

The
Greatest
of **GREAT**
ESCAPES

**Rotherham United's
Finest Hour**

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Chapter One

Reset and Refresh

NO SOONER had Rotherham United beaten Reading 2-1 at the New York Stadium in their penultimate game of 2014/15 to secure their place in the Championship for another year, than a new season was dawning. It was a new season which brought with it fresh hopes, dreams and expectations. And after getting through their first year back in the second tier of English football – with a minor hitch – there was a sneaking suspicion that the Millers might just be able to make a go of it this time around.

Manager Steve Evans took in the moment out on the balcony at the club's shiny 12,000-seater home, which was close to full capacity on that memorable evening as he addressed a mass of red-and-white-shirted supporters in the wake of a victory over the Royals which clinched survival with a game to spare. There were scenes reminiscent of the Millers' play-off semi-final second leg triumph over Preston North End a year earlier when fans spilled on to the pitch after Evans's men booked a date at Wembley, where they would go on to seal promotion under the famous arch in the League One play-off final. The feeling this time was just as good, if not better.

But before the Scotsman hit the fancy dress shops to purchase a sombrero and a pair of colourful board shorts for the trip to Elland Road on the final day of the season (more on that later), he issued one final Braveheart-esque rallying cry,

telling Sky Sports after the win: 'They can take our points, but they will never take our fighting spirit and passion to stay in the division.'

Realistically, supporters of the club were under no illusions that it was likely to be more of the same the following year. As the division's newcomers in the summer of 2014, it was almost inevitable that Rotherham would be earmarked as favourites for relegation, but it was much more than that. Punching above their weight might have just about summed it up – taking into account various different factors, from finances to facilities – but nobody could call into question their merit as a Championship club. Rotherham had earned their place in the division and it had been a long road back. If the previous 12 months had taught the fans anything, it was that their team weren't going down without a fight. The league's so-called minnows could still be the masters of their own destiny if they put their heart and soul into it. They had already proven as much. Equally, they knew only too well how to be the architects of their own downfall, as they almost were on more than one occasion over the course of the impending 2015/16 campaign.

Dull moments in the club's recent history have been few and far between, from the highs of a double promotion to the lows of battling the drop. The concept of a 'yo-yo club' has become universally accepted in football. So much so that the majority of countries have their own equivalent terminology. Rotherham so often find themselves shoehorned into that category. There might be few guarantees in football but those supporters waiting in line to pick up their season tickets or awaiting their arrival in the post could be assured that the 2015/16 season would be another entertaining one, whatever the outcome. Rotherham were no humdrum football club.

Indeed, Rotherham were a club who had enjoyed some good times in the second tier in seasons gone by. In 1954/55,

they came as close as they have ever done to reaching the promised land. After recording their highest-ever league finish the season prior, they went one better the following term, placing third in the old Division Two standings. By October, the club were sitting pretty at the top of the table, only to be knocked off their perch following defeat to Liverpool at Anfield. They dusted themselves off, winning seven games on the spin as the season came to a close and, with just two games remaining, the Millers needed four points to see them promoted to the top flight.

Come the end of the campaign, the club were tied on points with nearest challengers and eventual champions Birmingham City and runners-up Luton Town. The Millers missed out on goal average. They had scored more goals than both the Blues and the Hatters, their tally of 94 surpassing Birmingham's 92 and Luton's 88. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Fast forward some 60 years and, despite spending large parts of the 2014/15 campaign – particularly towards a nervy, latter half of the season – with their fingers, toes and everything else crossed, the Millers were seemingly a club on the up once again.

It had been a decade of peaks and troughs for the Millers, who had been relegated from the newly rebranded Championship at the end of the 2004/05 season. They finished rock bottom, where they had spent most of the season, of the second tier, 21 points short of safety. After registering just five wins in 46 league games, former manager Ronnie Moore eventually departed.

