



Fables of the Misconception

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Of course you can never replicate that first flutter in the stomach. That moment when everything clicks into place: the connection is made, the stars and planets align, your nervous and reticent feelings are hauled recklessly to one side. You finally throw caution to the wind and declare a deep and fortified love. You can no longer deny it.

FOR me and my purely football-related relationship with Fabian Delph, this moment came on 6th September 2008. The day before, Delph had signed a new four year contract, an encouraging reward for a series of cameo substitute appearances, one start in the League Cup away at Chester and one league start at home to Bristol Rovers. Within Leeds United circles, there was a buzz of excitement. Here was a player we had read about for months in the programme who was finally promising to be a genuine talent.

We had grown tired and highly suspicious of the naturally supportive promotion of youngsters from the Academy coaching staff, the coaxing motivation which masks a fairly ordinary player at a vulnerable make-or-break stage of their bound for the scrapheap career. For every Fabian Delph, there are a dozen Robert 'Bocca' Bayleys or Paul Keegans who skirt around the edge of the first team until we are screaming for them to appear; when nobody quite knows how to react as they turn out to be uncomfortably nondescript. Hard-working and keen, but unremarkable and workaday; we want to like them, we give them a chance, but before long the immediacy of our dysfunctional plight - for there is always a 'plight' - sends us cap in hand to the Alan Thompsons of this world, and, well, you know the rest.

But with Fabian Delph it was different, and on that sunny September afternoon against Crewe Alexandra at Elland Road, Delph cemented the notion that his dizzying promise could be transformed into authentic greatness. Before our very eyes was gold dust in a white shirt. In only his second league start, 18 year old Delph bullied the opposition, he prompted, cajoled, he spread the play, dictated the game, won the ball, wanted the ball, did something with the ball. He ran and ran: his Bambi limbs may have looked like they were about to snap, but his youthful ebullience knew no fear. Elland Road was his playground: the unforgiving amphitheatre, the boiling pot of discontent and wafer-thin patience that had claimed countless victims in white as the club cascaded down the leagues. This was Delph's stage, he belonged here, he lapped up the pressure and thrived on it, knowing full well that a kamikaze knee-high lunge to win the ball was just what we wanted to see.

Delph scored his first senior goal in a 5-2 win. The following week word was beginning to spread nationwide of a precocious talent in the third tier. The Guardian dispatched Steve Claridge to our match at Swindon to do a scouting report, and he returned

with glowing praise. Ten man Leeds romped to a 3-1 win, with Delph dominating midfield again, at one point controlling an awkward high ball by plucking it out of the sky via the execution of a Cruyff turn, leaving two defenders on their arse in the process. It was audacious showmanship that even brought a gasp and a ripple of applause from the locals.

We all know what happened next. The autumnal months saw Delph's infectious spirit lift every game, and most Leeds fans knew that we were watching a player before us who would lift the World Cup for England in 2014. We were that certain, that bowled over, that mesmerised. Pretty soon the secret was out, however, and inevitably the mood changed from heady expectation of what was to come from ours, to the inevitable fear that he would soon be someone else's. The England Under 21 caps and Football League Young Player of the Year awards didn't help with that. Effectively, as soon as we lost the Play-off semi-final to Millwall we knew he would be off: League One was no stage for such a talent. In short, he was too good for us, and only the most short-sighted Leeds fan would have denied him the move.

It is rare for a high-profile Leeds player to move to another club without a multi-layered shroud of bitterness and antipathy, splitting the remorseful fanbase in the process, but Delph broke that mould. Most logical and broad-minded fans wished him well and watched his progress closely, pleased that he landed at Aston Villa, a decent club with a balanced and pragmatic manager in Martin O'Neill. It was also easy to be happy that the fee of £6million plus add-ons was suitable compensation for nurturing the most exciting, young English legend-in-waiting in the game.

Few would have guessed how things have progressed in the intervening three and a half years. Two serious injuries and a succession of hapless managers has seen Delph's stock plummet almost as sharply as Aston Villa's. Last night I watched Bradford City defeat Villa 3-1 in the League Cup Semi-Final First Leg, with Delph making his first senior appearance back at the club from which Leeds first plucked him at the age of eleven. I actually thought Delph was one of the better players among the morass of disjointed and apathetic 'stars' in Villa's sorry starting line-up. However he was far from the captivating, dexterous virtuoso that lit up those otherwise desperate afternoons in League One.

