and arrived with a goals record that could generously be described as 'modest'.

Quite what possessed Mills to sign him, I have no idea, but it soon became clear that the gangly target man was out of his depth in the Second Division. No sitter seemed too easy to miss, no ball too difficult to mis-control; Bamber's ability to fuck up almost any situation was legendary, and soon had Stoke fans pulling their hair out in frustration as the striker ambled apologetically around the pitch with the sadness of an enfeebled old horse put out to pasture.

Somehow, Bamber had managed to notch six goals in 23 appearances during 1988/89, a fairly poor record that still flattered him in comparison to the abject level of his general play. Yet Mills didn't see a problem with Bamber's contribution. In fact all he felt was needed was a partner for the ex-Blackpool man, so in came the tanned form of Wayne Biggins for a fee of £250,000 from Manchester City. A quarter of Mills's war chest was spent, but at least Biggins had some pedigree, having previously played in the top flight for Norwich City.

'Manchester City had just signed Clive Allen from Tottenham,' recalls Biggins. 'And to be fair to Mel Machin, he told me that I'd be third choice and that Stoke had come in for me. I've always had a soft spot for Stoke since I was a kid, even though I've always been a Sheffield Wednesday fan. I remember watching the cup final in '72 and since then, for some reason, I'd always kept an eye out for Stoke's results. As soon as I met Mick Mills and looked around the ground, I knew it'd be a great move for me.'

On paper, the new strike force should have had a plentiful supply of chances given that Mills operated with two wide men in the form of Gary Hackett on the right and the sublime Peter Beagrie on the left. Hackett was competent but unspectacular

while Beagrie's dazzling dribbling skills had a number of top-flight clubs sniffing around for his signature.

In the middle of the pitch was the combative Chris Kamara, now more famous for his on-screen buffoonery for Sky Sports, but back then a tough-tackling hard man who would probably last no longer than five minutes before being sent off, or even arrested, if his somewhat 'loose' challenges were to be refereed under modern rules.

Thinking that Kamara perhaps needed a cool head alongside him, Mills plumped for another Manchester City player in the shape of Ian Scott, a 22-year-old midfielder who'd broken through into the first team at Maine Road during the previous campaign. The £175,000 that Mills spent on Scott was supposed to add genuine competition for places in the midfield, where the risk of Kamara being suspended meant that an extra body would be needed fairly often.

The other midfielder who Mills had to call on was local-born crowd favourite Carl Beeston, an England under-21 international who'd risen through the ranks of Stoke's youth academy, but had suffered a luckless spell with injuries. Beeston had lost an entire year of his career to glandular fever and missed countless games with a persistent ankle injury. Any game that Beeston could appear in was a bonus as his fitness could never be relied on.

Where Mills spent the majority of his kitty was in defence, smashing Stoke's transfer record by bringing in centre-half Ian Cranson from First Division Sheffield Wednesday for £480,000. Cranson was 25 years old and had played the majority of his career in the top flight, promising experience and class that he would surely need given that he was to partner the popular but sometimes erratic George Berry.

'I turned the move down initially,' remembers Cranson. 'I wasn't sure about dropping down a division, so I started the pre-season with Sheffield Wednesday. But I had another chat with Ron Atkinson, who was manager at Wednesday at that time, and as the club had just bought Peter Shirliff back from Charlton and already had Nigel Pearson, it seemed like I was going to be the odd one out. Ron said he didn't want to force me out, but he

wanted to balance the books and he'd still got the offer from Stoke on the table. I spoke to Mick Mills again and he confirmed he was still interested so I said I'd join.'

More First Division experience was added in the form of Derek Statham, who arrived for what looked like a bargain £75,000 given that the 30-year-old left-back had amassed over 350 First Division appearances for West Brom and Southampton. With Statham operating on the opposite side to the dependable John Butler, Mills was convinced that he'd now assembled a rearguard to offer some protection to goalkeeper Peter Fox, the diminutive but agile stopper who'd already given 11 years' service to Stoke and who would end the season with the captain's armband.

