

Leeds United – From Darkness into White

The Year of Resurrection

Phil Hay



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About the Author

Phil Hay was born in Edinburgh and has been a journalist for over six years. He was promoted to chief soccer writer of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* two years ago. *Leeds United - From Darkness into White* is his first book.

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Foreword by Eddie Gray



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE BASIS OF EVERY STORY IS ITS SUBJECT, AND I AM indebted to Leeds United - their players, their staff and their supporters - for the pleasure of a season which can only be described as an author's dream. No club does plot lines like Leeds United, and no journalist could ask for a more fascinating or unique club to cover. The job is never more satisfying than when players, coaches and supporters excel as they did during the 2007-08 season. Kevin Blackwell, the club's former manager, used to say that nothing rolls with the relentless power of a Leeds United bandwagon. He was not wrong.

I owe considerable thanks to Iain MacGregor, Mainstream's Associate Publisher, for suggesting this project and for the enthusiasm he has shown from the first day of writing to the last. At no stage were his demands anything other than fair and reasonable, and it helped enormously to be working with someone whose interest in the subject matched my own. Further praise is due to Graeme Blaikie, particularly for arranging the photographs for this book, and to everyone else at Mainstream who has been involved in the project. I could not have asked for more professional publishers.

A mention should also be made of my old sports editor at the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Phil Rostron, who recommended that I take this book on and proved a valuable source of advice in the early days of writing.

I'm extremely grateful to Eddie Gray for providing the excellent foreword for this publication, and also for his

friendly and entertaining company at home and away throughout the season. I have never met a more patient and willing autograph-signer, or a man with more inherent passion for football. He is a credit to his sport and his club, and Leeds United will never have a better ambassador.

Football is a game of opinions and your own is never enough, so I valued the chance to chew the fat over the course of the season with other journalists who followed Leeds United: Adam Pope of BBC Radio Leeds, Richard Sutcliffe of the *Yorkshire Post*, Paul Dews of Leeds United, Mark Walker of PA Sport and Tom Kirwin and Michael Weadock of Yorkshire Radio. A view from the terraces is equally useful, and I was pleased that Phil Woodhouse was willing to contribute to this book. Phil is what you can safely call a real fan, and it's always good to get his frank and accurate assessment of all things Leeds United. You can rely on supporters to tell it like it is.

My mother and father would not expect to be listed in this section, but they are anyway - for so many reasons, but above all for treating professional football with the perspective and, on occasions, the contempt it deserves. And finally, of course, a heartfelt nod to my darling girlfriend Fiona, for her encouragement, her support and for biting her lip when she should have bitten my head off. Love always.

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FOREWORD

LEEDS UNITED ARE IN MY BLOOD, AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO ask what my emotions were on the day the club were relegated from the Championship. To say I was disappointed doesn't do it justice. I was caretaker manager when Leeds lost their place in the Premier League in 2004 and that hurt, but the financial problems at Elland Road had become so bad back then that relegation wasn't a huge surprise. I can safely say that nobody saw League One coming. It was almost unbelievable to find the club in that position, but if you've been part of professional football for as long as I have then very little surprises you. The idea of Leeds United being so far down the Football League was actually one I could relate to. When I came to Elland Road as a player in the 1960s, Leeds were a second-division club. A few years earlier, they'd scraped clear of relegation to Division Three and done so by the skin of their teeth. Every club has points in their history where they feel they can get no lower, and Leeds were not the first major team to slip through the leagues. What really worries supporters is the idea that their club might become trapped.

When you're told two days before the start of the season that you'll compete in League One with a 15-point deduction, the automatic reaction is to assume that promotion is out of the question. But funnily enough, I wasn't too despondent. In fact, I still fancied Leeds to win the title. It was understandable that fans were panicking, but League One is not an impossible division in any circumstances. If we'd been talking about the Championship, there would have been no chance of

promotion; it's totally unrealistic to think that you could get over that sort of penalty in England's second division. There are too many good teams, and too many good players. But in League One, I was confident that Leeds had the power to go up, even though the summer had been a nightmare.

The 15-point deduction has been the talking point of the whole season, but with hindsight you could argue that the season might have been harder if it hadn't been for that penalty. That sounds like a strange comment, but Dennis Wise was an unpopular manager among the supporters after relegation from the Championship. He didn't have many friends in Leeds and there were plenty of calls for him to go. I'm not saying that he wouldn't have produced the same results without the 15-point punishment, but there's no doubt that the punishment created a sudden and definite siege mentality at Elland Road which hadn't existed before, at least not during Dennis's time with Leeds. The crowd moved behind the club and the players, and the united atmosphere seemed to inspire everyone. Dennis and Gus Poyet played on that siege mentality, and played on it big time. And it worked for them. Dennis himself obviously had something to prove. He can't have been happy about being the manager who took Leeds United into League One.

