



PAVEL

IS A GEORDIE

By Pavel Srnicek with Will Scott

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FOREWORD

Spending the first ten years of my football career away from St James' Park didn't mean I wasn't aware of what was going on at my home town club. As a Geordie and a Newcastle United supporter, I always kept a keen interest on what was happening on Tyneside in the early stages of my career at Southampton and Blackburn.

Although it was common for clubs to sign foreign players in the early 1990s, the market wasn't saturated the way it is now, but it was certainly unusual for teams to invest in foreign goalkeepers. And Pavel's arrival on Tyneside certainly caused a stir. He turned up on the club's doorstep when it was struggling at the wrong end of the old Second Division. It must have been a baptism of fire for the young Czech goalkeeper.

Not only did he have to adapt to a new style of football he had to settle in to a new town and culture. As a consequence, like the team, he struggled. I heard all about the 'dodgy keeper' chants from a mischievous United faithful on my frequent visits home and wondered how he'd cope with that. To Pav's credit he knuckled down; won over those sceptical fans; established himself as a top Premier League goalkeeper and the 'dodgy keeper' chants became nothing but a footnote in history. Mind you I still loved playing against him! I always scored past Pav at both St James' Park and Ewood Park when I lined up against the team I supported as a boy. I netted just about every time he was in goal. And once I became a Newcastle player in 1996, I still enjoyed smashing the ball past him in training. It was nothing personal I liked scoring against anyone and everyone.

Pav's time at St James' Park was never easy and he saw off several challenges from some very good goalkeepers before winning the coveted number one jersey. He also clashed with managers Kevin Keegan and Kenny Dalglish over his claim to the goalkeeper's crown and eventually left because of it. I know it almost broke his heart to leave because he'd come to love Newcastle in the same way only a Geordie can love the city and the club. But in all my time on Tyneside, Pav is one of the most honest professionals I have met in my career. He is one of football's good guys; was a great servant to Newcastle United; always gave 100 per cent; tried his best and that is why he was adopted as a Geordie by the club's fanatical following.

It's incredible to think he came from a small village in the Czech Republic to appear on the world stage as an international footballer. The odds of that happening are astronomical. And that is what makes Pavel's story such an interesting read. With more than a few tales from the Entertainers' era. *Pavel is a Geordie*, is not only a must-have book for every Newcastle United fan but for football fans all over the world.

Alan Shearer

CHAPTER 1

Pavel's Return

I wouldn't swap a World Cup, Champions League or Premier League winner's medal for that reception. The cocktail of euphoria, adrenaline and fear was coursing through every vein of my anatomy as I ran towards the Gallowgate End. Even now it still feels like a surreal, out of body experience.

I'd experienced everything in my life and career until that moment, or so I thought. And it happened so quickly. In less than a moment: Shay Given signalled to the bench to come off because he was injured, and Glenn Roeder, the manager, turned to me and said, 'You're going on.' I didn't have time to think, prepare or get warmed up. Before I knew it, I was out of my tracksuit, standing on the sidelines and being thrown in to the proverbial gladiators' arena, in a swirling cauldron of sound. More than 50,000 spectators' chants segued from 'One Shay Given' into 'Pavel is a Geordie', and I'm running towards the Gallowgate to take a goal kick. The noise was deafening and building up to a crescendo. I wasn't sure I could handle the situation. I was shaking. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing to attention and my heart was racing. There were only three minutes left. We were leading 3-1 against Tottenham, thanks to first half goals from Keiron Dyer, Obafemi Martins and skipper Scott Parker. I tried to compose myself, but I was struggling. Then I ran up to take the goal kick... and made a right arse of it. The ball bobbed about 50 yards along the ground.

After the match I delayed going back into the changing room and stayed out on the pitch longer than any of the other players. I wanted to eat, drink, and ingest every last drop of the exhilarating atmosphere. It was a fantastic memory, one that will stay with me for the rest of my life. It was like I could still hear the crowd and I wanted to prolong that feeling. I felt like I could burst at any second.

When I got into the dressing room everyone was congratulating me, patting me on the back and shaking my hand. Once the good wishes were over the lads started taking the piss about the goal kick I'd made a complete arse of. But the response from my team mates was incredible. Everybody was happy for me because they knew what it meant. The emotion from them was genuine. I could see it in their eyes. They also made it known they were surprised at the reception I received and confessed they'd never witnessed anything like it. Some of the lads even likened it to Alan Shearer's testimonial, which was extraordinary, I have to admit. Shearer is a legend and a god in Newcastle, so to be put alongside such a Geordie icon was flattering. I was humbled. I know I shouldn't have been surprised. But when you consider I first arrived on Tyneside in 1991, and this game was 15 years later, I just couldn't comprehend it. Nearly a generation of supporters had passed through the turnstiles since I last played at Newcastle. Some fans would've died, got older and maybe stopped going for one reason or another. Then there were the younger element that would not have seen me play.

The applause and appreciation can only be likened to the ovation I received when I made the save of my life against Everton back in 1995. The one Gordon Banks rated in his top ten saves of all time. I never expected that to be beaten, never mind topped. But it was against Tottenham.

