

# Judgement day



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

" First of all, let me apologise for our pathetic performance against Crystal Palace. Enough has been said about that already, and now we must focus positively on this afternoon's match. It's a game we must win, and then keep our fingers crossed about the eventual outcome. I don't want to think about the unthinkable. " The colourful, shiny programme I held in my hands trembled as I read this. It was from the weekly interview with the Portsmouth F. C. manager, Graham Rix. It sounded a long way away from the cool and collected manager, who had denied all problems and remained optimistic until this day.

For you see, this was no ordinary day, no ordinary Saturday match for the inhabitants of the bustling south coast city of Portsmouth. This was like something out of a cheesy American movie. It was the last day of the season and, as they had been forced to do four times in the last six years, Portsmouth had to win to stay in the division. It was their own fault really, as many a Pompey fan would admit. They had spurned their chance to escape this last day nerve-jangler only three days prior to this momentous day.

The chance had arisen when they played Crystal Place, the team one place below them, the place feared by managers and fans alike, the final relegation place. It had been a cold, damp night at Fratton Park, and yet still, the Pompey faithful wore only the shimmering blue and gold shirt, onto which, the Portsmouth badge was stitched. They had turned out in their hoards, believing this would be the night when our troubles came to an end, and after which we could relax, safe in the knowledge that we would remain in Division One for at least one more year.

It was evident as the match kicked off that all was not well, as Palace stroked the ball around the park with ease, confident in their own surviving ability. This confidence paid off, and, within the first ten minutes of the match they had scored. They kept going, and by half time they were leading the uncomfortable looking 'royal blues' 3-0. The rot continued, and despite a bright spell of ten minutes, in which they clawed it back from the brink to 3-2, the final score was one of woe for Portsmouth.

The match finished 4- 2, with Portsmouth playing abysmally, and giving themselves a severe uphill struggle, needing to win by two or more goals on the last day, against a strong Barnsley team, whilst also counting on Crystal Palace or Huddersfield to lose. The crestfallen fans trudged home, pouring into the gloomy streets, no doubt feeling as bad as the dire weather. There were mutterings of discontent all over the town, about the manager, about the team, and most worryingly, about the future. It was obvious to me, from his emotional spill in the programme, that Rix had also felt this bitterness as he left the stadium.

It was this I hoped, as I moved along with the surging mass of blue, that would keep us up, that finally we had a manager who cared about the team, not just his bank account. I noticed that, alike the sea of friends I did not know, I had been overtaken by a strange numbness, a sort of hollowness, which rendered me unable to speak or sing along with the rest. As I handed my ticket to the collector upon entering the lower east KJC stand, he seemed to notice my nervousness, and gave me a wink or reassurance, and told me it would be ok.

This went a great deal to settling my nerves, but it was not nearly as soothing as the great roar that greeted me, as I stepped out from the stairs to find my seat, sifting through the cheering fans. It was quite simply breath taking; in all my life I am unable to recall another time when I had received such a rush of adrenaline. After taking to my seat I soon joined in with the familiar chants that had graced the ground for decades before, and lost my already quivering voice in the process.

Then, the place went silent, as our chairman, Milan Mandric came out of the tunnel, looking as anxious as we all felt. He made a speech, which reverberated over the ancient tannoy, shaking the stands. He reassured us that this team was his heart, and we, were his blood. We were, in his eyes, the best followers he could have hoped for, and he then thanked us for coming, and made his way up the stairs of the stand, and sat down among the fans, much to their delight. The team then crossed the threshold of the tunnel, and entered the hallowed turf of Fratton Park to a standing ovation.

It was the biggest game of their lives, but they did not show it, warming up as usual, and signing autographs for the children. Then, as they stripped from their training kits to reveal the kit, that every young boy from the areadreamsof putting on, the ground seemed to take on an eerie silence. This continued for a few more minutes right up to the start of the match, when only then it was broken by the referees whistle, signifying one of the most important games in the history of the club, and certainly the most important in my short lifetime. This was it! This was the match!

All of 16, 000 people, the capacity crowd at Fratton Park held their breath, said their prayers, and hoped that after the ninety minutes had ended they would be cheering again. As the whistle sounded the crowd exploded into noise, with the fans hollering out the traditional morale boosting songs, unique to Portsmouth. Barnsley didn't know what hit them. From the start they faced wave after wave of attack from the blend of youth and experience that was the Portsmouth team, most of which broke onto the defensive rock that was Darren Barnard, the Welsh international.

Then, as time went on the constant pressure applied from Portsmouth began to show, the lackadaisical Matt Appleby pondered too long on what to do next and was caught in possession by the energetic local boy, Gary O'Neil. He powered his way down the wing, and swung in an accurate, curling cross. This was met by the huge frame of die-hard Portsmouth fan and player Lee Bradbury, who powered the Blues into the lead by steering the ball past the hapless keeper, Kevin Miller, into the net. Before the ball had even touched the floor the crowd were on their feet, sheer jubilation running through them, as they hugged strangers, and friends alike.