Despite obvious areas of weakness, as the 1989/90 season approached, most fans considered the team to be an improvement on the one that had finished the previous campaign. A pre-season tour of Sweden, where Stoke rattled in 32 goals in only six games, also contributed to the expectation level being raised higher than it had been for some time, despite the fact that we'd been playing a bunch of Scandinavian postmen!

The Season Begins

There's always a special atmosphere to the opening day of a new football season. The sun always seems to be out, the crowd is always bigger and optimism hangs in the air. Until we see them play and the disappointment inevitably kicks in, new signings promise to be the missing piece to the puzzle and the deficiencies of the players we already know about are viewed in a softer focus. In early August, anything's possible and whatever disappointments we suffered during the previous campaign will have long been forgotten.

Saturday, 19 August 1989 was no different. West Ham were the visitors and 16,058 people, a much bigger crowd than usual, packed into a sun-drenched Victoria Ground to watch Mills's new-look side kick off the season.

'We are going up!' was the chant from the Boothend before a ball had even been kicked. Never has optimism been more misplaced. Yet the start to the season wasn't bad at all. West Ham were strong opponents, fancied by many for promotion, and

although the visitors took the lead, Biggins headed in an equaliser on his debut to earn Stoke a point.

However, the game will probably be remembered more for the post-match reaction of West Ham striker Frank McAvennie following a tackle from, surprise, surprise, Chris Kamara. McAvennie went off injured after the challenge, which was firm but fair, and tests revealed that he'd actually broken his ankle. Rather than accept this as a risk inherent to the game, and perhaps swayed by Kamara's reputation as a 'dirty' player, McAvennie threatened to take legal action against the Stoke midfielder.

'It's a shame because there have been so many lies and false recollections of that incident,' Kamara told *FourFourTwo* in 2010. 'Basically, it was an innocuous challenge and if you don't believe me, it's on YouTube and you can make up your own mind. It was one of those things that you see from time to time where a perfectly good tackle injures someone. Poor old Frank got a bad injury but nobody knew at the time just how bad it was. I certainly didn't know and the other players on the pitch didn't know.'

To be honest, the only person that the blond-mullet-sporting McAvennie should have been suing was his barber. Thankfully, these threats were nothing but hot air and the storm blew over fairly quickly.

Stoke's start was tricky, but given the levels of pre-season optimism, to only have four points on the board after six games was undoubtedly a huge disappointment. These points had been gained through draws, the first win remaining elusive. By the time that Oldham came to town on 16 September and returned to Lancashire with a 2-1 win, it was clear from the attendance of just over 10,000 that the Stoke crowd had realised they were going to be served more of the same old mid-table fare. That was the best-case scenario too, as already the bottom three was looking worryingly close. In the short term though, the following Saturday, local rivals Port Vale would be the visitors for the first league meeting between the sides in 32 years. Defeat in this game was unthinkable, yet given the start to the season, very much a possibility.

Following their promotion from the Third Division, under the stewardship of the canny John Rudge, Port Vale were in the

ascendancy, and with a talented side containing the likes of Robbie Earle, Darren Beckford and Ray Walker, our Burslem-based rivals weren't to be taken lightly.

The atmosphere in the ground and the atmosphere around the city in the weeks beforehand was crackling with the buzz of anticipation for this fixture. There was a pretty even split between Stoke and Vale fans in our class (I'd only just moved up to high school) and the banter flying back and forth made the prospect of defeat something that I didn't even dare to acknowledge.

My friend Lee Leighton reckoned that Vale's left-back, Darren Hughes, was so good that he should be capped by England. Wildean wit that I was, I told him that Peter Beagrie would turn Hughes inside out so often that he'd be pissing out of his backside by full-time.

Even the players were feeling the pressure. Carl Beeston recalls receiving numerous phone calls from friends in the days leading up to the game. 'Yeah, the phone kept ringing the week before and people would be saying, "You'd better not lose this game, Beest, we know where you live." And these were supposed to be my mates!' There was a lot at stake here for all concerned.