Football hasn't made me a rich man in monetary terms but the memories of my time at St James' Park have made me the wealthiest man in the world. I went to my friend Lorenzo Terrinoni's house and met up with my other good mates Denis Martin and Tom Sweeney. We were all still buzzing after the game. Denis and Tom had been to the match and were full of how everyone was talking about it in the pubs in town. Lorenzo was working in his restaurant and told me that everyone who came in was talking about my dream return. I remember pinching myself and wondering whether it was all an hallucination. It was an unbelievable feeling. I thought, I would love to stay here forever; to coach or something like that. To give something back to those who have stood by and supported me. But no sooner was I thinking and planning this than a few months later the dream comes to an end, courtesy of the arrogant Sam Allardyce.

Ironically, I started in goal against Allardyce's Bolton at the Reebok on Boxing Day, three days after the Spurs game, while my first appearance on the bench for United was when Wanderers visited St James' Park, in October. They won 2-1. Shay Given and Steve Harper were still injured, so Tim Krul made the trip to Bolton with the team and warmed the bench. Shay and Steve weren't the only big names missing. There were several experienced personalities absent from the squad that travelled to the North West. Consequently, Glenn Roeder put out arguably the club's youngest ever back four in a line up. Teenagers Paul Huntington and David Edgar were the full backs, while 20-yearold Steven Taylor and Peter Ramage, 23, partnered each other at the heart of the defence.

We started well and Kieron Dyer put us 1-0 ahead early in the game before Ramage headed an own goal past me, courtesy of a push in the back from future Magpies' favourite and captain, Kevin Nolan. It was undoubtedly a foul but for whatever reason the referee allowed the goal to stand. Nicolas Anelka got the winner from a trade mark Trotters' set-piece. A long throw was flicked on by Kevin Davies and the ball was turned back

for the France striker to net from close range. It was disappointing to lose a match we should have taken something from.

It was to be the last time I played in goal for my beloved club because Shay and Steve returned to share goalkeeping duties after that. Admittedly, my best playing days were behind me, but I was content to settle for a place on the bench and help set up coaching sessions for the lads. I started working with the academy kids, as well as being involved with the first team. I met Tim Krul and Fraser Forster and they trained with Shay, Steve and I.

I was sad when Fraser eventually left because I felt the club should have kept him. I would love to have two precociously talented goalkeepers at Sparta Prague, like Tim and Fraser. The club should have kept them out on loan until they were ready to challenge and push each other, unless they could get big money for them. United only got £2m for Fraser yet he went to Southampton for £10m. Newcastle could have banked that money.

It has been a privilege to have played football in the Czech Republic, England, Portugal and Italy. When I am coaching the goalkeepers at Sparta Prague, I like to mix it up, so one day I'll do an Italian session, another day it will be a Portuguese session and so on.

It prevents them becoming bored and ensures enthusiasm levels are soaring. If I only did the English training sessions, they wouldn't like it because the levels of fitness were phenomenally high and hard.

There wasn't much in the way of technique in England, just bang! bang! bang! The way I coach makes it a bit more interesting for the goalkeepers because I offer a bit more variety, using both the European and British way and mixing it up. Shay didn't like the European sessions I put on. He liked his bang, bang, bang, routine, working like a Trojan. I would guess if I went back to Newcastle tomorrow, it would be the same sessions from when I first played at Benwell in 1991. Maybe that's a trifle harsh. The sessions have changed a little but there's hardly any work done on the angles, positioning or technique. That is the English way.

I was living in Italy when I got a call from Steve Harper in late September of 2006. It's fair to say my football career was winding down around this time and I was playing for a small Italian side called Carpenedolo in the fourth tier of Italian football, on a non-contract basis. Carpenedolo is a small town in the province of Brescia. A friend of mine knew the chairman. He asked whether I would be interested in coaching the goalkeepers and keeping fit while I looked for a club. I was living alone in a camping hotel while I rented out my house in Italy, because my family were back in the Czech Republic. I had one offer from Red Star Belgrade but it was immediately withdrawn when they found out I was 38. I went back home to see my family in Ostrava around this time, and spoke with my wife about the next step forward in our lives. We both agreed that I would go back to Italy for two weeks, and if nothing turned up then I would retire. It was an extremely difficult and emotional time for me because I was finally calling time on my career as a professional footballer. I was admitting to myself that I was finished, putting myself out to pasture. You can imagine this was quite a bitter pill to swallow.

I jumped in my car and drove through the Czech Republic. I was just approaching the Austria-Italy border when I got the call from Steve Harper. I pulled the car over to accept it.

'Hi Pav, how you doing and what are you up to?'

I told him I was playing for a small club in Italy and keeping fit, just in case a club was interested in signing me.

'What if Newcastle came in for you?'

I said, 'Yeah, good one, Steve.' I thought he was taking the piss. He wasn't.

