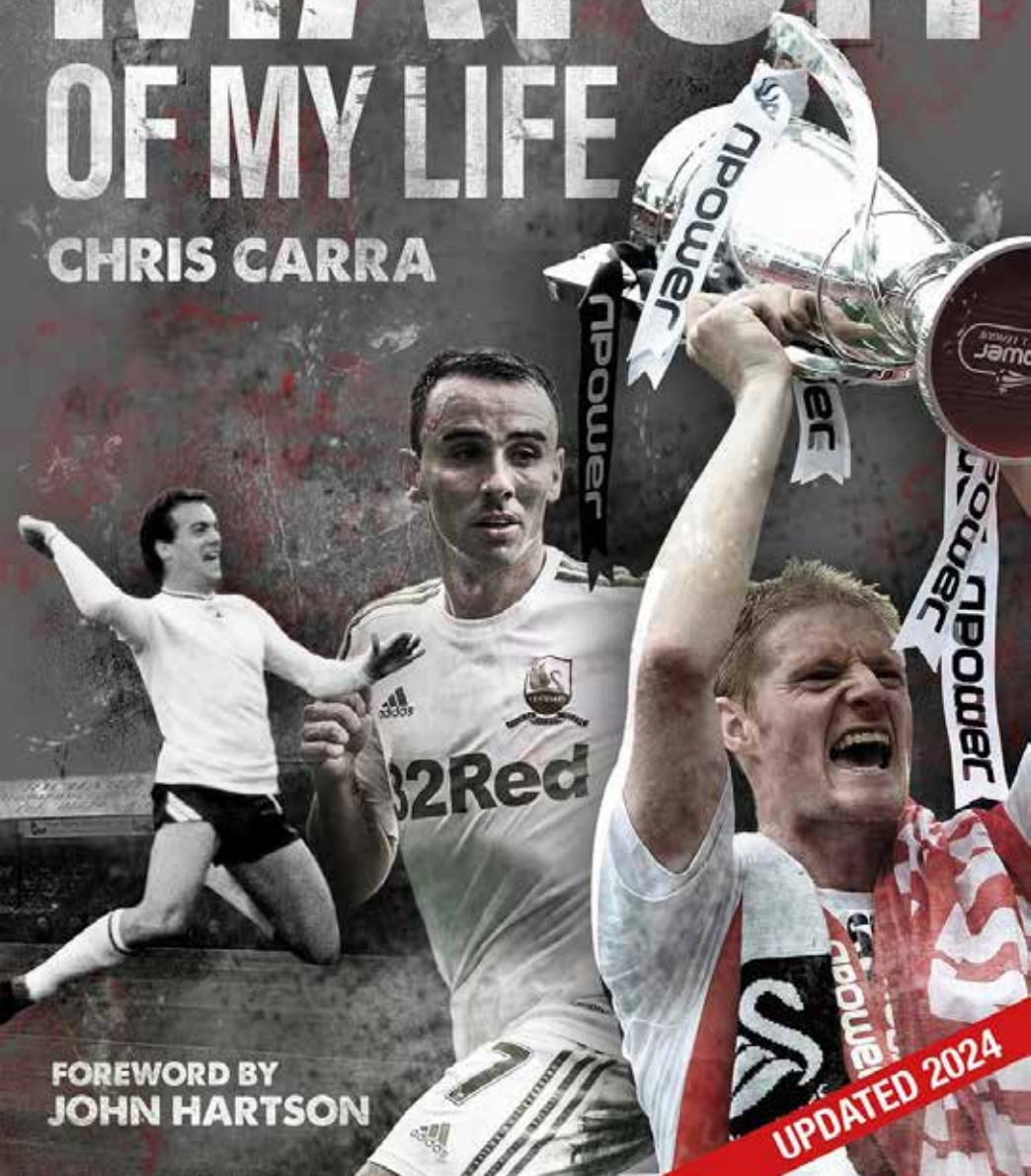


SWANSEA CITY

MATCH

OF MY LIFE

CHRIS CARRA



**FOREWORD BY
JOHN HARTSON**

UPDATED 2024

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BEN CABANGO: BORN 30 MAY 2000, CARDIFF; 161 GAMES, 8 GOALS



Ben Cabango

Cardiff City 0–4 Swansea City

Championship

Cardiff City Stadium, 2 April 2022

Having been with Swansea City since the age of 15, adeptly rising through the age groups and into the senior team, Ben Cabango has become one of the first names on the team sheet – this is certainly the case when it comes to matches against Cardiff. The Welsh international relishes playing against his hometown, and has made his mark in no less than five South Wales derbies. Of the many derby matches that have featured in this book, none are quite as historic as the Championship game in April 2022, when Swansea finally did the league double over their bitter rivals.

Swansea City: Fisher, Cabango, Naughton, Latibeaudiere, Christie, Grimes, Downes, Wolf, Piroe (Congreve), Paterson (Fulton), Obafemi (Smith)

Cardiff City: Smithies, Drameh, Ng, Flint, McGuinness, Bagan, Doyle (Colwill), Wintle, Ralls, Hugill (Ikpeazuat), Harris (Davies)

Swansea Scorers: Obafemi (2), Cabango, Wolf

Referee: Joshua Smith

Attendance: 27,280

GROWING up in Cardiff, it's easy to see why people naturally assume that I was a Cardiff City fan as a kid – but that was far from the case.