When you reach a level like this, you realise that something has to change. The decline of Leeds has been going on for some time, and at a very quick rate. I know the club reached the Championship play-off final in 2006, and were that close to getting back into the Premier League, but back then I still had a feeling that things weren't quite right behind the scenes. The club's finances were nowhere near as stable as they seem to be now. Fair enough, promotion to the Premier League would have sorted the problems out - we're talking about a payday of £40 million upwards for promoted teams these days - but there was always that lack of control. When Leeds lost to Watford, the money issues started to bite again, and for the first time in their

history, the club were dropped into the third tier of English football. Obviously as an ex-player and manager it saddens me but, as ever, it's the supporters you think about and sympathise with first.

Take, for example, the support we've had this season. I look around at the average attendances in England, and I see a club like Stoke City. They're getting around 17,000 for their home games and they're preparing for the Premiership. Our average attendance is way above that. There aren't many teams in the country who can command gates of over 30,000 - and on a few occasions get almost 40,000. A lot of clubs hope to get to that figure when they reach the Premiership but hardly any of them do. To achieve those figures in League One is incredible, and Leeds United support should not be under-estimated or under-valued.

One of the most important factors during the 2007-08 season was that the fans supported the club from the word go. But you've also got to give credit to the way the players responded to the points deduction. It's easy for me to say that I fancied them to go up, but I couldn't have predicted how positive their attitude was going to be. The manner of their results definitely helped. When I think back to the start of the season, I have to say that a lot of our victories came down to good fortune. Leeds developed this habit of popping up with goals in the last minute, which added to the feeling that the club was on a roll. The game that stands out is our 2-1 win at Nottingham Forest in August. In the second half, Leeds got absolutely battered, and I don't know how Forest missed the chances they missed. Forest should have won that game 5-1 but they didn't, and results like that gave the fans inspiration. I think some of the euphoria came because we were winning games out of the blue, and winning games we perhaps deserved to lose. People started to expect us to score last-minute goals and when you have that expectation, it often happens. I'm sure it played on the minds of the opposition as well.

The advantage that Leeds United undoubtedly have is that the club will always be an attraction to professional footballers, whatever anyone says. If a smaller club had done what Leeds did last summer and said to these players 'we can't offer you contracts at the moment, but come and train with us anyway', some of them might have said 'get stuffed'. A few players said that to Leeds anyway, but I guarantee you that it would have been a million times worse if it hadn't been Leeds who were asking the question. The fact that they were able to bring quality to this league was a huge benefit. Take Dougie Freedman as an example. I doubt whether he really wanted to drop down to League One - and by that I mean he'd have been right in thinking he was better than this level - but he did want to come to Leeds. When this club finally returns to the Championship, as it is bound to do, it will hopefully be the same - assuming, that is, that Leeds have the money to compete. Every time you get to a higher level, the stakes get higher as well. And in the Championship, there are always clubs with money in their pockets.

I still believe that when you talk about Leeds United in the context of the biggest English clubs, you're talking about one of the top eight. I'm not saying they're a top-eight team right now, because there are plenty of better sides in England at the moment, but this club is massive. Truly massive. It's not just about their attendances. Consider as well the number of foreign countries that have registered Leeds United supporters in them. They're everywhere, even now. That's why it's important that our time in League One ends as quickly as possible. When a club is struggling, football moves away quickly, and the financial figures that the Premier League teams are dealing in these days are frightening. Sooner or later - the sooner the better - Leeds have to get back in amongst that money. That's what the club's future depends on.

Given the circumstances, the 2007-08 season has to go down as one of the better seasons in our history. You can only compare like with like, but you can't necessarily argue that getting to the semi-finals of the Champions League is more difficult than getting to League One's play-off final with a 15-point deduction. The 2008 League Two final was between Stockport County and Rochdale, and to Stockport's players, winning promotion will feel like as big an achievement as Manchester United winning the European Cup. The money that Manchester United have makes them potential Champions League winners every season, and the Leeds squad that reached the semi-finals wasn't cheap. They were brilliant, no doubt about that, and went further than most people expected them to, but you can't rate teams on the basis that one trophy is bigger or more lucrative than another. It's all relative. In truth, you'd be hard pressed to pick out a season which was better in terms of results than the one just gone.