He told me Shay was injured and he was the only fit goalkeeper along with one of the youngsters, who turned out to be Tim Krul. I think maybe Steve had told the gaffer, Glenn Roeder, I was naturally fit and could resolve the goalkeeper crisis. The Newcastle boss asked whether I would be interested in coming over so he could check out my fitness. It was a no-brainer, I instantly said 'Yes, that would be fantastic!' The thought of returning to St James' Park was a dream come true. It was like all of my birthdays and Christmases had come at once. I immediately turned the car around. I was about five hours from home but, with the adrenalin coursing through my body, I reckon I did it in four. I got a flight to Newcastle the following day and met Glenn, who said I was only there for cover and that I was going to be the third choice keeper. He added that, while I looked in good shape, he needed to see me in training before he could offer me a contract.

The following day I went through the warm up routine and then ten minutes into a game, Glenn came up behind the goal and said, 'Pav, it's OK, I've seen enough. Come and see me after training and we'll sort out a contract.' I went to see Russell Cushing to negotiate an initial three month deal. Russell had been at the club long before I was there and I have known him for a long time. But when we met in his office I said 'Russell, whatever you offer me I will take it'. It was a pleasure to be back on Tyneside and I would've played for nothing if I am honest. So he showed me some numbers and, it wasn't a fortune, but it was a fair salary for a third choice goalkeeper, knocking on a bit but not quite ready to draw his pension. Red Star

Belgrade actually came back in and tried to sign me when they realised I wasn't fat, finished and ready for the glue factory. But I told them it was too late because I had signed for, what felt like, my home-town club, Newcastle. Maybe I was being sentimental but that is what it felt like. Playing and living in Newcastle gave me so much pleasure, satisfaction and a sense of belonging.

When I left Newcastle in 1998 Freddy Shepherd said if I ever wanted to come back, just give him a call. I never did. I don't know why because it's my spiritual home. I had two opportunities to return after I left. The first time was when Ruud Gullit was manager. I was told Gullit didn't rate Shay Given, and Simon Smith, United's goalkeeping coach at the time, was asked to get a message through to me to see whether I'd be interested in going back. This was when I was in my second year at Sheffield Wednesday. I never found this out until Bobby Robson was boss, a few years later. I found it hard to believe Simon wouldn't pass the message on, after all, we were friends for years. I met Simon when he played for Gateshead in the Conference. We used to meet up to train together when I either came back for pre-season training early, stopped on at the end of the season or when the internationals were on. It got me wondering why I didn't get this message. Maybe he was worried I would take his job, which wasn't the case. I had no intention of moving into coaching at that time. I was still a young professional goalkeeper and just wanted to play. Nevertheless, there are no hard feelings and I couldn't be happier for him now he's back at St James' Park as Steve McClaren's goalkeeping coach.

The second time I had the opportunity was when I had just signed for Cosenza in 2003. Russell Cushing called to see whether if I would like to come back to the club. I was gutted. If only he had rang a week earlier. I told him I would love to return, but I was under contract I couldn't get out of it. Typical!

Glenn was a great guy. Initially, I was only supposed to stay at the club for three months. But the gaffer approached me well before that was up and asked whether I would like to stay until the end of the season, which I was more than happy to do. I was delighted to be back at the club. In my first game for the reserves, I kept a clean sheet, in a goalless draw against Wigan at Kingston Park, where a teenage Andy Carroll also played. Everything was working out just fine.

I generally kept myself to myself and tried not to get involved in club politics, although it was a difficult year for the boss. One problem I encountered was the number of cliques, particularly with the foreign players. They all seemed to stick together in a group. There didn't seem to be the bond, camaraderie and unity we had back in the 90s. Albert Luque, Emre and Obafemi Martins all spoke Italian or Spanish together and rarely any English. Luckily for me I spoke both Italian and English so I could understand what they were saying. The English players were all asking me what was being said. I tried to act as a buffer rather than becoming embroiled in any personal politics. The British lads were forever telling them, rather aggressively at times, to speak English. It wasn't good for morale and I think it made the English players suspicious that the foreign lot were talking about them. We never had this problem in my time because all of the foreigners mixed, got on with the British lads and spoke English.

Glenn was unlucky at Newcastle. He did a great job at steadying the ship, which had been run aground by the previous incumbent, Graeme Souness, the season before. And he was mainly left with the expensive misfits Souness had brought in. Furthermore, Roeder was always going to be up against it with two factions in the camp pulling in different directions. You could feel he was losing the respect of the dressing room as the season went on because he was a nice guy. He never really put his foot down and I don't think it was in Glenn's nature to be a disciplinarian. I think the players sensed it and took advantage. When that happens the players don't put themselves out for the coach. I felt this was the same when John Carver took over as caretaker manager from Alan Pardew. It was a real shame because

Roeder's intentions were honest and he had been a great captain for the club when he was a player.

The results were poor until mid-November. There was a mass demonstration after we lost 1-0 at home to relegation favourites Sheffield United and dropped into the bottom three. Thousands of supporters had gathered outside the entrance of the Milburn Stand voicing their displeasure at the chairman, Freddy Shepherd.