Struggles on and off the field ensued as the club's very existence hung in the balance and supporters fought to save Rotherham United. The Millers twice went into administration before they were exiled from the town following a dispute with their former landlord. Instructed to return to Rotherham within four years under the stipulations

set out by the football authorities, they vacated and moved to Don Valley Stadium in Sheffield. The sporting venue – where Olympic gold medallist Jessica Ennis-Hill used to train – had a pitch which was separated from the spectator stands by an athletics track which ran the circumference of the stadium. The chasm, both physically and metaphorically, deepened as they faced an uncertain future. But a lot can change in ten years and the Millers rose from the ashes.

A change of ownership saw local businessman Tony Stewart give the club a new lease of life. After eventually returning to the town to christen the newly constructed New York Stadium, the club achieved back-to-back promotions, sending the Millers shooting back up from League Two to the Championship. Evans, the man who would lead the club into battle in 2015/16, had given the fanbase something to cheer about once again.

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With pre-season on the horizon and the 2015/16 campaign fast approaching, Rotherham boss Evans had a figure in mind of how many new recruits he wanted to bring to the club as he plotted his course of action for the upcoming transfer window. The Scotsman, who said he had already identified a handful of key targets, revealed he hoped to bring in ‘six or seven’ permanent signings. He also admitted that he had perhaps overused the loan market in 2014/15, with the club bringing in 19 players on temporary deals over the course of the campaign. It was an honest and frank assessment from Evans.

‘We want permanent signings in the main. We recognise that we brought in too many loan signings last season, but sometimes you have to bring them in to cover for injury or just to make us stronger,’ he told the club’s official website at the beginning of June. ‘Of course, everyone understands that when you’re Rotherham United

and you go into the Championship level, it's fantastic for us all, but the task gets harder for Paul Douglas [chief operating officer] in terms of getting players over the line and agreeing the finances.'

On paper, the Rotherham manager was building a squad with an ideal blend of experienced heads and youthful spirit. Aidy White was one of Evans's first signings. The left-sided player arrived from Leeds United, where he came through the ranks, gaining experience on loan in League One with Oldham Athletic and Sheffield United. Unfortunately, he would later depart Rotherham with just a handful of appearances to his name.

Evans also secured the signatures of Sheffield Wednesday defensive duo Joe Mattock and Lewis Buxton on free transfers. Mattock's capture, in particular, would prove to be a shrewd piece of business. The left-back finished up as the club's second-longest-serving player behind Richard Wood when he left Rotherham for Harrogate Town in May 2022, making over 200 appearances for the club, winning three League One promotions and an EFL Trophy to boot.

Mattock and Buxton were soon joined by former Owls team-mate Chris Maguire, who swapped one South Yorkshire postcode for another on a free transfer, with Evans looking to add to Rotherham's attacking roster. However, the striker, who bagged 18 goals in 79 league games for the Owls, had some amends to make. His celebrations in Wednesday's last-gasp local derby win over Rotherham earlier in the year, when he shushed the home supporters after Atdhe Nuhui netted the decider in injury time, had touched a nerve. Fortunately for him, it was a game that Millers fans were keen to banish from the memory.

Perhaps the most intriguing new face wasn't such a new face at all, but a familiar one. The return of Emmanuel Ledesma sparked excitement among the fanbase, who were

taken back to see the former Middlesbrough winger return. Supporters had instantly taken to the attacker when he first joined on loan from Boro in November 2014 on an emergency deal. He headed back to the Riverside after making seven appearances in a Millers shirt. Despite Rotherham holding talks with the Teesside club over a potential return – with Evans revealing the club lodged a bid for the player, who ended up being out of their price range – the Argentine was loaned out again to Brighton & Hove Albion until the end of the campaign.

In the summer of 2015, it was confirmed that Ledesma would become a Rotherham player on a permanent basis after the club fought off interest from elsewhere in the Championship. However, things didn't quite go as planned. The 27-year-old started three games – two of which were in the League Cup – and came off the bench a further five times. He was used sparingly for the remainder of a disappointing individual campaign before being released at the end of the season. It was a baffling turn of events that left fans wondering why things didn't quite click the second time around.

