

Royal APPOINTMENT

WHEN JON HOWE WAS JUST A LAD, HE CHEERED AS SGT WILKO BROUGHT TWO TITLES TO LEEDS. NOW, IN 2013, HE'S SAT ON HIS SOFA.

'NEVER MEET YOUR HEROES' is the old adage; something I've always treated with disdain because, well, it's not what you want to hear and okay, I'm sure John Peel could be a bit of an arse sometimes, but I'd quite like to have taken the chance that he was, on most occasions, a sound bloke in the right company. Even then, such is the superficial cult of celebrity, you would be fairly stupid to expect the rendez-vous of your dreams to pitch up in cold reality anyway. Real life bites. So I'm well-prepared for an off-hand and evidently strained greeting if I catch someone I admire on a bad day, and it won't stop me enjoying every album, watching every film or fondly counting the scars from every goal celebration.

So it was with a mixture of caution and curiosity that I decided to arrange a meeting with Howard Wilkinson; my caveat being that he wasn't really a 'hero' as such. That honour was reserved for the Bats of this world, the focal point of a teenage Leeds fan's wide-eyed awe and glorification being the players. Wilko didn't really fit the role, and he didn't want to. Wilko was the brains behind the scenes, the 'stage left' conductor, the facilitator of dreams rather than the perpetrator.

The clarity and conviction with which Wilkinson turned around Leeds United's fortunes in the late 1980s/early 1990s contributed to my favourite

period of being a Leeds United fan; when football was pure and undiluted escapism, and Leeds United was a raw and hungry beast. Wilko expedited that journey with professionalism, grace and an element of certainty. We felt safe in his hands. Save for Barnsley at home, it was a ride that was exhilarating and breathtaking, but ultimately you felt in control, under Wilko's control; it was an enjoyable journey with an accomplished, assured and trustworthy person at the wheel; it was a safe journey. Maybe it didn't feel like it at the time, but in hindsight, it was a safe journey.

I wanted to speak to Howard Wilkinson because I'm working on a book project, for which I needed some inside knowledge, opinions and doctrine. This has involved me speaking to various people in and around Leeds United, going right back to the 1940s. But sometimes you have to push yourself and seek the words and wisdom of the very best, and hence one day in a fanciful and potentially hare-brained moment I decided to try and contact Howard Wilkinson. I sent off a polite and expansive e-mail to a generic e-mail address at the League Managers Association back in May 2013, explaining the background to both myself and my project, and didn't think much more about it. With most speculative e-mails you send to faceless organisations, you rarely anticipate a reply and half expect it never to

even be read. So you steel yourself for that inevitability, particularly when the e-mail in question is an attempt to negotiate a precious chunk of time from Leeds United royalty, gratis.

However, within five minutes of sending the e-mail I received a reply from Howard Wilkinson's secretary acknowledging receipt. This, I thought, was typical of Wilkinson's courtesy and professionalism. I replied to say 'thanks,' hoping my reciprocal courtesy would be noted by the great man. At that stage, just an acknowledgement from his secretary was enough, even if nothing came of it. But about an hour later I received another e-mail explaining that Howard would be happy to meet me, but couldn't do so until the middle of August. After a flurry of further e-mails we agreed a date. Having quickly gathered my thoughts, the reality of what was happening then kicked in.

In the build-up to the meeting I was waiting for the inevitable e-mail explaining that Howard had other commitments that had arisen and the meeting couldn't take place. This happens in all walks of life, but particularly when people of Howard Wilkinson's standing are doing a favour for someone they have never met. Still, while the meeting date and time was still valid I prepared myself accordingly.

I remembered Wilko's famous pre-season drills and his steadfast belief in preparation: 'fail to prepare and you prepare to fail.' I undertook the freelance writer's equivalent of a four mile run up Wesley Street, past the Tommy Wass pub and up to Middleton Golf Course and back, twice. I almost asked my six year old daughter to adopt the Mick Hennigan role, and bark orders at me with nagging and merciless persistence until I could prepare no

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more, but I didn't want to grow to actually hate my own daughter; even if below the many layers would still be underlying respect.

The meeting was originally set to take place in a hotel in Baslow, just south of Sheffield. The time was then changed on the Monday of the meeting, from 10.30am to 3.30pm, as Howard had a last minute change of appointment. Later the same day, the meeting was then changed to take place at Howard's actual home, because he felt he didn't have sufficient time to get from his appointment to meet me punctually. Throughout all this, I was just thankful that Howard seemed intent on keeping the meeting on. It would have been much easier to postpone something of little consequence to him personally. But he had the good honour to stay faithful to his prior arrangements. Furthermore, through a twist of fate, my mum and dad used to live not far from where Howard lives now, so I knew how to find it; which was preferable to heading from Leeds, at rush hour, to a random hotel in the middle of Derbyshire.

While preparing notes and questions and allowing for moods and conversation tangents etc, I also became engulfed in mild fears, particularly when it slowly dawned on me that I was going to Howard Wilkinson's house.