For some reason, I have always been a Liverpool fan. I used to idolise Steven Gerrard, who was just the best back then. We also happened to have the same birthday, which was a nice coincidence.

When it came to defenders, my favourite centre-back was always Rio Ferdinand. Even though he played for United, he was inspirational. He was a top-quality player on the ball and he could defend – the perfect modern centre-back. I remember watching clips of him on YouTube before games, just to get me into the spirit. He influenced how I approach the game now – comfortable on the ball, but a defend-first defender who just wants to get the best of a striker and keep clean sheets.

When I first came to Swansea, my favourite player soon became Ashley Williams, who was easily the standout centre-back at the time. I never had much of a chance to work with him, even though I did see him in the Wales camps from time to time. But I was always watching and learning.

I joined Swansea City when I was 15 years old and I never looked back. I may have been born in Cardiff, but there's no argument that I'm now a Swansea boy.

As a kid, it didn't really register with me that there was a big rivalry on the pitch between Swansea and Cardiff. This changed as soon as I joined Swansea and played in my first derby under Steve Cooper. This is when I experienced how big the South Wales derby is first-hand.

I'll always remember that game. Going into it, I was pretty nervous. I remember an early cross coming into the six-yard box, which I just about managed to head over our bar. For a split second I was shitting myself, thinking, 'If I score an own goal here in my first South Wales derby ...'

That game was when I had a scuffle with Robert Glatzel. I fouled him on the halfway line and, because he reacted, I decided that I might as well put a bit into him. All the drama got the crowd up and that spurred us on.

Since then, the Cardiff game has always been one I look forward to. As soon as the fixtures come out, the first game I search for is

against Cardiff, both the home and away games. As footballers, these are the games you want to be involved in and want to do well in.

Having played Cardiff twice a season for the last few years, most of us know what to expect and know what's at stake. There are a lot of local boys in the team like Ollie Cooper, Liam Cullen and Joe Allen, and they obviously know what it's all about.

Our newer signings soon find out. If there was ever any doubt, the guys we work with each day make sure to drill it into them.

We have a team full of proud Swansea fans, like Chris the chef and Mike and Shaun the kitmen. These local guys really bring across how much the game means to them – and to Swansea fans in general.

In fact, in the cafeteria at our training facility, a small chalkboard appears 14 days before any game against Cardiff. It's placed right where you grab your food. Each time we go to get a meal, we can see exactly how many days are left until the game. Things like this definitely drill the derby into your mind.

Then as soon as you've played in one, you know the magnitude of the game and you know what to expect next time.

With all the nerves and excitement, anything can go in these games. In the last few seasons, there was an extra buzz around the fixture as one team was always on the cusp of making history by doing something no other Swansea or Cardiff squad had done in over a century: winning the double.

I remember when Steve Cooper was in charge, we won the first one and set up the double, but we could never win the second and seal the deal. It may be crazy to think that in 110 years it had never happened, but it's more difficult to do than it seems!

In the 2021/22 season, we had once again set up the double having beaten them 3-0 at our place in October. I didn't play in that game, but Jamie Paterson opened the scoring with a lovely goal from 25 yards out, then set up the goals for Joël Piroe and Jake Bidwell in the second half.

The way that game went, beating them so comfortably, I think Cardiff would probably have gone into the second game with a lot of fear. Plus, we were on a good run at the time. All things considered, there was a lot of pressure on Cardiff to prevent us from doing the double.

Obviously, there was something to lose for us too, because we wanted to be the first team to make history in such a way. Yet we went in with the attitude of no fear. We knew the job we had to do and we knew that if we played anywhere near our best that day, we were the better team.

The day arrived and, like any other matchday, it felt pretty normal for me. I'll wake up and eat breakfast, go for a little walk, have a coffee, then arrive at the stadium for pre-match. For the Cardiff game, we get on the bus to go 40 miles up the road and there's definitely a different atmosphere as you're driving down the M4.

At the stadium, we will always have a team talk to fire everyone up. But in reality, this isn't a game you really need firing up for – you can sense how much it means.

I've found that every manager respects the derby, but Russell Martin seemed to take it the most seriously. He really understood the importance of community spirit and got everyone involved.

For example, he was the one who arranged for Mike the kitman to make a speech in the changing room before the game. Hearing how important the derby was from a lifelong fan was quite emotional and I feel like it got everyone up for the game. Little things like this really make a difference.

But it wasn't all emotion. Russ made sure everyone knew what the derby was about, but not at the cost of being overwhelming.

At that stage we were very comfortable playing his style of ultimate football. For the gameplan against Cardiff, nothing really changed apart from the intensity.

Initially, this style of football was different to anything I'd ever come across before. Playing out from the back at all costs, it was a bit extreme compared to anything I had experienced. I am always someone who has been comfortable on the ball, but it took me a little while to adapt.