Looking at the club in general, I can see that things are on the up again. But we're still a long way short of the pinnacle of the game. For a club like Leeds United, the pinnacle of the game means playing at the highest level. And not just playing at the highest level - competing at the highest level, and winning at the highest level. Gary McAllister played in a great Leeds side who won the league championship and got to the final of the League Cup. There were a couple of disappointments as well, but he still won a major trophy. And that matters. It's what football's about, and especially when you play for a club like Leeds. I can't predict how long it will take the club to get back to that standard, but I know that we're not going to walk it. I also know that once we reach the Championship, as we so nearly did in 2008, the fans will expect promotion to the Premier League immediately. If you support Leeds United, you automatically assume that the club will do well. In fact, you demand it. That's the legacy of Don Revie's team in a way, and I accept

that his era can be a noose around the necks of some managers. Every time a team struggles, people say 'it wasn't like this in the 1970s'. But you can't look back in football and maybe we're guilty of doing that too often. You'll never see another situation where 10 or 12 players come to a club at the age of 16 or 17 and stay there for virtually their whole careers, as I and a lot of my teammates did. I made more than 500 appearances for Leeds and some of the other players made over 700, but those were different days. There's unlikely to be another era where the same squad stays together for more than a decade and wins a load of trophies and medals. Gary Kelly recently passed 500 appearances for Leeds before he retired, but he might be the last guy to do that. If anyone else manages that, I'll be surprised. As much as supporters might like a team to match the one we had in the 1970s, it's not a realistic expectation. Football has changed.

If Don had been alive to see this season, he'd have been delighted - for the simple reason that he'd have approached it in exactly the same way as Dennis Wise did. Can you imagine Don looking at the 15-point deduction and saying: 'Ah well, boys, this season's ruined. We might as well not bother'? No chance. Absolutely none. He'd have said: 'All these people who are having a pop, let's get into them and have a go.' In the 1970s, there was a siege mentality at Leeds, and we knew what was said about us as a team. But when you're winning games week-in, week-out, it doesn't bother you too much. At the end of the day, we were the boys with the medals. With Dennis and his players, it was different. Last summer Leeds were getting taken to the cleaners on all fronts, and things like the 15-point deduction must have created real resentment. If someone says 'you're a bunch of dirty players' and you're holding a league championship medal, you're not bothered. But what can you say to a 15-point deduction? Add that to the fact that Dennis had been under a transfer embargo for months - and

that he'd been relegated with Leeds at the end of the previous season - and you can understand why he felt the Football League and the game as a whole were out to get him.

Some people are of the opinion that Dennis deserves no credit for this season. I disagree completely. He's worth every bit of praise he received for the way the club started the season, and had it not been for those results, Gary McAllister wouldn't have had the chance to take Leeds into the play-offs. Gary was terrific as well, but this season has definitely been a story of two managers, and they've both played a part. I understand that people might not like Dennis's character, or his Chelsea connections, but let's not rewrite history. His role was crucial, and it would have been easier for him to walk out of Elland Road six months before he did, when the club's position was dire. I wouldn't have blamed him.

A few times last summer, I heard people saying that Leeds United were on their last legs; that the club might die. But never once did I think that administration or the 15-point deduction would be the end of Leeds United. The club is too big; the city is too big. A team who can pull in an attendance of 38,000 for a League One game has everything going for it, and you can't kill that spirit. One day, the revival was bound to start. It had to happen. The defeat to Doncaster Rovers at Wembley was ultimately a horrible disappointment, but the club have a positive future once more. My only hope is that this season will prove to be the first of many steps forward.

Eddie Gray MBE

PROLOGUE

IN DEEPEST, DARKEST LIBEREC

LIBEREC. 21 JULY 2007. THE LIGHT HAS FADED AND THE mood is dark. Clustered in the silhouette of a stadium they don't know, in a city they have never heard of, Leeds Uniteds supporters are seeking solace in litres and half-litres of Gambrinus. It is, according to those who know, the most refined lager the Czech Republic has to offer, and on this night of all nights the nations guests deserve nothing less. The last train to Dresden rolled down the tracks half an hour earlier; those who should have been among its passengers will fend for themselves until the light of day returns.

By the blue and rusty gates of Stadion U Nisy - the residence of FC Slovan Liberec - the undercarriage of a coach is being loaded with heavy bags. The vehicle carries the banner of Dynamo Dresden, the deposed powerhouse of East German football, but is charged this evening with bearing the players and staff of Leeds United back across the Czech-German border and home to their hotel in Radebeul, a northern suburb of Dresden.

