



Darlington FC – Back From The Brink – January 2012

Just after midday on Wednesday 18th January 2012, Darlington Football Club was pronounced dead. Over 128 years of history wiped out after the club fell victim to administration for the third time in ten years. This time, it seemed, there was no way out.

Twitter was awash with comment, with the excellent updates from the Northern Echo's Peter Barron particularly addictive following. Players emerged from a crisis meeting to announce the news to supporters and media alike. Manager Craig Liddle, like his team made redundant 48 hours earlier in a final cost-cutting move by the administrators, explained that he was "sick to the pit of my stomach."



**Help Save
Darlington FC**

Liddle, a legendary figure at the Quakers since making his debut in 1998, had heroically turned up to take training with the youth team on Tuesday morning, offering his services free of charge in the process, his burgeoning reputation growing still further in his defiance at the club's demise.

Darlington dropped out of the Football League in 2010 but, under the stewardship of Mark Cooper, they won The FA Trophy twelve months later in May 2011. Cooper acrimoniously left in October, then-chairman Raj Singh pointing the finger at his former boss and his relatively expensively-assembled side for Darlington's financial ruin.

The truth, of course, is very different. Singh need turn his clock back less than a decade to view the source of the club's woes.

Local businessman George Reynolds was a convicted criminal, a safe-breaker. He boasted that this particular leopard had changed his spots and, in a time before The FA's much-maligned Fit & Proper Persons Test, there was nothing to stop him taking over.

There was nothing to stop him from moving Darlo lock, stock and barrel out of the dilapidated but homely Feethams in the town centre.

Nothing to stop Reynolds constructing a new stadium, a white elephant of a 25,000-capacity ground self-servingly named after the egotistic owner, far away from anywhere. With Newcastle United, Sunderland and Middlesbrough all close by, the decision was pure folly.

In 2005, Reynolds departed with the club, somewhat predictably, in administration, ready for another period enjoying life at Her Majesty's Pleasure. He left behind a legacy, but not one of a Premier League or even a Championship, club playing in front of packed stands. Although the Darlington Arena has 25,000 seats, the capacity is now restricted to just 10,000, with one stand effectively operating as the world's largest dug-out. Never have more than 11,600 fans entered the ground.

Against that backdrop of unsustainability, it is no wonder that the club have lurched from one financial crisis to another. And this January the death-knell appeared to sound once and for all.

The Supporters' Trust has saved around £50,000 but, as the administrators desperately sought backers, they were understandably unwilling to part with that cash without a viable long-term strategy in place. Rather, they worked a contingency plan to set-up a phoenix club, with Trust Board members being forced to step down as a result of the abuse they received for their decision.

Wednesday, midday again: Players, staff and fans alike were welling up with tears. Local and national press were beginning to write the obituary of Darlington FC. But, behind the scenes, there was one last roll of the dice; the Darlington Football Club Rescue Group (DFCRG) had a final proposal to put to the administrators.

With the help of backing from individuals, the Supporters' Club and £10,000 from the Supporters' Trust, the DFCRG had cobbled together £50,000 - enough to keep the club afloat until the end of January and see them through their next three matches.

The Blue Square Bet Conference will allow the nine previously unemployed players and their youth team counterparts to participate on a non-contract basis for those matches. Liddle, a veteran of more than 300 appearances over seven years for the club between 1998 and 2005, has registered as a player in case of emergency. It's all systems go, with the Northern Echo, sponsors of the stadium, drumming up support.

Darlington FC is on a life-support machine. The groundswell of backing from all across the country has been overwhelming for all of those volunteering to keep the club running in these dark days. The Quakers need all the help they can get, not just to get through the next few weeks, but beyond.

They are not the only club in trouble. Kettering Town and Northwich Victoria, both famous non-League outfits, appear to be similarly approaching the brink. The Shrimpers Trust have written to the Darlington Supporters' Trust, offering any support and help we can give. We are, most certainly, not alone in that respect.

Football has to wake up, and quickly. Less than a 100 places separate the FA Premier League from the Conference; still less to League Two, where the Shrimpers currently reside. However, the two are worlds apart. The Football League is working hard, with wage-capping being introduced in League One from 2012/3 to join League Two, in a bid to enhance sustainability, but yet greater strides need to be made.

Southend United faced a winding-up petition a little under two years ago, and I remember then the relief at our reprieve. We didn't get as close as Darlington did to folding-up completely, but there are many clubs who continue to struggle and it is imperative that the game's authorities and custodians start to listen to football supporters.

Because, as Wednesday's dramatic events proved, without us, there would be no clubs.

****If you wish to donate to Darlington FC and help them, you can send a cheque to Darlington FC Supporters Club at 6 Somerset Grove, Darlington, DL1 2LL. A back account is being opened by the DFCRG, and details of this will be available soon; it is advisable to check the Northern Echo website, www.thenorthernecho.co.uk for the latest details.***

General donations can also be made to the Darlington Supporters' Trust through www.darlotrust.co.uk.