Even 28 years later, I still have some vivid memories of that day; the sharpest being the moment that Port Vale took the lead, and the sea of black, white and yellow erupting on the old Stoke End in delirious celebration. It sounds awful to say this, and I'll blame my immature mind for such a terrible sentiment, but at that moment in time all I could think of was, 'Die, you fuckers.' I've probably thought that every other time I've seen Vale fans celebrating a goal against us as well, the difference being that as an adult I've never meant it literally. Probably not anyway.

It was the dread of facing my mates on Monday should Vale have beaten us, you see. The gloating and mockery, especially from Lee Leighton, would have been relentless and I knew it. I might have cried had we lost, so I still feel grateful to the long-forgotten midfield nobody Leigh Palin for scoring an equaliser that day.

Well done, Leigh, you bog-standard, journeyman midfielder who most fans will probably have forgotten even existed. You might have only had a career that took in the likes of Bradford

City and Hull, you'll have made nobody's 'Best XI' list, and nobody will ever be searching the internet wondering what happened to you (apart from me, a few seconds ago) but on 23 September 1989, to me you were more important than Gordon Banks, Denis Smith and Stanley Matthews all rolled into one.

A 1-1 draw saved us the embarrassment of losing to our local rivals (the ignominy of seeing them with two more points than us in the league was bad enough!) but we were still faced with the situation of being winless seven games into the season. That wasn't a position that was going to get better for a while yet, either.

By the time the full-time whistle blew following a disappointing 1-1 draw at home to Hull City on 14 October 1989, Stoke had gone a scarcely believable 11 games without a victory. Mick Mills was known for slow starts to the season but this was taking the piss even by his dilatory standards. At this point, we all knew that the longed-for promotion was not going to happen and we hadn't even got to Halloween.

Another horror that we dared not speak of was looming large though, the spectre of a relegation battle, which would mean Stoke playing in the third tier for the first time in over 70 years. We had to get a victory on the board at some point, surely, and that moment of blessed relief came in the very next game, a 2-1 win over West Brom thanks to goals from Gary Hackett and Wayne Biggins.

It was a welcome result but sadly proved to be a false dawn as Stoke went on to lose the next four games and firmly ensconce themselves in the bottom three, a run which ended with an embarrassing 6-0 thrashing at Swindon Town. How did the Stoke fans in the away end respond to this performance? By doing a conga in the rain of course, then indulging in ironic celebrations for the home side's final two goals – not the usual response to seeing your team annihilated, but typical of the black humour that most fans were adopting in order to get through what was starting to look like a miserable season.

Nothing was going right for Stoke. There had been many moments when luck had simply deserted us, but it's not unlucky teams that lose games 6-0, it's very, very bad teams. We were certainly looking like one of those. Something had to change and

the board finally acted by terminating the contract of Mills – a contract he should never have been awarded in the first place.

Peter Coates still thinks fondly though of Mills as a person, and describes him as decent, intelligent and a good judge of a player. 'I never enjoy sacking managers,' he states, 'but sometimes events happen that leave you no choice but to take action. My theory now, looking back, is that we put Mick under pressure to spend the £1m rather than let him do it in his own time, in his own way. I used to get my colleagues ringing me up saying, "Have we bought anybody yet? What's he doing?" and I think perhaps our impatience contributed to the situation. It's a lesson learnt really.'

Two years of slow decline had finally reached an inevitable conclusion. Although the pressure from the board might have been a contributory factor, really Mills only had himself to blame – he kept faith with the frankly awful Bamber until the bitter end of his reign, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his mistake in signing such a misfit.

Other mistakes were also becoming apparent – Ian Scott had barely featured and had looked poor when he did, while Derek Statham looked unfit and disinterested for the most part, eventually losing his place to the man he'd been bought to replace – Cliff Carr, nicknamed 'the Lego Man' as he was probably the smallest full-back ever to grace a football pitch!