Carefully, the driver guides his bus through the pockets of drinkers beside the stadium's primitive beer tents and begins a short, steep ascent to a car park behind Stadion U Nisy's main stand, the oddity of an otherwise nondescript venue. An architect worth his salt would have surveyed the cliff which overhangs the stadium and suggested that Slovan Liberec take their football elsewhere. The club adopted a less defeatist view and hacked the fourth side of

their ground into the yellow sandstone. As a result of that pragmatism, Leeds United's squad will leave silently through the back door this evening, far from the madding crowd 100 feet below.

The thick of the congregation of nomadic supporters was not a place for United's players to be. Less so their manager, Dennis Wise. 'I wish the little bastard would come out here,' says a barrel-chested cockney, the severity of his snarl enhanced by the occasional missing tooth. 'He'd get a lively reception from us lot. Very lively. And I'd be right at the front of the fucking queue.' He wasn't joking. Nobody was joking. It was weeks and months since supporters with a healthy interest in Leeds United had shown the inclination to make light of anything. Relegated from the Championship in April and declared insolvent in May, the club could not predict with any certainty that they would be fit and eligible to start the season their players and staff were preparing for when they escaped to central Europe for a brief summer tour on 17 July. A transfer embargo imposed on Leeds by the Football League - an automatic effect of a club's entry into administration - meant Wise was permitted to peruse the transfer market on a look-but-don't-touch basis, a depressing situation made worse by the knowledge that few players were interested in touching an insolvent Leeds United. The 20-man squad which travelled abroad with Wise contained three out-of-contract players, five trialists and five players recently fashioned from the club's youth academy. Quakers went to war with more numbers and more vigour.

In those circumstances, Liberec was an appropriate destination for supporters who had reached the end of their tether. It felt like the ends of the earth. The Czech Republic's sixth-largest metropolis is known to natives as the Bohemian Manchester, but not because it is ready to embrace a cosmopolitan culture. English speakers were few in number, and citizens without a grasp of German conversed solely in the unrecognised language of Czech.

The Republic joined the European Union in 2004 but will not implement the Euro as its official currency until 2012 at the earliest. When United's supporters invaded on 21 July, they found that their rolls of Euro notes were essentially worthless in a country which yearns for a wider outlook but continues to display its Eastern European heritage. The supporters who were able to lay their hands on Czech Koruna did a brisk trade in currency exchange around the stadium; others who feared they would be locked out of the ground were reprieved by Slovan Liberec's willingness to accept Euros in exchange for tickets. It is unlikely that the club understood the dark psychological place that the followers of Leeds were in, but their flexibility kept the peace nonetheless.

It was in keeping with so much of the summer that United's presence in Liberec was neither planned nor especially desirable. That scorching Saturday should have been spent playing Dynamo Dresden, the midway point of Leeds' proposed three-match tour which began three days earlier with a 2-0 defeat to Union Berlin in the German capital, and concluded two days later after a 2-1 defeat to FC Energie Cottbus in Dessau. Cottbus were and are a Bundesliga club and represented the most capable team on United's schedule, but Dresden were the draw. More than 1,000 of United's supporters planned to attend the fixture in southern Germany, a pre-season turn-out to dwarf all others. But when local police learned that followers of Dresden planned to provide what could generously be described as a welcoming party, the wheels of authority trampled the friendly into the ground.

Germany has a chronic problem with violence in the name of football and far greater than that of England, the country which is still accused by Europe of having bred and nurtured the hooligan. The issue is accentuated in Dresden, where die Polizei no longer take chances or cut corners. A Regionalliga Nord game between Dynamo and Union Berlin

during the 2006-07 season carried such a threat of violence that 1,100 officers were posted to marshal a gathering of 20,000 fans, and the long batons, tough khaki uniforms and ultra-thick helmets carried by police constables do not suggest their idea of crowd control is a subtle concept. Hooliganism in Germany is driven as much by social issues as it is by sporting rivalry, and the gates of Dresden's ground, the Rudolf-Harbig Stadion, carry the ludicrous but necessary warning that supporters are banned from distributing rechtsradikalen propaganda - right-wing propaganda - on the terraces. In England, stewards twitch at the sight of supporters carrying cans of Fanta. In Dresden, they frisk you for Swastikas at the gates. It did not help that on the day of United's friendly with Dynamo, a march with fascist overtones was due to take place in Leipzig, a city which shares the same Bundeslande and police force as Dresden. Twenty-four hours before the kick-off, the plug was pulled.