The first name on Evans's wishlist was Greg Halford, the utility man released by Nottingham Forest in the summer who had played in the Premier League during his career with a handful of different clubs. Halford had dabbled with positions all over the pitch. Able to play almost anywhere across the backline, he could also do a job in midfield or as a striker if required. Halford, who netted eight goals in 82 appearances for Forest and brought an abundance of Championship experience to the table, was hoping to take his career in a new direction and shake off his utility man tag by homing in on his preferred position up front.

In an interview with the club website, Evans highlighted that Halford was 'quite simply top of that list' he had given

to the chairman at the start of pre-season. The player was handed the captain's armband before the campaign got under way, with the Rotherham boss entrusting him with the responsibility of leading the team out in the Championship, but it didn't last long.

'I chose Rotherham over other teams because I was going there as a striker,' Halford recalls. 'That's where I wanted to play. Before, I played at Forest and had a number of games up top for them and scored a lot of goals, so I wanted to rebuild my career as a striker. I wanted to challenge myself.'

'I played 45 minutes as a striker in pre-season, then I started the season as a centre-back, where I hadn't trained. I didn't perform on the pitch, which translated to the fans that I wasn't really bothered, and it was tough to win them back over. I was very close to handing in a transfer request after pre-season. At that point, I did regret signing. It was a place I didn't want to work and I didn't have a great first season but, eventually, I got my act together and put it right.'

Another player the Millers were in pursuit of was a 22-year-old winger from Peterborough United. Joe Newell was already acquainted with one of his future comrades at Rotherham, having played alongside Lee Frecklington while coming through the ranks at London Road and all it took was a phone call to the midfielder to get his take on the situation.

'I was lucky in the fact that I knew Lee Frecklington,' Newell explains. 'When I broke through at Peterborough, he was a big help for me coming through. He was one of the older pros that really looked out for me and helped me settle in with the first team.'

'I knew he was at Rotherham. The day I drove up to Rotherham for my first day, I rang him and said "Hi, mate. Long time, no speak. Bit of a mad one but I'm coming up to Rotherham now." He was like "Joe, as much as I'd love to see you mate, you need to turn around. This isn't the club for you".'

He said, “The way you play football, big Steve isn’t going to suit you.” Luckily, I didn’t listen to him!

‘They wanted me to go and train for a week, so I played a trial game first of all against Mainz from Germany in the last pre-season friendly. I was at Peterborough going into the last year of my contract and I told them that I wasn’t signing a new deal there. Their policy was that as soon as you’re in the last year of your contract, you’re on the transfer list, so I knew I was getting sold that summer somehow. Steve Evans, with his connections to Peterborough, and the chairman knew of me.’

Newell was taken on trial by Rotherham during pre-season and eventually, after impressing Evans, put pen to paper on a three-year deal as the Millers parted with an undisclosed fee for the winger. Another astute signing from the Rotherham chief.

Despite his vow not to dip into the loan market as frequently, he turned to Premier League giants Tottenham Hotspur to enquire about taking Grant Ward for a season to give the young midfielder his first taste of Championship football on the back of a short stint at Coventry City in League One the year prior.

‘I was at Coventry the season before and Chicago Fire [in Major League Soccer] and I’d done quite well, so there were a few teams interested,’ Ward says. ‘They asked if I’d be interested and the staff at Spurs heard a few things about Steve Evans, so they told me to go there for a few days first to see how I felt. I went with one of the staff and I liked it.’

‘It was game time and the opportunity to play in the Championship, which was the highest level I’d played at. I was in League One the season before. Me and the boys at Spurs thought it would be good progression.’

Evans also signed up two central defenders with equally impressive credentials on opposite ends of the spectrum. The Millers snatched up former England youth international

and under-17s European champion Tom Thorpe from Manchester United. The 22-year-old, who captained the Red Devils to FA Youth Cup success, boasted a sterling CV but ultimately had a largely forgettable stay at the New York Stadium. On the other hand, Danny Collins had spent the best part of his career plying his trade in the Premier League with the likes of Stoke City and Sunderland, before making the switch to Rotherham from Championship rivals Nottingham Forest.