There was also the infamous incident when Mills went to watch future England captain David Platt at Crewe and turned down the chance to sign him because he didn't believe him to be as good as either Carl Saunders or Graham Shaw, both of whom were on our books at the time. Being generous, you could say that everyone makes mistakes.

Realising their £1m gamble had failed, yet perhaps failing to realise the very real danger the club was in, the board followed the decision to sack Mills with the sale of star man Peter Beagrie for £750,000 to Everton, recouping most of their summer outlay in one hit.

I was upset at Stoke losing games to teams like Swindon by six goals to nil and I was upset at my team being below Port Vale and in the relegation zone, but nothing upset me like seeing my beloved Beagrie depart the Victoria Ground.

An Ode to Peter Beagrie

The seeds of my Beagrie obsession were first sown after I watched our wide man torment Newcastle Town's motley bunch of plasterers, bus drivers and bricklayers in a meaningless pre-season game at the start of the 1988/89 campaign. It was all very well showboating against men to whom football was just a supplement to the rest of the week's working and drinking, but come the season's arrival Beagrie's brilliance was still apparent even among his fellow professionals.

This new and exciting capture from Sheffield United would be described in the world of tired football clichés as an old-fashioned winger, whose only mission in life was to take possession of a football and dribble with it until his arse bled. Once he'd run out of opponents to beat, he'd gain greater pleasure in turning round and skipping past them again just for a laugh rather than actually parting with ball. At times he was nothing more than a self-indulgent, greedy show-off, but Christ I loved him for it.

Another endearing trait was that, in addition to being the new Stanley Matthews, Beagrie transformed into an Olympic gymnast whenever he got on to the scoresheet, back-flipping and somersaulting his way around the Victoria Ground turf in acrobatic displays of joy.

Embarrassingly, I so longed to *be* Peter Beagrie that I decided to tell the other kids at school that I *too* could do a back-flip, naively failing to anticipate that an outlandish claim such as this would have to be backed up with physical proof. Being as my natural athletic prowess was somewhere between that of a pissed-up sloth and a Christmas pudding, the exact mechanics of how I would accomplish this gymnastic feat had clearly not been calculated by my pre-pubescent brain.

At first, I laughed off these sceptical requests to perform my new and entirely fabricated party piece, but did foolishly promise that I would display this new talent the next time I scored a goal during a PE lesson.

Soon after, in a move that could kindly be described as 'ambitious' but more accurately labelled as 'a fuck-witted act of self-delusion', I confidently declared to the PE teacher, Mr Eckersley that I was the flying left-winger he was looking for in

the high school football trials. Recommending that he should cast aside his arbitrary rule of excluding kids who hadn't played football for their junior school in order to give me the chance to perform some magic, my sure-footed confidence seemed to win the teacher over.

Nobody wants to be the guy who turned down The Beatles and whether old Eckers was fearful of overlooking an undiscovered gem or just relishing the chance to watch this cocky little shit embarrass himself, I'm not sure. All that mattered was that Mr Eckersley had cast me as Peter Beagrie in Team A and the stage was now mine to illuminate.

It was only as I was warming up, doing some purposeless stretches that I'd seen the professionals perform on the telly, that I started to wonder exactly what I should be doing as a left-winger. I'd always played in defence before and knew vaguely where to position myself at the back, even though I was usually too slow to get there in time. However, this left-wing business was uncharted territory, so I figured that just getting my head down and running for the corner flag was the best course of action.

My initial concerns were alleviated somewhat when I first laid eyes on Team B's right-back. He was a squat little fat lad who looked like he'd be more suited to appearing in the school production of Snow White than coping with the slinkiness of my wing skills. Not for a moment did I think I was being overconfident as, after all, if Peter Beagrie could terrorise a hung-over milkman at full-back, I'd absolutely marmalise this four-foot human dumpling. Infused with confidence from dribbling around my Grandma's concrete bird bath several times at the weekend, I awaited the moment when Mr Eckersley would sound the whistle and a new back-flipping wing wizard would be born.

It only took a few seconds for the ball to be spread out wide, and I immediately set off at a less-than-blistering pace towards my dumpy opposite number.