Thus it was that Leeds and an intrepid portion of their fanbase found themselves in Liberec, a destination beyond the back of beyond. Slovan averted a blank weekend by agreeing at short notice to host a friendly with United, and also adhered to Wise's insistence that their first-team squad be involved. United's tour of Germany - interspersed with their cameo in the Czech Republic - was a valuable break from the overwhelming atmosphere of conflict and controversy which had enveloped the club back home, but Wise was unwilling to allow the trip to mirror a vacation. Had he wanted a holiday, United's manager would have resigned from his post and disappeared to Dubai, the land of riches unimaginable to a club as close to liquidation as Leeds were. A wealthy man in his own right, he did not need their money and he was not obliged to accept the aggravation his job entailed. An icon of Chelsea at the forefront of Leeds United could never expect to command unanimous popularity, but relegation at the end of his first season at Elland Road

transformed scepticism of Wise into open hostility. He had been verbally abused by supporters present in Berlin, and would be again when Leeds arrived in Dessau. He did not need to mingle with the moonlit crowd in Liberec to appreciate their volatility and shattered patience. Hundreds of miles from Elland Road, the discord hovered like a persistent fog which the club's pre-season results failed to lift. United, for the record, were beaten 1-0 by Liberec.

The merits of the European tour were difficult to gauge, yet Wise's demand that Slovan Liberec refrain from fobbing him off with a team of reserves confirmed that he at least could see through the smoke and fire of administration, and far enough to visualise the start of the new season. He would later describe United's foreign training camp as the catalyst for the drama which followed, and what Slovan Liberec's co-operative staff could not have realised was the ironically low priority Wise was placing on Leeds' friendly fixtures. In cruel temperatures in the south of Germany, United's coaching team would force their players through hours of exhausting fitness work on the morning of each match, leaving their squad with limited energy for the game which followed in the evening. It left the club susceptible to defeat but allowed their manager to fly back to England with unbridled faith in the condition and mentality of the members of his fragile squad. The supporters who journeyed to the continent were abandoning hope on their return, unaware of the fact that Wise had renewed his. His resolve would be examined again before the start of the season by a punishment which he and his club did not anticipate, but by then the battle lines were comprehensively drawn. The intoxicated antagonist of Liberec would soon be forced to concede that Wise was not for turning - the little bastard with a big heart.

PENNY IN THE POUND

THE SUN CAME UP ON THE MORNING OF 28 APRIL 2007, illuminating the city of Leeds in a tantalising glow. Football takes on a different complexion as the weather changes, and the clear skies over Yorkshire presented an optimistic outlook for the afternoon ahead. By 3 p.m., 31,269 spectators would be crammed into Elland Road, the majority stomachaching butterflies but clinging to the promise of salvation that came with glorious sunshine. Leeds United had been backed into a corner and were almost trapped; the Americans would have hung a sign outside Elland Road welcoming travellers to the Last Chance Saloon.

The permutations for Leeds before their last home fixture of the 2006-07 season were potentially complex, yet worryingly simple. The club held 22nd position in the Championship and lay a point adrift of Hull City, their Yorkshire neighbours and by then the only club whose demise would facilitate United's survival. Luton Town had been relegated already; Southend United were certain to follow. With two matches remaining and six points still available, the one outstanding issue was whether Leeds or Hull would become the third and final club to forego their place in the Championship and depart to the outpost that is League One. United's supporters did not appreciate the sight of their club exiled from the Premier League, as Leeds had been since 2004, but a second relegation threatened obscurity on an untold scale. As weary as they were of newspaper articles recalling how six years earlier Leeds

United had negotiated a spectacular path to the semi-finals of the Champions League - Europe's most prestigious and affluent club tournament - the comparison exposed in graphic detail the ridiculous nature of the danger they were in.

To the credit of United's squad, they had fought the good fight and railed against the suggestion that relegation was unavoidable. Four victories at Elland Road during March and April and a slight upturn in results away from home kept their noses above water, though the sense of inevitability surrounding their demise was never removed. Of greater resonance than their defiance was a defeat to Colchester United on Easter Monday, when Leeds conceded two goals in the final eight minutes having held a 1-0 lead for most of the second half. The strained look in Dennis Wise's eyes after full-time at Layer Road did not speak of a beaten man but it revealed the concern of one who knew he had lost control of his club's season. 'We were in such a comfortable position', said Wise. 'Then we had a mad 10 minutes.' United's fate in those 10 minutes had been left to hang on the results of other clubs.