Newcastle supporters didn't really appreciate the Magpies' chairman, but I always got on with Freddy Shepherd. I could see it from both sides – when you know how passionate the Geordies are about their football and how much they live and breathe it, you can understand their feelings and their want for someone to blame and shout at. I remember after one game Freddy said, 'Can you do me a favour, Pav?' I'm thinking, he's the chairman, why is he asking? I am his employee. He can order me to do anything. He owns half the club. Then he says, 'It's my mother's birthday. Can you take these flowers up to her in the lounge?' I was his mother's favourite player. He added, 'She would probably like your shirt as well.' I thought no problem. I gave her the shirt and signed my gloves.

I've never seen her so happy as when I presented them to her. She gave me a hug and a kiss and said, 'You stay with me, Pav.' She turned to Freddy and said, 'Son, this is the best player at the club. You'd better give him a good contract.' I'm thinking, Freddy, you should listen to your mam. This was my boss and she was talking to Freddy like he was a little boy. It was very funny.

Freddy's mother always came to see me when we played. I was very sad to hear she had died. I didn't find out until a few months after her death. It was when I was at Portsmouth. Had someone told me I would have gone to the funeral because she was a lovely woman. I remember around this time Shay was interviewed in the press and he was quoted as saying the club needed some heavy investment in players if it was to move forward. A message

was quickly returned to Shay from Freddy. The chairman made it quite clear it wasn't the goalkeeper's place to comment on club business and that he should concentrate on his own performance. There was a little bit of tension between the United chief and the club's number one but it was soon forgotten.

We rode the storm and managed to put a good run of results together, losing only once in the eight games after the Sheffield match, lifting us out of the drop zone and up to 11th. We got as high as ninth but then results and performances dropped below par and there was more unrest. I suppose it didn't help Glenn that he couldn't call upon Michael Owen. Owen was the country's top striker but had injured himself in the 2006 World Cup the previous summer. His goals could have had Newcastle challenging for a UEFA Cup qualifying place.

The memory of Michael Owen playing football for Newcastle does not resonate at all. I remember Michael Owen for one thing and one thing only... horse racing. That's all he was interested in. He was injured all season. He used to come in every morning with his racing newspaper and talk about horses, betting and how you win money. I can't remember a conversation involving football. I recall one occasion when he flew into training in his helicopter. It was astounding. It didn't seem right for a player to come to training in a helicopter. It was more suited to a film set in Hollywood. His pilot just sat in the seat and watched the session. After Owen had finished training he flew him away somewhere else. I sat next to Owen in the dressing room one time. I felt like he was Bill Gates and I was someone trying to buy a computer from him. That was the difference in wealth, I felt.

We went out of the League Cup in the fifth round at Chelsea, and got thumped 5-1 at home in the FA Cup to Championship outfit Birmingham. It was an embarrassing defeat. We fared better in the UEFA Cup. We qualified through the Intertoto Cup, and because we were the last team in the competition, the rules dictated we won the trophy. This kind of gets overlooked. I know it wasn't the FA Cup or League Cup but it was an achievement of sorts. As for the UEFA Cup itself, we went out in the last 16 to Louis van Gaal's AZ Alkmaar on away goals. We won the first leg at home 4-2 but lost the return 2-0 in the AFAS Stadion. It was a great shame because we played really well at home. But for some sloppy defending we would've been in the quarter-finals of the competition. The season more or less ended for Newcastle following a 2-1 home victory over Liverpool in February. I say ended because we only won one more league game after that, at Sheffield United. It was a great match played in appalling conditions. I thought at one stage the fixture was going to be postponed because of the rain and surface water on the pitch. The supporters on both sides generated a fantastic atmosphere and the contest ebbed and flowed. I think we just about edged it and deserved our 2-1 victory. Nobby Solano and Obafemi Martins netted for us, while former United bad boy Craig Bellamy opened the scoring for the Reds. The season couldn't end quickly enough for our fanatical supporters following the slump in fortunes through March and April. I remember the penultimate game of the season at home to and Blackburn. It was a pitiful surrender by the team and a 2-0 loss. The writing was on the wall for Glenn after that fixture, although you can't blame the manager for the team's performance. Most of the players came back onto the pitch to show their appreciation for the support they'd received during the season, although there were a couple who didn't come back on, namely Stephen Carr and Titus Bramble. Glenn tried to fight fires after the game but the following day he resigned, or was pushed. Nigel Pearson took charge for the club's last game of the season which was drawn 1-1 at Watford. A week after that Sam Allardyce was installed as the Newcastle manager. I asked to see Sam soon after he got the job but we never had a proper meeting. He was coming out of the entrance door at the training ground, at Benton, when I asked if I could have a word with him about his plans.