The goalkeeping department was an entirely different story for the Millers, who, since their promotion back to the Championship, had struggled to find consistency between the sticks. Over the course of the 2014/15 season, Evans had rotated between Wembley shoot-out hero Adam Collin and new signing Scott Loach, before Rotherham made a move to sign Arsenal's Emiliano Martínez. He arrived on a short-term loan deal in March 2015 to cover for injuries as Loach headed out to Yeovil Town.

Future World Cup winner Martínez edged out Collin, putting in an impressive shift to help the Millers to stay up but, once again, Rotherham were on the hunt for a new number one. They turned to Derby County's up-and-coming stopper Kelle Roos. The 23-year-old had caught the Rams' eye while on the books of non-league Nuneaton Town but had only made occasional appearances in cup competitions. Roos would experience his first taste of league football with the Millers. He was handed the number one jersey by Evans, suggesting he would be preferred over Collin. Roos, however, didn't make the best first impression, the keeper shipping ten goals in the opening five games and making several costly errors which led to criticism from supporters. It resulted in his loan spell being cut short just six weeks in.

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If the dramatic fight to the finish in 2014/15 wasn't hair-raising enough, the 2015/16 campaign would hold even more thrills and spills. With just three games of 2014/15 remaining, the Millers looked all but safe for another year until a points deduction sent their season down to the wire.

In April 2015, Rotherham were docked three points and fined £30,000 for fielding an ineligible player in Derby loanee Farrend Rawson. The defender, who arrived on a 28-day youth loan from the Rams in March, was named in the starting line-up for the Millers' home fixture against Brighton in early April. However, the teenager's agreement had expired. The punishment left the club precariously perched one point above the drop zone and right back in the fight against relegation.

'I only played a handful of games and when we played against Brighton my loan was up supposedly, which nobody knew about,' Rawson states. 'I was only 18. I was just playing football and I thought other people would deal with that. We beat Brighton and I woke up on Sunday to find my phone was ringing tenfold. They were asking me to come in and it got released to the media about a points deduction for an ineligible player, which was me, obviously.'

'I got sent back to Derby after that, so I didn't have a clue what was going off. Thankfully enough, it didn't affect the season and we managed to stay up because I would've felt devastated massively. As an 18-year-old, I was thinking, "Something must be sorted or I wouldn't be in the team, surely?"'

Nevertheless, Evans's side defied the odds to beat the drop as Millwall, Wigan Athletic and Blackpool were relegated to League One and Rotherham survived their first season back in the Championship after a nine-year absence. However, Rawson faced some backlash.

'I was having people messaging me aggressively and showing a lot of hate towards me,' he continues. 'At one time,

people were calling up the club and asking where I lived. I just thought, “This is crazy. How was I supposed to know the loan was up?”

He put all that behind him when Rotherham came knocking again in the summer to re-sign him on loan, jumping at the chance to return to the New York Stadium and start afresh ahead of the new campaign.

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A host of incomings inevitably meant there would be a few outgoing and it was time to bid a fond farewell to some of the Millers’ Wembley heroes. Among those who headed for the exit that summer were Ben Pringle, Craig Morgan and Kári Árnason. The trio had played their part in the club’s successive promotions under Evans, writing their names into the history books in the process. However, the team that helped Rotherham to get where they were had slowly been dismantled, player by player.

Pringle departed for second-tier rivals Fulham, having become a popular figure at Rotherham after signing for the club from Derby in the summer of 2011. As free transfers go, Pringle was worth his salt for the club. He was recognised in the PFA’s League One team of the year in 2013/14 and his form didn’t go unnoticed, either. In the January 2015 transfer window, Millers assistant Paul Raynor told BBC Radio Sheffield that a fee had been agreed with Millwall for the sale of Pringle – who scored 19 goals in 147 league appearances for the club – but the player ‘couldn’t agree personal terms’, feeling it wasn’t the ‘right move’ for him at the time. So, it didn’t come as a surprise when he was snapped up by the Cottagers in 2016 on a free transfer.