What if his house incongruously smelt of wet dog? What if he actually had a large dog, and like all large dogs it targeted me upon arrival, sensing my

deep and seemingly conspicuous unease around our four-legged 'friends'? What if Dave 'Harry, oh Harry' Bassett still lived next door, as he famously did during the heated 1989/90 promotion battle with Sheffield United? How could I cope with the face of Dennis Wise's grinning sidekick appearing at the window? What if I was force-fed Gatorade from an industrial IBC piped in from the garden, or was only allowed to leave once I accepted a fistful of Flying Pizza merchandise?

I wondered whether it was courtesy to offer to take my shoes off upon arrival? Well, of course it was, this was Howard Wilkinson's house. But then my fears descended into a pit of antiseptic paranoia, centred on an OCD fixation on how I could ensure I was suitably uncontaminated to sit on Howard Wilkinson's sofa. I had to ensure my jeans were clean-on, and that my socks didn't pick up too much unidentifiable 'fluff' from the insoles of my shoes, but was that enough? Short of donning a sterilised chemical suit I would just have to chance it.

Memories of Wilko's time at Leeds are inevitably tinged with the sadness at how it all ended, and what would have happened if the fabled ten-year plan of 1988 to 1998 had been allowed to come to its natural conclusion. Wilko had transformed the club from top to bottom, ahead of schedule, and the long term plan of youth development was about to bear fruit in a spectacular way. While Martyn, Radebe and Bowyer

had been brought into the club by Wilkinson, the likes of Kelly, Harte, Woodgate, McPhail, Kewell and Smith had been identified at a young age and had, or were being, carefully nurtured under the umbrella of Wilko's masterplan.

Had we known that the likes of Beesley, Rush, Hateley, Jobson and Worthington were simply a necessary means of treading water until the fountains of youth spewed forth, a little more patience might have been exercised when McAllister and Speed were sold and Manchester United hammered us 4-0 at home. Certainly, the despicable hounding of Wilko as he headed for the tunnel at Wembley after the League Cup final would have been replaced simply by discontented rumblings of justified displeasure. With Wilko there was always a bigger picture, always a long term plan, and we always felt safe, or at least we should have trusted him sufficiently to. Ultimately, however, the regret at the thought of what Wilko could have done with that squad of players is equal to the despair at what the impatient and self-aggrandising haplessness of Ridsdale and O'Leary actually did do.

Still, none of this helps when your knuckles rap on Howard Wilkinson's front door in August 2013. Howard's wife answered and explained that he was on the phone, and she asked me to wait in a sitting room. Mrs Wilkinson shouted upstairs to Howard that I had arrived, even though she knew he was on the phone, and for the first time I heard his voice. The beleaguered snap of Wilko's pestered 'okay' was unmistakable, but my nerves about whether Wilko would now be in a hospitable mood were not eased.

I sat down and perched uncomfortably on the edge of a sofa, until the man himself appeared in the room. Every preconception or anxiety immediately melted away as I managed to navigate this surreal and long-awaited event with admirable aplomb. Having quickly established that there was no chance whatsoever of Dave Bassett popping round for a cup of sugar, we chatted, and Howard was engaging, affable and helpful. He took an interest in the copy of my first book that I presented him with, he asked where in Leeds I lived, and he asked my opinion on GFH-Capital and the current landscape at Leeds United.

But with Howard there are always the charac-

teristic paradoxes. He was eloquent, refined and philosophical, but equally abrupt, dead-pan and adept at speaking in palpably frank tones. At times I could sense he enjoyed re-visiting the revolution he undertook when he addressed the dormant potential and dual personality of a revered and reviled football club. At other times his answers showed the arduous fatigue that had kept media men on their toes for nigh on thirty years, but which also prompted you to remember you were a stranger in his house.

This wasn't helped by a number of things I had forgotten. I never offered to take off my shoes, and I didn't offer him a business card; but equally he never offered me a drink. But then, a man as guarded and complex as Wilko would hardly crack open a case of Chateau Latour as I took the bold step over his threshold, at least until we had built up a bond of trust that would see us defend each other in the trenches. So I didn't take it personally.

My sixty minutes in Wilko's company were soon up, and the almost ethereal encounter went very well. Furthermore, my appreciation and respect for the man was undiminished, as I had expected. He was obliging when posing for a photo outside his front door, and muttered under his breath that his driveway was like a 'bloody car showroom' as his son was visiting

and various vehicles were parked at all angles, including mine.

I thanked Howard and we shook hands warmly. He seemed more chipper, unquestionably enlivened from his mood earlier when discussing the thorny and multi-layered issues involved in managing Leeds United, as if the pressure had left indelible gloom. Or maybe it was just because I was leaving. But he had a playful glint in his eye that I recognised.

With one final and typically enigmatic personality conflict, Howard brusquely requested a transcript of everything I intended to include from our conversation, for him to check over before it was published. This was fine and I had been tipped-off to expect it, but was followed by a cheery 'safe journey back' as he waved me to my car and positively skipped off inside to open the driveway gates for me.

'Safe journey'; yes it was, and it still is. With Howard Wilkinson never far away, somehow it always will be.

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