It was with that understanding that Leeds welcomed Ipswich Town to Elland Road on 28 April, the penultimate day of the season. Hull City were engaged with Cardiff City on the same afternoon, and it did not take a calculator for Wise to establish the consequences of an away win at Ninian Park combined with a draw at Elland Road. Hull's lead would be three points and their goal difference insurmountable. United's manager was outwardly confident but inwardly concerned. He could rant and he could rave; he could offer his squad every scrap of inspiration he had ever gained. But when the players crossed the whitewash, Wise would be left to cross his fingers and trust to luck. Fortune was all he had left to bank on.

In the days leading up to the game against Ipswich, Wise was drawn into discussing the catastrophic effects of

relegation. There would be changes in every department, he warned, and consequences stretching far beyond a squad of players which was already certain to haemorrhage at the end of the season. Staff, in short, would have to be sacked as Leeds revised their levels of expenditure. Exactly how much Wise knew about the holes in United's accounts is difficult to say, but he was clearly aware of trouble behind the scenes. A fortnight after the season finished, his kit manager Shaun Hardy and the club's popular physiotherapist Alan Sutton, an employee at Elland Road for 21 years and a valued part of the furniture, were made redundant by the administrators who had been summoned to deal with the club's unmanageable debts, the first of many painful examples of collateral damage. Leeds were also asked to dispense with Wise's managerial secretary. Do or die, as he had termed the contest with Ipswich, seemed like an apt phrase, and many in England were hoping for the latter. 'An awful lot of people will be rubbing their hands with glee if Leeds take another mighty fall,' wrote Rodney Marsh, the former Manchester City striker, in a national newspaper column before the game. As tactless as the comment may have been, it was not at all inaccurate.

The nervous tension inside Elland Road on 28 April was tangible, and the shiver-inducing noise that met United's players as they stepped from the tunnel in tandem with Ipswich's line-up represented a desperate plea for one last push. The occasion felt decisive. With 12 minutes gone, David Healy drove a shot against the body of Ipswich goalkeeper Shane Supple, and Richard Cresswell threw himself awkwardly at the rebound, bouncing the ball over the goalline with a flick of his head. In those magical seconds, Leeds United felt the surge of invincibility that flows from a goal like Cresswell's. The doubts cleared and the butterflies paused; Elland Road raised two fingers to the rest of the country. He who laughs last . . . But the euphoria couldn't last; Leeds United couldn't last. When news began

passing from seat-to-seat that Hull had taken a second-half lead at Cardiff, an advantage they would not relinquish, United's stadium was gripped by a deathly hush, acutely aware of the cost of an Ipswich equaliser. Robbie Blake, the former Leeds striker, admitted in the car park afterwards that the Chinese whispers had seeped through to the players with vivid clarity, bringing with them unbearable pressure. In the 88th minute, Alan Lee delivered the coup de grace Leeds had been evading for weeks by glancing a header beyond the reach of Casper Ankergrén, sinking the ball into the Danish goalkeeper's net and a knife into United's gullet. The goal should have brought Elland Road to its knees. Instead, it provoked an uprising. Referee Michael Jones, a late replacement for County Durham's Nigel Miller, whose fractious relationship with Wise made his involvement on 28 April inappropriate, awarded six minutes of injury time but United's supporters had already resigned themselves to a fatal result. As Leeds mounted a final, disjointed attack, a handful of fans broke from the north-east corner of Elland Road and spilled onto the pitch. The invasion began as a trickle but quickly became a flood, and while scores of supporters streamed over the turf, Jones led a frantic dash of players and officials towards the sanctuary of their dressing rooms. Leeds feared an invasion was probable and had hastily planned a post-match presentation to their retiring full-back Gary Kelly, with a warning that it would be scrapped in the event of any unrest on the terraces. The threat did not have the desired effect. Several supporters ran to direct their ire at chairman Ken Bates and United's other board members, who were seated in the directors' box in the centre of the West Stand. The majority moved ominously to the opposite end of the field to crowd around the south-east corner of the stadium, where Ipswich's fans had been housed for the previous hour and a half. A hail of coins launched into the stand left eight wheelchair-bound spectators with cuts and bruises, and the

unpalatable scenes would later bring prison sentences and banning orders for a number of the perpetrators. United's active involvement in helping the police identify the majority of those caught on CCTV subsequently spared them from a Football Association charge. Pleas from the club's stadium announcer for the invaders to leave the field were consistently ignored until, to the surprise of everyone, it was confirmed through the public address system that Jones intended to play out the final 45 seconds of a game which had been delayed for half an hour, and which to all intents and purposes was finished as a meaningful sporting event. The announcement had the desired effect and the pitch rapidly cleared. Some supporters were able to retake their seats; others were chased out of the ground by fellow Leeds fans who were incensed by the invasion. The exchange of punches seen on the walkway in the front of Elland Road's Kop, white-on-white violence, was the very essence of a club imploding.