Figuring that a flashy, showy move early in the game would have Mr Eckersley marking a tick next to my name on his team sheet, I decided that I was going to cut inside on to my right foot, only to then trick fatty with a Cruyff turn to the left. This would leave him statuesque, just like Gran's bird bath had unsurprisingly

been, and I'd be nutmegging the centre-half before the applause had even abated.

The next thing I recall is being hit with the force of an articulated lorry, which was, in reality, the feeling of being slide-challenged by an overweight child. 'Good tackle Jones!' hollered Mr Eckersley as I lay in the mud, groaning like some sort of dying cow, wondering why fatty hadn't stood there open-mouthed at my attempted manoeuvre.

This theme recurred throughout the afternoon: me devising increasingly elaborate moves to confound my marker, but fatty reading each pathetic, telegraphed attempt with ease, enabling him to thunder his way into one successful tackle after another. I'd like to tell you now that this young lad overcame his Humpty Dumpty-like build to become an unlikely defensive colossus, and went on to not only represent the school at football, but progressed on to a selection at county level, where he was spotted and signed by Stoke City. I'd like to tell you that this kid's name was Andrew Griffin.

But it wasn't.

He was just some random fat kid playing in a school trial match. A fat kid who must have thought that all his birthday cakes had arrived at once when he realised the opposition left-winger was a big, clumsy carthorse who was even slower than he was, and for the next 90 minutes would be making him look like a decent player.

'James, isn't it?' said Mr Eckersley, jogging over to me as I lay prostrate on the ground for about the fifth time that afternoon. 'Yes sir,' I weakly replied.

'Okay,' he smiled, turning back to the game and writing something on his team sheet. He probably just put a cross through my name, but it wouldn't have been unfair if he'd written the word 'wank' next to it as well, just to emphasise the point.

Needless to say, I didn't make the school team, but it didn't stop me worshipping Peter Beagrie as he was continually the shining beacon of brilliance in what was, it has to be said, a very poor Stoke team.

There were countless sparkling granules of solo Beagrie genius sprinkled throughout the 1988/89 and 89/90 seasons, and

if only hormones would have permitted it, I'd have grown myself a fetching moustache in homage to my new hairy-lipped hero. As it happened, I couldn't even grow pubic hair on my bollocks at this point, so had to settle for scrawling 'Peter Beagrie is ace, OK' on my pencil case instead.

Predictably, my idolisation of Beagrie quickly waned once he was no longer adorned in the precious red and white stripes and I quickly came to terms with his departure, as well as my failure to transform into a mercurial, twinkle-toed winger. My humiliation at the hands of a chubby dwarf on the school games field had seen to the death of that dream, but there were still the backflips ... the backflips that I'd told everybody I could do. Ridiculously, I still maintained that I could perform them. My excuse was that I just needed the right setting, and the middle of a Maths lesson wasn't it, so people would just have to wait until that moment arose. Needless to say, I hoped it never would.

Inevitably, that time did arrive the following summer during a game of rounders, another game that I was hopeless at. The usual routine of me arriving on strike would involve some precociously developed kid with a hairy arse hurling the ball at 90 miles per hour, its intended target being my face. On rare occasions of sporting bravado, my response would be a tokenistic limp-wristed waft with the bat, but the usual reaction was an act of self-preservation, namely ducking out of the way and ambling towards first base. Cordially accepting a meek run-out in exchange for the conservation of my facial features seemed a fair deal to me, so that was how events usually panned out.

It would restore some of my damaged self-esteem to state that on this single occasion, I'd decided that enough was enough, and instead of passively accepting my dismissal from proceedings, I slammed the hairy-arsed kid's delivery into next week like a vengeful Babe Ruth. However, what actually happened was that I performed the usual Quentin Crisp wrist action in the general direction of the ball and somehow the delivery connected straight on to the sweet spot of the bat.

This, to general amazement, meant that the ball pinged over the astonished heads of the outfield and a rising panic as to what I should actually do next. I opted for a leaden-footed jog around