Skipper Morgan – the club’s players’ player of the year in 2014/15 – came to an agreement with Wigan. The Welshman, who had earned 23 caps for his country, had

been with Rotherham since 2012, when he made the switch from Preston. He was later handed the captaincy by Evans at the beginning of the 2013/14 season after Johnny Mullins departed the club and was at the heart of the defence as the Millers bounced back to the Championship, partnering the outgoing Árnason. During the summer, he revealed that, although he had interest from elsewhere, he wanted to remain a Millers player. However, Morgan later opted to join League One side Wigan, hoping to add another promotion to his CV.

Meanwhile, Árnason, an Icelandic international, swapped the Championship for the Champions League, returning home to the country of his birth, Sweden, to sign for Malmö and it was an opportunity that nobody would begrudge him. Like Morgan, the central defender joined the club in the summer of 2012 as Rotherham geared up for a promotion push. He arrived from Scottish outfit Aberdeen but his experience of playing in the Championship with Plymouth Argyle stood him in good stead when he returned to England. Upon his departure, boss Evans heaped high praise on the 32-year-old, who went on to make his first appearance in a major tournament at Euro 2016, where he found himself coming up against the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo. Evans highlighted Árnason's 'loyalty' to Rotherham when speaking to the club's official website, adding: 'The big fella will always have a place in the hearts of the Millers faithful after playing such a huge part in the success this football club has enjoyed over the last three seasons.'

Now, just three members of the triumphant Wembley squad of 2013/14 remained: Frecklington, Richie Smallwood and Collin. A new team was taking shape under Evans.

'At Rotherham, it's the same every year,' says Smallwood. 'The turnover of players is that huge, it takes some players time to get used to their new team-mates. You see it at most clubs, that bedding-in period. That is a factor each season,

certainly while I was there anyway. It's not easy, but you try to hit it off as quickly as possible. The players who got the promotion from League One weren't given a fair chance, but it happens at clubs; they try to move the team on to bring better players in.'

Mark Bradley, Richard Brindley, Rob Milsom, Mat Sadler, Loach and Conor Newton, in addition to academy graduates Tony Thompson and Daniel Rowe, were also informed they would be leaving the club that summer.

Bradley had been with Rotherham since 2010, first signed by Ronnie Moore from Walsall. The defender played 33 times as Rotherham won promotion from League Two in 2012/13. He went on to feature in a further 28 games the following season when the Millers ascended via the play-offs but, after sustaining anterior cruciate ligament damage to his knee in a game against Oldham in March 2014, it would be Bradley's last involvement, later announcing his retirement from professional football.

Fellow full-back Brindley departed after two years. The right-back stepped up following that injury to Bradley but fell out of favour when loan star James Tavernier joined from Newcastle United. After spending time with Colchester United on loan in 2014/15, he made the switch a permanent one.

Milsom joined Rotherham in 2013 after the Millers had won promotion to League One. He played a handful of games in the Championship in 2014/15 but eventually signed for League Two side Notts County. Meanwhile, Sadler transferred to his former club Shrewsbury Town after loans with Crawley Town and Oldham in 2014/15 put him out of the picture. Having been with the Millers for just a year, the full-back failed to make a single appearance during his short stint in South Yorkshire.

Loach would also sign for Notts County, having been unable to make the number one jersey his own since putting

pen to paper with the newly promoted Millers in 2014, acting as understudy to Collin in between a series of loan spells with Bury, Peterborough United and Yeovil Town.

Newton joined Cambridge United after his contract at Rotherham expired, making 14 appearances in the Championship after Evans picked the midfielder up from Newcastle. They all made way for a new team to make their mark and consolidate Rotherham's place in the Championship.