Those final seconds enforced by Jones did not bring a reprieve. Had they done so, the cries of injustice across the country - nowhere more so than Hull - would have been deafening. Hull closed out their 1-0 victory over Cardiff, and as Jones brought a conclusion to a sour afternoon at Elland Road, Hull's chairman, Adam Pearson, was being offered a glass of champagne by his counterpart at Cardiff, Peter Ridsdale, in the bowels of Ninian Park. The insinuation that Ridsdale, a man held in contempt by so many in Leeds, might be toasting the demise of the club he once ran and professed to love did not sit comfortably within the boundaries of Yorkshire. Ridsdale said he had simply been handing his congratulations to a club who had much to celebrate. This gesture had nothing to do with Leeds United's future, he claimed. 'I am saddened by their current plight and have always wished them well as I continue to do.' The offer of sympathy from south Wales was not welcome, nor was it especially relevant. Leeds had a big

enough crisis developing on their doorstep without reigniting the debate over the mistakes made by their former chairman, now ensconced in the Principality and hundreds of miles away.

Amid the devastation, it seemed certain that Wise would come out fighting. It is the approach that he knows best. But, to the surprise of many, United's manager held up his hands. At a sombre post-match press conference, Wise accepted responsibility for relegation and accepted that Leeds had deserved to suffer that punishment. In 33 matches under him, United were beaten on 16 occasions. Wise regretted the strength of his squad and the chaotic disposition of the dressing room he had inherited from Kevin Blackwell and John Carver seven months earlier, but Elland Road on 28 April was not the time or the place for excuses. I take full responsibility, Wise admitted: 'I'm not going to blame other people.'

Bates stood in defence of his manager, and in defence of himself. On the Monday after United's draw with Ipswich, he spoke with bullish resistance, knocking back questions over whether relegation constituted a failure by his administration or by Wise. Big clubs rise again, Bates insisted, and he would see to it that 28 April came to represent the very base of United's decline. His conviction was obvious, but the picture he painted of the club's future avoided one crucial detail. At that moment, Bates knew that Leeds United as a business were virtually insolvent.

Administration was first mentioned to me as a possibility after the league game between Leeds and Southend United at Roots Hall stadium in Essex on 17 March. At that juncture it was nothing more than a whisper, a suggestion which could be dismissed as doom-mongering as easily as it was termed a credible threat. Leeds United had debts; that much went without saying. The liabilities first generated by Ridsdale's board had passed through various directors before becoming Bates' problem in 2005, and there was no

indication that the bottom line looked any better in April 2007 than it had when his stewardship began more than two years earlier. United's accounts for the financial year running to June 2006 exposed debts of almost £30 million, and Leeds were paying close to £2 million a year for the rent of Elland Road and their splendid training ground at Thorp Arch Grange, an attractive piece of land near Wetherby. Both facilities had been sold to Jacob Adler, a property developer from Manchester, in 2004 by the board headed by former chairman Gerald Krasner, from whom Bates took charge of Leeds. At the time, the sale-and-lease-back agreement with Adler, which also included a buy-back clause allowing Leeds to re-purchase the two properties, had been sanctioned as a result of the pressure that the club's debts were placing on Krasner and his boardroom colleagues. The money raised was said to have met an instalment due on the repayment of a loan given to Leeds by Jack Petchey, then a shareholder of Aston Villa. It bought United time at a point when the ownership of the stadium was the least of their concerns, but the deal with Adler did deprive Leeds of their most valuable assets. In June 2005, the deeds for Elland Road changed hands for a second time when Adler transferred ownership to Teak Commercial Limited, an off-shore company based in the British Virgin Islands (BVI). The individuals behind the BVI firm have remained anonymous, as the tax haven's regulations allow them to do, but they are in possession of a miniature goldmine. United's most recent valuation set the cost of invoking the buy-back clause and repurchasing Elland Road and Thorp Arch Grange at £19,142,806, a figure the present board cannot afford to meet. League One chairmen rarely deal in that sort of money.