They could sense something special was on the way. I leapt up from my seat, throwing my programme to the floor, and cheered all I could, losing my voice, which I had only just regained. Among the crescendo of clapping and cheering the game had already started again. There was a buzz among the crowd, as the players in blue seemed to swarm the ill-fated Barnsley defence, pouncing on every mistake. After a swift attack in which Barnsley committed many men forwards, Portsmouth broke, tearing up the field, sweeping the ball from left to right.

Lee Sharpe came up with it, on the left flank, and violently lashed it centrally, towards the advancing run of Gary O'Neil. The wayward defence watched, as he cut through them expertly, until he had a clear chance at goal. I was amazed at his composure, as most experienced players would, by now, just have belted it goal bound and hoped for the best, but O'Neil calmly and collectedly dinked the ball over the advancing keeper, and landed it in the far corner of the goal, where it rolled over the line. The crowd again detonated a chorus of cheers and clapping.

O'Neil ran over to the crowd in celebration, and was instantly mobbed by the devotees, who were restrained by the stewards, who themselves were in a jubilant mood. All around me I could see happy faces, it was not their dream come true, but their nightmare vanquished, and I revelled with them in delight. It was, in hindsight, a little presumptuous of us though, to have celebrated already, as there was still another half to go. The first half in fact drew to a close with the booking of Bruce Dyer, who was beginning to get frustrated by the constant badgering from the home supporters.

At half time the multitude of persons arose, and filed off, to get their customarily dodgy half time snack, of pies, tea and chocolate. Whilst down there though, many people began cheering, for what seemed like no reason, but then it was made public over the tannoy that at that specific moment in time both Huddersfield and Palace were losing, and if all stayed as it was we would stay up. Still, I was worried, football is a cruel game, and Portsmouth had been known for conceding late goals, costly ones. As I stepped back out onto the terracing I glanced around at the surroundings.

It was an ocean of blue, shone upon by the sun, on a hot May afternoon. It all seemed calm, all problems washed away, knowing that we were all in this together, and that, come rain or shine, we always would be. It was a touching moment I can assure you. The next half continued as the first half finished, which was brilliant from our point of view, as we had been playing out of our socks for the first 45 minutes. The players had obviously deliberately not been told about the results elsewhere, as they still set about their task with a great sense of urgency, giving their all.

The more and more we attacked the more defiant Barnsley became, and soon the constant failure of all of Portsmouth's attacks began to frustrate some of the Portsmouth players. What happened next horrified the Pompey faithful, as an off the ball argument soon developed into a brawl, in which Shaun Derry crudely head-butted Barnsley's captain Neil Shipperly, breaking his nose. For this pointless act of violence Derry was rightfully dismissed, and even the blue nose Portsmouth fans did not complain.

Whilst Shipperly was replaced by Rory Fallon, Portsmouth adjusted their formation to cope with being a man down. There were whispers behind me that this was the changing point, and that all our good work had been undone. It was a worrying time to be a fan, and the jitteriness of the crowd returned. But my worries were soon quashed, as Portsmouth seemed not to be affected by their numerical disadvantage, and played some lovely flowing football, all applauded riotously by the fans. It was a long period of sustained build up play that led to the third goal.

The ball had been played backwards, and forwards, as Portsmouth, instead of launching high balls over the top, decided to probe their opponents, and retain possession. This worked a treat, as a great link up between O'Neil and Mills put through Bradbury, who, with endless space took the ball cheekily around the keeper, and slotted the ball home, into the unguarded net.

Barnsley were broken, their spirit crushed, they had been out played in every dimension and they knew it. The crowd also knew it, and sung out in great approval, as the minutes passed by at a snail's pace.

After what seemed like an eternity the referee began to look down at his watch. At this the Portsmouth fans prompted him by whistling to a deafening pitch, and after two more minutes of this the referee, who had performed well, blew for time. For a second there was silence, an aura of disbelief swept over the stands. I stood there taking it all in, pinching myself, aware that I had just been privileged enough to witness one of the greatest moments in the clubs' history. My train of thought was broken, by the rather poignantly apt 'Great Escape' theme being blasted out of speakers all around the ground.

The crowd got their voice back again, and scenes of celebrations soon followed. I was swept along, on a wave of euphoria with the crowd onto the pitch, where the players were lifted high above the heads of the crowd, on their shoulders. Flags were hoisted up around the ground, and the news cameras were all over the place, interviewing fans, interviewing players. I came upon one interview with the relieved Graham Rix. On one of the greatest days of my life, I stood there, listening to what he had to say, along with a great number of fans, who waited to congratulate him after.



His words at first were serious, stating, that 'this would never happen again. ' How many times I had heard that in the last six years. But there was something about this man, something different. He cared. We all knew it, and we all knew that he would do everything in his power to keep his promise. His next words struck a particular chord with me, and have stuck with me ever since. His face changing from one of happiness to one of ambition, as he delivered his final words, 'just think how those fans would have reacted if we could really give them something to celebrate! '