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The need to strengthen the backline became even more paramount when, less than a week before players were due to return to training in preparation for the new season, Rotherham received news that defender Kirk Broadfoot had been handed a ten-game ban. The penalty, which ruled him out for a large part of the start of the campaign, was the longest suspension in English football for verbal abuse at the time. Broadfoot's ban surpassed the eight-game penalty issued to Luis Suárez by the FA in 2011 when the then-Liverpool striker was found guilty of racially abusing Manchester United's Patrice Evra.

The incident took place in March 2015 against relegation rivals Wigan. Rotherham suffered a 2-1 defeat in the game when the Millers defender became embroiled in a verbal altercation with James McClean.

A statement from the Football Association stated that Broadfoot would be required pay a fine of £7,500 and complete an education programme as part of his punishment. It read: 'Following an independent regulatory commission hearing, Rotherham United's Kirk Broadfoot will serve an immediate ten-match suspension after a misconduct charge against him was found proven.

'The charge was that during a league fixture between Rotherham and Wigan Athletic on 14 March 2015 Broadfoot

used abusive and/or insulting words towards a member of the opposition ... Broadfoot was also fined £7,500 and ordered to complete an education programme.'

Boss Evans faced the prospect of being without one of the previous season's top performers until early October although Broadfoot would surely be raring to go once he'd served his spell on the sidelines.

'I actually finished the end of the season before that really well, so I was feeling really good. I'd done a lot of fitness work with Warney [Paul Warne],' Broadfoot says. 'Me and him were doing a lot of extra training, so I was ready to go, but I couldn't. The amount of running we did during that time, I felt really fit when I was ready to go. The thing about being in England is there are so many games. It [the duration of the suspension] wasn't as long as if I was up in Scotland; you were looking at maybe four months to get ten games in up there.'

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As was tradition, Rotherham kicked off pre-season with their annual friendly fixture against local non-league outfit Parkgate, giving fans the chance to run the rule over a host of new faces. Steve Evans fielded two different teams either side of the break. Ledesma, Paul Green, Grant Ward, Danny Ward and Jerry Yates all made the scoresheet in an emphatic display as the Millers got the campaign under way with a 6-0 victory.

Pre-season continued with trips to semi-professional sides Stocksbridge Park Steels and Alfreton Town. Smallwood, Grant Ward and Jonson Clarke-Harris were all on target in a 3-0 win at Stocksbridge before the Millers slipped to a 3-2 defeat to Alfreton, with Ward grabbing both goals. Nonetheless, it provided a good workout for the side before they headed north of the border to Scotland for a tour of Evans's homeland.

On their travels, Rotherham picked up a 3-0 win against Greenock Morton – Halford, Frecklington and Clarke-Harris the scorers – and a 1-0 triumph over Dundee, courtesy of a Green strike, before playing out a 1-1 draw with Partick Thistle in which Matt Derbyshire opened his account for pre-season.

In the penultimate fixture in the pre-season schedule, Rotherham hosted Leicester City who, unbeknown to the crowd of just over 3,600 inside the stadium that evening, would go on to be crowned Premier League champions that season. Riyad Mahrez and David Nugent struck in the second half for the Foxes to give them a 2-0 lead before Grant Ward halved the deficit with ten minutes remaining.

Rotherham went out on a high when they entertained Bundesliga outfit Mainz in South Yorkshire a week before the season got under way. This time, it was Derbyshire and Jordan Bowery among the goals for the Millers in a 2-1 victory. That meant that Evans's men finished pre-season with five wins in eight. All the signs suggested Rotherham fans could hold high hopes for the new campaign. However, nobody could have predicted what was in store and one of the Millers' new recruits, Mattock, summed it up perfectly when reflecting on his time at the club.

‘The previous three years before, when I was at Sheffield Wednesday, was all pretty much middle of the table – not really threatening for the play-offs but not really at risk of going down. It was mainly a steady Championship season,’ he says. ‘Going into Rotherham, straight from the off, we were on the back foot. It was almost like “Welcome to Rotherham. Here we go.”’