Sam more or less dismissed me saying, 'I'm not going to offer you a new contract because you're too old.' It was conversation which lasted no more than two minutes, and he spent most of it looking at his fingers. You could see he was in a hurry and wanted to get away from me. There was a total lack of respect on his part. Allardyce had a similar arrogant attitude to Kenny Dalglish. One of the club's secretaries at the time told me, 'Pay, he [Allardyce] is the nastiest man I have ever met.' People reading this may think I am being myopic or have a polarised opinion of people. But I wasn't the only one to get this feeling from the likes of Dalglish and Allardyce. Steve Harper rang me when he heard the news and said he would've bet his house I'd have been kept on had Glenn stayed. It has been the story of my life to be honest. Right place, wrong time, or vice versa. I couldn't help thinking, what if Alan Shearer hadn't wanted to take a year off from football when he retired, and moved alongside Glenn when he stopped playing? I know I'm talking hypothetically but could you imagine how well the club would've done under Alan with Freddy Shepherd's backing? I knew Newcastle were going to be the last club I played for and I didn't want it any other way. People say it is best to go out on a high and I did. I know in reality I began my career in the Czech Republic, but I felt my football career was metaphorically born in Newcastle and finished 15 years later in Newcastle. It was a fitting fairytale end. I finally got to say goodbye to all of those people who stood by me through the trials and tribulations of my career at St James' Park. I never had a chance to say goodbye before. Ironically, it was probably the happiest year of my life. There was no stress, a fantastic club, supporters loved me and I was doing a job I loved for the club I have loved all of my life. Yet there was a sad aspect to my return to Newcastle. Everything may have been going well for me on the pitch but I couldn't say this was the case off it. My wife never moved back with me to Tyneside. She stayed at home in

Ostrava, and when I returned to the Czech Republic after my year in England we got divorced. So on the one hand Newcastle gave me my life but on the other I suppose it took a large part of it away as well.

CHAPTER 2

Kenny Conflict

Terry Gennoe approached me and said, 'Kenny told me to tell you you're not on the bench. Shaka is going to be on the bench today.' I could feel the blood rising within my body. I thought I was going to erupt. It felt like someone had just ripped my insides out. I couldn't believe it. I punched the wall as tears of anger started trickling down my face.

'Terry, I'm going to fucking kill him! Tell him I'm going to fucking kill him!' I ran down to the hotel reception area, where we were staying in Manchester prior to our FA Cup semi-final against Sheffield United, and waited for the bastard. My temper was rising by the second. And then I saw him walking down the stairs, not a care in the world, and the red mist took hold of me. I lost all control as he ambled along, oblivious to what he'd done and to how I felt.

'You fucking bastard! I'm going to kill you!'

A woman nearby, one of the hotel staff, dropped a tray she was carrying because of the sheer volume of rage in my voice. Maybe she thought I was shouting at her. I ran to lock the entrance/exit door to the reception, so he couldn't get away. Terry, our goalkeeping coach, chased after me and gripped me in a bear hug. I managed to free one arm and took a swing at Dalglish as he tried to get past, but I missed him. The coward managed to sneak under my arm and scurried onto the coach like a little rat without saying a word. It was the fastest I'd ever seen him move. Terry released his grip and I scampered after him towards the bus and tried to get on. But, just as I got there, Dalglish told the driver to shut the door and go. I slammed my fist into window as it pulled away for Old Trafford and the game. He didn't even have the balls to look me in the eye and I was left in the hotel fuming! I was furious; I could've ripped down the hotel with my bare hands. I'm surprised I didn't. That was typical of him though – spineless and never wanting to resolve any of the shit he caused. It was just brick walls and silence; causing conflict and then avoiding the fallout from it.

While I was reflecting about what had just happened I turned around and saw Temuri Ketsbaia, oblivious to the fracas, nonchalantly walking down the stairs. He said, 'Pav, what's happening, man? Where's the bus?' They left him behind as well.

'That bastard shit himself and ran away onto the bus!'

The Georgian was a bit confused and couldn't really comprehend what was going on.

'Yeah, OK, what about me?' He had to take a taxi to Old Trafford.

After I composed myself I rang a good friend of mine, Denis Martin, from Durham and told him what had happened. I was still infuriated and emotional, trying to comprehend what had just happened. Denis just said, 'Wait there, I'll come and get you.' I sat in my room and watched the game, which we won 1-0, thanks to an Alan Shearer strike. And, by the time it had finished, Denis was there to take me home. The reason I exploded was because it was my turn to sit on the bench, yet Dalglish chose Shaka. Shaka and I were both in the last year of our contracts and after months of ignoring me – being excluded from the first team squad, training on my own - an arrangement was put in place where Shaka and I would share bench duties in alternative games. Why was the arrangement agreed? I'm not completely sure. Maybe the United hierarchy had told Kenny he had to start including me in his match day squad. It was out of the blue because I had trained on my own for months.

Dalglish did not give a reason or excuse as to why he went back on the agreement. I would say he went back on his word, but Dalglish's word isn't worth shit. He just made the decision and sent one of his minions to tell me. He probably knew I would kick off if he told me to my face. That is why he sent Terry to tell me. Dalglish treated me like a piece of shit in all my time with him at Newcastle and I'd had enough.

When I got back to the club, on Monday morning, I went to see Freddie Fletcher. In hindsight that was a mistake because he was Dalglish's good mate. I told him straight: 'I can't bear to be around him at the club or at the training ground because he treats me like a piece of shit, and you know he does, so I'm going home for a couple of weeks to clear my head.' Freddie disagreed with what I had told him and reckoned the fault clearly lay at my door. Fletcher added that I have had problems with every manager at United and should look at myself rather than blame others. His response shocked me. Admittedly, I wasn't happy when I wasn't playing under Keegan. No player is happy when they're out of the side. But it was never like this.