The warnings of administration given at Southend were not, therefore, surprising. Clubs whose results fail to satisfy are often the subject of innuendo about their finances, and United's imprudent history encouraged that reaction. But

insolvency was indeed on the horizon, and when Leeds visited Southampton on 21 April, the prevalence of discussions about administration suggested the club had begun to seriously consider the possibility. In fact, on the Monday afternoon when Bates sat in his office dissecting the implications of the catastrophic draw with Ipswich Town, administrators from accountancy firm KPMG were already looking through the club's accounts, having been called to Elland Road that very day. KPMG were asked by Bates to instruct him on the best course of action. The only advice they could offer was that any plans to repay United's debts in full or by conventional means should be considered defunct.

The club owed more than £35 million to hundreds of different organisations, companies and individuals. They had nowhere to hide. Leeds declined to comment publicly about the prospect of administration, but on the night of Monday, 30 April, Krasner contacted an impromptu phone-in on BBC Radio Leeds to voice his opinion on the situation at Elland Road. A qualified insolvency practitioner, Krasner declared that he was 90 per cent certain that the company running Leeds United would be declared insolvent by the end of the week. It was, to many, acceptable confirmation that relegation from the Championship was merely the tip of a larger problem. The once-good ship Leeds United would promptly hit the iceberg with full force.

In the days that followed, United made urgent appeals for wealthy parties with a genuine interest in supporting the club financially to declare their interest immediately. The probability of a response was miniscule, and Leeds cannot have expected one. Suspicions about the state of their finances had spread quickly and potential investors with an ounce of business acumen were not about to launch pound notes into what amounted to a black hole. The only advantage of administration was that it would give those interested in presenting funds a clearer picture of the

financial landscape inside Elland Road before they made any serious commitment. You don't buy a house that's been chosen for demolition, was how one local businessman put it. United's directors concurred, and the process of administration was promptly set in motion with the assistance of KPMG. The worst-kept secret in Leeds finally became public knowledge at 4 p.m. on Friday, 4 May.

A statement issued by KPMG confirmed that Leeds United had, as expected, been declared insolvent. Richard Fleming, a joint administrator for KPMG, said it was necessary for the club to enter administration as its balance sheet dated 31 March 2007 indicated debts totalling approximately £35 million, with a cash injection of approximately £10 million required to continue trading. The figures were eye-watering, yet not especially shocking. The slow walk to relegation from the Championship, just 12 months after Leeds were competing in the division's play-off final, had, in hindsight, been a veiled hint at the scale of the emergency developing within the club. But the announcement from KPMG came with a twist that caused bewilderment in Leeds. The company controlled by Bates and now declared insolvent Leeds United Association Football Club Limited would be sold immediately by KPMG to a firm called Leeds United Football Club Limited, a firm which listed Bates as a director. United's chief executive Shaun Harvey and their solicitor Mark Taylor, a long-time colleague of Bates, had also been given directorships with the new company. Forty-five minutes after placing Leeds in administration, the sale to Leeds United Football Club Limited had been authorised and confirmed in principle by KPMG. When the dust and the confusion settle, the terms of the deal dawned quickly on the city; by way of KPMG, Bates appeared to be selling to himself.

Leeds United Football Club Limited had the look of what administrators would call a phoenix company, one which takes possession of the assets of an insolvent firm, while

retaining some or all of the previous company's directors and continuing to operate in the same sphere of business. The use of phoenix companies is not favoured by all in the business community, but provided certain conditions are met, the process is entirely legal. KPMG's announcement meant in essence that by the beginning of June, Bates was likely to have control of Leeds United through a different firm possessing virtually the same name and registered with Companies House. The only difference in the eyes of the club's supporters was that the debts of £35 million would, in theory, no longer exist. But while Bates believed that a significant portion of the fans were still supportive of his reign, relegation had done as much damage to his reputation as it had Wise's. The sceptical element were no longer convinced that Bates' vision of the future was what they or their club desired.

As KPMG began the administrative work needed to put Bates' proposal to the club's creditors, the doubts thrown up by the rapid sale were growing. Krasner asked why KPMG had been so willing to agree to Bates' offer when a greater degree of patience might have allowed them to find a more attractive and valuable bid. The administrators argued that the speed of the sale was designed to maximise the possibility of survival to minimise uncertainty for all the club's stakeholders and supporters, and to allow the club to plan ahead for next season. Bates had agreed to fund United's day-to-day operating costs during administration but would have been less willing to make that commitment without the assurance that he would eventually receive a solvent business in return. 'The action taken brings to an end the financial legacy left by others that we have spent millions of pounds trying to settle,' Bates said. 'The important thing now is not to view this as the end, but the beginning of a new era.'

The reluctance in Leeds to accept that view was prevalent, an attitude deepened by the release of a