Gone was the lustre, gone was the magnetism, gone was the bullish stipulation that he simply must

control the game. He was meek, hesitant, clumsy. He had the vision of a crab that could only see sideways, and he never once pushed forward with the wilful abandon of old. Never once took the game by the scruff of the neck and said 'I'll sort this out lads'; never offered the kind of trailblazing governance and authority that Villa were crying out for.

But then, of course, I expected this, because I'd seen it before. Delph's loan spell nearly a year ago should have been the explosive trigger that ignited our flagging 2011/12 season. Hell, a year or so previously, if you'd told me Delph was coming back

on loan I'd have wilfully bathed in custard in the Peacock car park, such was my excitement at the prospect. But in January 2012 Leeds fans were at a particularly low ebb. Stuck in a deep void of discontent, the sale of Jonny Howson had been one piss-take too many. With only the feint and frankly forlorn hope that Robbie Rogers had the healing powers of Mother Theresa in Predators, Leeds fans were distracted from Delph's low key homecoming by a gathering storm of prickly negativity. Nothing short of Bates being publicly flung against a cream clad wall could have lifted the mood.

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Grayson was sacked soon after, with Delph coasting through each ninety minutes, successively failing to raise the heartbeat, and even managed to 'Do it for Redders' without breaking sweat. It wasn't that Delph was particularly bad, he just didn't do anything. He still had the slight and nimble build of an Ethiopian marathon runner, but Villa had somehow stifled his creativity. He played so deep he was in the queue at United Fisheries for most of the second half; he had no ambition to attack, no element of initiative, he seemed robotic, regimented, sanitised by the Blue Chip risk aversion of the Premier League. He was still miles better than any other player on the park, but he was such a diluted version of his former self it just added to the sense of depression about what our great club had become.

Looking at Villa in recent weeks, you have to fear for them too, and maybe this is part of the problem with Delph. Obviously bad injuries have hindered him both mentally and physically, but it can't help playing for a club who appear to be debilitated by the same stigma of doom that has paralysed Leeds United for the last ten years. They also wear a Macron kit - coincidence? I don't think so.

The argument that the grass is not always greener for young starlets is much-discussed, and not always true. For every Ben Gordon, Luke Garbutt, Michael Woods, Tom Taiwo or Simon Walton, there is an Aaron Lennon, James Milner, and a Scott Carson. Even players like Matt Kilgallon and Danny Rose have carved out decent Premier League careers, and have arguably developed into better players than had they remained at Leeds.

Quite what camp Delph resides in is difficult to say, because he was different: he was the new Steven Gerrard, all-action, all over the pitch, inspirational, enchanting. Yes, he is now playing regularly in the Premier League with a very tidy contract in his top bedside drawer, albeit for a god-awful team who are thundering uncontrollably towards the trap door, but he had it, he had 'it'. That could take you a long, long way, but now 'it' is lost.

The scale of Delph's decline was brought home to me when researching this very article. I happened

across the Villatalk.com forum, which currently has a 108 page thread dedicated to Fabian Delph. The thread was started in August 2010 when Delph was out with an injury. Villa fans, intoxicated on the fumes of pre-season optimism, were waxing lyrical about their team's possibilities, with Ashley Young and Stewart Downing in wide positions and they were itching for the return of Delph to pull the strings in midfield; he was hailed as Stiliyan Petrov's natural successor. On page 108 of the thread, two and a half years later, the mood had darkened somewhat. Fans were irate that he was in the team, baffled as to what his qualities were, apoplectic that they had wasted £6 million on him: 'Bates must be pissing himself,' they said. A club with problems from the boardroom, to the manager's office, to the pitch, where good players simply don't perform; sound familiar?

Regardless of the other fragmented plankton that Villa had fielded against Bradford, Delph was the focus of the ire. Of course I didn't read the 106 pages between the first and the last but I sense that Delph is an ongoing enigma at Villa, a figure of ridicule much as the likes of Pugh, Varney or Bessone have been for us. Was this really the same player that had me gushing like an excitable child?

How something so good can become such a puzzling conundrum is the big question here, even while we ponder what actually happened to the £6 million we received for him. Delph's eminence was such that the disparity in quality between League One and the Premier League should have been breached with the ease of an inch-perfect crossfield forty yard pass, that the lumbering Andy Robinson couldn't be arsed to stretch for.

That Delph's career has faltered since leaving Leeds is not so much another lesson about how chasing the Premier League dollar does not always end with reaping the rewards, more a case of 'choose your team wisely', because if they're going down you're going down with them. Not only that, if you find a place where everything suits you and you feel comfortable in your surroundings, you will thrive like a seed in fertile ground. Therefore, don't be surprised if the real Fabian Delph ends up back at Elland Road again one day.



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