Kevin respected me and never treat me like shit, unlike Dalglish. Furthermore, I never had any problems with Jim Smith or Ossie Ardiles. I bumped into Terry Mac in the corridor after this meeting and told him I had to get away otherwise I would kill Dalglish. His reply astounded me: 'You think you're the only one capable of doing that? Do you not think Kenny knows people who could kill you?' I thought that was a bit of an odd thing to reply with, but I dismissed the idle threat and laughed. I would've killed him had I got the chance. Freddie and Terry were both protecting Dalglish. But had they gone around the dressing room and asked whether the other players favoured Kenny, they would've been in for a big surprise. The feeling of antipathy towards the former Liverpool manager wasn't exclusively mine. Nevertheless, I went back to the Czech Republic to clear my head

and returned to Newcastle after a week. Nothing was said when I returned and I continued to train on my own. Surprisingly, when I got back, I was on the bench for the next game, a trip to Arsenal. As luck would have it, my last taste of life in the dugout came two weeks later at the venue of our FA Cup semi-final, Old Trafford. It's ironic how football does that to you.

The reason for my discontent with Dalglish, or the catalyst for our estrangement, came just after the pre-season tour of Ireland and the Umbro Tournament at Everton. He got the three goalkeepers, Shay, Shaka and I, together prior to pre-season training and told us that we were all very good goalkeepers and he wasn't sure which one of us would start the season as the club's number one. We went to Ireland to play in a tournament, against PSV Eindhoven and Derry City. I played in the match against Derry where we won 2-0. I remember the trip to Ireland well, because Shay was very popular there. We also played in a mini tournament at Everton. I played against Ajax, where we lost 3-0.

It was no surprise when another goalkeeper, in the shape of Shay Given, arrived at St James' Park that summer. I had seen it all before. A new shot stopper turned up on Tyneside before the beginning of every season. I'd become accustomed to it. I was still confident in my own abilities and I would eventually earn the right to wear the number one shirt. I was aware of Shay Given before he turned up on our doorstep. I remember the previous season when he helped Sunderland to win the First Division title. He kept 16 clean sheets in 17 appearances for the club, so you tend to notice statistics like that from other goalkeepers at other clubs.

Once pre-season training and the friendly games were over, I said to Shaka and Shay that we should go and see the gaffer to clear up who will start and where we stand. Kenny shocked us at first because he wanted Shaka and I to share our Champions League bonus from the previous season with Shay. Shaka made it known he was fine with that as long as we all share the bonus and appearance money for the forthcoming campaign. Up to that point, the way Kenny was talking, it looked as if the three of us were going to be rotated; one in goal, one on the bench and one in the stands. When we tried to clear up that conundrum, Kenny said no, the third choice will not be getting a share of the bonuses. I countered that by telling him, in that case, it wasn't fair Shay should get a share of our Champions League bonus from the previous campaign, which was £20,000 each. It really pissed me off when Kenny asked us to share our Champions League bonus. I worked really hard for it. Shaka and I had nothing against Shay, in fact, you could tell he was uncomfortable and embarrassed by the talk. He was squirming in his chair while we were discussing it. Dalglish immediately responded by saying, 'Pav, you're third choice goalkeeper.' Consequently, I came into training the day after this meeting and found I had to train alone, while Shay and Shaka trained together or with the first team. Ten minutes before we finished training, Terry Gennoe would come over and work with me, because he felt sorry for me.

You could feel a wind of change around this time. The feel good factor we previously had encountered under Kevin was slowly evaporating. Throughout the summer and pre-season, we had been constantly linked with new arrivals, while speculation raged about who was about to leave Tyneside; none more so than Les Ferdinand. Despite the constant conjecture it was still a shock when Les left. Why did he leave? Maybe he had the same feelings about Dalglish as I did. Maybe he was told he wasn't going to play as often, or the board were saying he had to be sold to balance the books; I don't know. I have never spoken to Les about why he left or what the reasons were behind it. Les was one of the nicest men I have ever met in football. He wouldn't say anything disparaging about anyone but I bet he was upset at having to leave. As bad luck would have it, the day after Les agreed to sign for Tottenham, Alan Shearer got injured at Goodison Park in our pre-season tournament. The club contacted Les and asked if he would remain at St James' Park. Even Alan called to see if he could persuade his strike partner to stay on Tyneside. Despite wanting him to remain a Newcastle player, I wasn't surprised he went ahead and signed for Spurs. Les had given his word he would put pen to paper for the club he supported as a boy. And being a man of honour you wouldn't expect him to go back on a promise.

We were down to one experienced striker in Faustino Asprilla and one untried novice in Jon Dahl Thomasson as we approached the curtain raiser against my future employers, Sheffield Wednesday. I say one experienced striker but it wasn't really because Peter Beardsley was still at the club. He was on the bench with me that day. As it happens we played well and Tino had a fantastic game, netting a brace. The same can't be said for Thomasson, who seemed to freeze on the big day. He had an early chance, which he fluffed, and he never seemed to recover from it during his time at St James' Park.