I remember the first thing he said to us centre-backs: 'You're going to head the ball the least number of times in your career,' and I thought, 'Here we go!' The first game we played under him was against Blackburn away. We had to try this style of play and really be brave on the ball. Even if the opposition were pressing hard, we would have to work around it.

It definitely took some getting used to, but Russ did something that helped us settle: he would take responsibility off any mistakes

we made, especially at the start when we were trying things for the first time.

We would make the odd mistake, which was expected when playing in such a different system. As we adapted, it really helped knowing that we had space to make some errors. But then his standards got higher and we needed to match them. In the end, it started to click.

It certainly clicked that spring day in Cardiff, when we won the double.

As we walked out on to the pitch, the first thing we could hear was the travelling Swansea fans in the away corner. As we all ran over, the roar we received was immense – it's enough to give you goosebumps. It sets the tone for the day, because all you could hear was non-stop singing after that.

The match couldn't have started any better for us. From the first whistle, we were in total control. We actually almost scored within 35 seconds as Oba beat the offside trap, but he couldn't connect with the pass.

But that didn't matter because he did put the ball in the back of the net in the sixth minute to give us the early lead.

That quick goal took a lot of pressure off us and piled more on to Cardiff. But they couldn't really do much to change it. The way we were playing at the time, we were dominating the football and they couldn't really get near to us. Because of this, the rest of the half was so comfortable.

We came in at half-time with our 1-0 lead intact and we were all so confident knowing that Cardiff needed to change something to actually bring it back, otherwise we were going to make history.

We knew that they were going in to have a bollocking and they had to change something. But whatever they were planning didn't work because we came out in the second half and did exactly the same thing.

Our domination meant they started to press us a bit more, but that just played into our hands as we found more space to play through.

Then, in the 57th minute, we had a corner. It fell to Matt Grimes who took a shot, which deflected and dropped to me. Without thinking, I just hit it – and I hit it well. It came off my foot and flew into the bottom corner like a rocket.

It was probably my best ever goal – I don't think I'd be able to do something like that again!

As soon as it dropped in, I ran over to the Swans fans in the corner. Knowing that my family were there in the stands made it even more emotional. A few of my mates are Cardiff fans and they were also in the stands that day – they didn't have many good things to say about my goal when they were texting me after the game!

At the moment I scored, it felt like we had done it. Scoring like that and adding a second at a time when we were dominating the game in such a way felt as if it was done. I didn't really see a way back for Cardiff, unless they could find a little lucky goal.

Of course, looking back, I wouldn't actually say that it was the winning goal. There's always a danger when you are 2-0 up. It only takes one goal from them and the momentum of the game can switch.

The killer for them came in the 78th minute, when Hannes Wolf met a cross with his head to put us three goals up. Then the fourth didn't come too long after with Oba curling it into the top corner. That was the game.

When we had actually done it, it was such a great feeling knowing we would be going down in history alongside so many other legendary Swans matches. We would never be forgotten and we'd always have that one up on Cardiff.

I honestly felt like winning a cup final for us and, because of this, the celebrations were unreal. All I'll say is that it was a good Saturday night down Wind Street!

As I mentioned, it was strange that in 110 years, neither team had done the double. What was even stranger is that the next double came along the very next year.

That game was pretty similar to the first double we did, in that we were totally dominating again. We went two goals up in the first half through Joël and Culls, and things felt comfortable.

But, like I say, 2-0 can be a dangerous score. Straight after our second goal, Cardiff scored from long range and the momentum of the game instantly changed. Cardiff were on top and they nicked a late one to take the score to 2-2.

It couldn't have been set up any better for me to spoil their party.

In the very last minute, I remember Jay took a free kick and it rebounded off the wall. He hit it again and it smacked the post and

fell to me. Time just slowed down as I poked it goalward and, as soon as it crossed the line, it was just limbs. I don't think I'll ever get that feeling in football again. Pretty much the final kick of the game and we had done the *double* double!

Making history with any club is a dream, but to do it with a club that I have been with since I was a teenager was very special.

My move to Swansea came about when I was with Newport. We were playing against Swansea Under-16s and, after the game, my dad told me that the Swansea scout liked the look of me and that they were arranging a trial. The day arrived and they liked me, luckily. I moved to Swansea when I was 16 and have been here ever since.

You put in so much hard work, dedication and sacrifice to make it as a footballer, and so do your parents. So, when it actually comes through and I made my debut with Swansea, it was such a proud moment for me and my family.

It's still quite early in my career, but when I look back, doing the double over Cardiff will definitely be remembered.

I've already done so much in such a short space of time, including scoring in the Champions League for TNS, travelling to Qatar with Wales for the World Cup in 2022, and I was also in the Euros squad the previous year.

I didn't play in these games but it was an honour to travel with the squad, and such a valuable experience being among top-quality players. I'd love to get to another World Cup with Wales. We have a really good young squad and we just need to keep building momentum and improving.

I would also like to eventually look back on playing in the Premier League – that's a big ambition of mine. Not just one season, but I want to solidify myself as a Premier League footballer.

You have to aim high as a footballer, otherwise you are never going to push yourself to achieve goals. I just have to keep working hard, which feels slightly easier to do when you are with a club like Swansea.