Games were coming thick and fast thanks to qualifying for the Champions League. We were unbeaten throughout August. A 2-1 triumph over Wednesday was followed by two home victories; 2-1 over Dynamo Zagreb and 1-0 against Aston Villa. Remarkably, John Beresford scored all three goals. Dalglish had pushed him forward into left midfield following the signings of Stuart Pearce and Alessandro Pistone. Bez also managed a brace against Dynamo Kiev in Russia later on in the competition. A nailbiting 2-2 draw in Zagreb, thanks to strikes from Tino and Temuri Kesbaia, saw us qualify for the league stage of the competition.

I said in the previous chapter how Newcastle's season effectively ended after a game against Liverpool. The same could be said after we beat Spanish giants Barcelona on Tyneside. Yes, I know we got to the FA Cup final but it was hardly champagne football on the way to Wembley. The atmosphere was electric at St James'

Park, and Keith Gillespie and Tino had arguably their greatest games in a black and white shirt. I watched from the bench as Gillespie tortured the Barca left back while our maverick Columbian bagged a memorable hat-trick.

Defeats home and away to PSV Eindhoven; a loss in the Nou Camp; a 2-2 away draw and 2-0 home victory over Kiev weren't quite good enough to qualify for the knock out stages of the tournament. Why?

Several reasons really. The manager employed negative tactics; the squad wasn't good or strong enough and on a few occasions we lined up with five full backs in the side. It was mind boggling stuff. You couldn't second guess what Dalglish was going to do. I remember hearing when Kenny took over from Kevin; he indicated the squad only needed tinkering with. I know my use of the English language isn't perfect but I'm sure it didn't mean ripping the team apart and bringing in has-beens and never-will-be's. Unknowns came in, such as Temuri Ketsbaia, Andreas Andersson, Alessendro Pistone, Nikos Dabizas and Jon Dahl Tomasson; followed by John Barnes, Ian Rush and Stuart Pearce. I don't want to sound disrespectful to any of those players, but the veterans he brought in were way past their best. Yes they had had great careers, won loads of trophies, but that was in the past. They weren't going to take the team forward. And were any of them really better than John Beresford,

Darren Peacock, Philippe Albert, Peter Beardsley, David Ginola and Les Ferdinand? In essence, these players were the backbone of our success and progress over the previous five years.

The older players had our respect because of their great careers. They had a wealth of experience, an excellent attitude and good personalities, but they were fast losing face because they weren't quick enough to keep up with the pace of the Premier League. If Kenny had brought in one older player with vast experience, then fair enough, but not three or four. You can't carry three or four older players in your team. And when you look back at their time on Tyneside, did they really make an improvement to the team?

The guys who were brought in by Kevin, and were being phased out by Kenny, all formed a bond. We all spoke about what was happening. We encouraged and supported each other while Kenny was taking a proverbial wrecking ball to the club. The team was dismantled under him, destroyed. It's hardly surprising we stuck together, when you consider we had spent the previous five years building something special at the club only for Dalglish to come in and demolish all of the good work Keegan had put in place. I know I wasn't happy with my situation under Kevin but I never hated him. He was a good man. I could see what he was trying to do, and he did respect and treat me like a man, unlike Dalglish. It has been suggested the position was too big for

Dalglish, but he must have known how significant the job was at Newcastle. He should've been able to cope with the pressure. He was a great player at Liverpool, a great manager on Merseyside and, of course, won the title at Blackburn. I don't know why he was the way he was with us. Maybe he didn't like the way we, and the people of the North-East, lived our lives. I've never met anyone quite like him. He never looked into your eyes when he spoke to you; he always had an air of superiority and treated me like dirt. This just wasn't me, he did this with everyone. He definitely thought he was better than anyone else. The way he spoke and the cutting, hurtful sarcasm was uncalled for. There have been people in my life that I haven't liked or got on with but I still gave them respect. I never felt that way about Dalglish. One of the lads once said he loves his dogs more than people. Maybe he should've got a job looking after cats and dogs or ran a farm in that case.

Kenny had such a great career and knows a lot of influential people in football who will never say a bad word against him. But I'm sure there are more than a few out there who think the way I do. There were several who played with me at Newcastle. He tried to destroy me as a man. Managers make and break careers. If he didn't like Shay then I'm positive he wouldn't have had the career he went on to enjoy. If Dalglish hadn't arrived at St James' Park I would still be there. I am convinced of it. I would be there in some capacity, as a coach more than likely.

It goes without saying, the 1997-98 campaign was the worst season of my career. There were 56 games that term including Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup. I played only once, against Blackburn in a 1-1 draw. I was on the bench a further 13 times; unlucky for me, eh? We also finished

13th in the league. That was our worst finish in a top flight campaign since we were promoted in 1993. It was mentioned that it was a tragedy when we finished sixth in our second season back in the big time. But this was a horrendous league position. We'd finished runners up in the previous two terms. It was said Kenny would be a good appointment for the club. He would finish the job Kevin started and finally land some much craved silverware. Dalglish's style was said to be a bit more cautious and pragmatic. This would be more successful than Keegan's open football style. So out went the fluent, eloquent, onetouch football where attack became the best form of defence. In its place, Dalglish introduced a careful, ungainly and disjointed model, that wasn't a success at all, far from it. The football was just bloody awful and, not only that, we were worse for it.

Smiles around the club had changed to frowns and it reflected Dalglish's dour personality. Training wasn't enjoyable, going to games wasn't a pleasant experience and the football was dreadful. If that wasn't bad enough our chairman and director were set up in a *News of the World* sting. Freddy Shepherd and Douglas Hall were caught on camera boasting of how they'd ripped off fans, mocking Geordie women and calling Alan Shearer 'Mary Poppins'. The season was staggering from bad to worse.

It was a shock to us all when the story broke. The players all spoke about it and were astounded. Douglas was the son of Sir John Hall and a director, while Freddy Shepherd was our chairman. We were employed by them, so the story was also about us aswell. We wore the shirts that were supposed to cost only five quid. Can

you imagine how the parents of those kids felt having to pay out £40 every season for a new shirt? Some families had two and three kids. That's a lot of money to shell out when you don't have much money to go around. My wife was from the Czech Republic so I wasn't insulted by the comment that all women from Newcastle were 'dogs'. But some of the players did have Geordie girlfriends or wives. It was a bad PR exercise for the club and wasn't a good way to project the club. This story didn't just stay local; it went all the way around the world. I know it has been said that Freddy and Douglas were set up as part of a sting. And I know peoples' inhibitions are lowered when they have had a drink, but you should still watch what you say in front of people. Some stories just come and go. This story didn't just last a week and then go away. It hung around for months. It hurt the fans, it hurt the club and it hurt the city of Newcastle. I'm a great believer in fate, and it came as no surprise that this all happened while Kenny was in charge of the team. There was a cloud hanging over the club from the first day he walked into St James' Park. Kenny was bad for the club in the same way Sam Allardyce was. I didn't know Allardyce, and maybe he was a good manager, but he wasn't the right man for Newcastle and the North-East. There was an arrogance about the two men. They couldn't give a fuck about anyone. Why? Maybe because they had made enough money and were already set up for life. There's no doubt the story damaged the reputation of the club. People's perceptions were starting to change about us. In a very short time we went from being the nation's second favourite team to a laughing stock.

I should probably talk about our FA Cup run, given that I spoke earlier about an upsetting experience prior to the semi-final. Obviously, I was happy for our supporters. It was the first time they had been to an FA Cup final in 24 years. But the road to Wembley is just a painful memory for me. I'm guessing it is for the fans, looking back. The team never did itself justice on the day. Dalglish will probably take credit for taking the club to its first FA Cup final in decades. But when you look at who stood in our way, it is hardly surprising we got to the final. Aside from Everton in the third round, we never met another Premier League club in the competition until the final. I wasn't involved in the squad but I was there. The best I can say about the day is that our fans performed marvellously, unlike the team.

My contract ran out at the end of this turbulent campaign yet, despite a tumultuous season of club conflict and political strife, I was offered a four-year deal worth £500,000 a year. It was a fantastic contract. The biggest deal of my career and yet I wasn't the club's number one goalkeeper. It would've set me up for life. But, with a heavy heart, I turned it down. I rang Freddie Fletcher and told him it was a fantastic contract but said I wasn't going to sign it. Fletcher rang me the following day, while I was still packing, and left a message that the offer was still on the table. I ignored the voice-mail message. He also rang me two weeks later and said, 'Pav, the contract is still here, are you going to sign it?' I knew Kenny's job was under threat so I asked whether he was staying or getting sacked. Freddie said he couldn't say what was going to happen.

Two weeks into the new season and Kenny was given the boot. I am sure Freddie Fletcher knew he was going to get sacked. When Dalglish was dismissed I asked whether the offer was still open. Much to my disappointment it had been withdrawn. They subsequently signed Sunderland goalkeeper Lionel Perez as my replacement. Had Freddie said, go away for a few weeks, have a break and then come back when you have cleared your head, I would have never left the club. Nonetheless in hindsight, as long as Dalglish was in charge, I still would've refused to sign. That is how much I hated the man. He destroyed my career. I probably would've finished my career at the Newcastle, had a testimonial and stayed coaching with the first team or the academy. I had made the heart-wrenching decision to leave the club I loved. I was half way through packing up the house and moving lock, stock and barrel back to the Czech Republic. My friend, Denis, wanted me to rethink and stay because he knew I loved Newcastle and everything about the North-East. And of course £500,000 a year was a lot of money to reject. I was still undecided. My wife was back in my home country and I thought I'd call her and see what she said. I left the decision up to her. Denis' wife also spoke with Pavla to try and talk her into staying. I called her and spoke and, after a 20 minute chat, she told me to come home.

When we finished loading up the removal truck I took one last look around the house and its surroundings and cried! I didn't like it, but to me it was the only decision I could have made.