



The Story of MK Dons - Part 2 - stadiummk 2007 to 2010

2007/8

In the summer of 2007 the Dons' new stadium was rapidly coming to completion, or as complete as it was likely to be for the next few seasons. Only the lower tier would be seated for the present, which would still provide enough room for 22,000 supporters, more than enough until they got into the Championship. Apart from the new ground, the Dons also had the little matter of finding a new manager again and to everyone's surprise, Pete Winkeman appointed the up and coming new manager, Paul Ince, ironically a former team mate of Keith Andrews whilst at Wolves. Ince had started his coaching career at Swindon and then in 2006 became Player/Manager at struggling Macclesfield at the bottom of League 2, seven points adrift of their nearest rival. They did, however, manage to avoid relegation on the last day of the season. When Ince joined the Dons on 25th June 2007, he brought along Ray Mathias, experienced player and coach, who was his assistant at Macclesfield.



Ray & Paul

So the 2007/8 season was started with renewed optimism with a new stadium and a new manager. And not without good reason. They played their first competitive game at *stadiummk* on 11th August against Bury, with Keith Andrews scoring the first goal at the new stadium. Despite that, though, the Dons lost the match 1-2, in front of a crowd of 7,740. By the end of September, however, they were top of Division 2 and stayed there, more or less for the remainder of the season.



our'Keef'

Promotion was assured on 19th April 2008 when they came from behind twice to beat Stockport 3-2 at Edgeley Park, ending the Hatters' 10-game unbeaten run in the process. The Championship was finally secured with a 2-1 win away at Bradford City, with goals by Jude Stirling and Lloyd Dyer, his last for the club, moving to promoted Leicester on 1st July.



This wasn't all, of course, as in the meantime the Dons had been challenging for the Johnstones' Paint Trophy. After knocking out Peterborough, Bournemouth, Gillingham and Swansea, they found themselves at Wembley on Sunday 30th March 2008 facing Grimsby in the Final. In front of 56,618 supporters, 33,000 of whom were Dons fans, the Dons came out worthy winners with goals in the last 16 minutes from Keith Andrews, with a penalty, and Sean O'Hanlon heading in the winner from a Colin Cameron corner.

The game wasn't without its heart stopping moments though as Willy Gueret gave away a penalty in the 18th minute, but true to form, he made a great save and kept the Dons in the game. It was Willy's 5th penalty save of the campaign, the best one being against Swansea in the semi-final penalty shoot out, which got them to the final. All in all, an excellent season, and one that would not be easily repeated.

2008/9

The gloss was taken off the euphoria, however, when on 22nd June 2008, Paul Ince was offered the Manager's job at Blackburn Rovers, Mark Hughes having moved to greener pastures at Manchester City. This was not to be a happy experience for Ince, however, as he was sacked in December after winning only 3 games in 17. Ince, however, had taken the Dons captain, Keith Andrews, with him to Blackburn, who has been quite successful there. Also, while at Blackburn, Ince appointed the ex. Liverpool Youth Academy Coach, Karl Robinson, as his assistant, having met him at the Academy during his son, Thomas's, time there. And so, on to season 2008/9, managerless once again and without our 2nd & 3rd highest goalscorers for the season, Andrews and Lloyd Dyer. The leading scorer, Mark Wright was to leave at the end of this season.

Everyone was waiting with bated breath to see which rabbit Pete Winkelman would pull out of the hat this time. Would he go for experience this time or another 'name'? Of course, it had to be a big name, but we weren't expecting someone who hadn't managed before. However, such was the case with Roberto Di Matteo, the Swiss born Italian and former Chelsea legend.



Roberto Di Matteo

Scorer of the fastest goal ever scored at a Wembley Cup Final (42 secs.) until Louis Saha broke the record in 2009 against Chelsea (25 secs). Although Di Matteo had no managerial experience he had, in fact, been taking his UEFA coaching licences while still playing, completing his "B" licence during his time with Chelsea.

Despite his lack of experience, however, the Dons had a reasonably good season, with some outstanding results, such as the 4-0 battering of Millwall at the New Den, the 5-3 defeat of Cheltenham, away again, and the 6-2 demolition of Oldham at *stadiummk*. Having said that, the Dons had a lean spell in March and ended the season in the Play Offs once again, repeating the failure to achieve promotion against a Scunthorpe side who only just made the Play Offs and were 11 points behind the Dons. The second leg went to penalties and Di Matteo's old mate Tore Andre Flo hit the crossbar for the losing penalty. The Dons played some good football during this season but some of Di Matteo's team selection decisions left a good number of fans frustrated. Overall, though, the Dons performances during the season were enough to get Di Matteo noticed and once again the cheque books were out. This time it was West Bromwich Albion who came calling, having been relegated back to the Championship and also losing their Manager, Tony Mowbray. So, on 30th June 2009 the Dons were without a manager once again.

2009/10

While everyone was speculating on who the next manager would be, it hadn't escaped their attention that Paul Ince, their most successful manager, was now on the market again having been relieved of his duties at Blackburn following a run of dismal results back in December. He had blamed his failure on "a lack of financial backing" despite spending over £10 million on new players. This excuse would be revisited again in the not too distant future. There seemed to be a large movement of fans who wanted Ince back, in the hope of reigniting the glory times, and they got their wish when Pete Winkelman welcomed him back, to finish, as Ince put it, "*some unfinished business*".



So began the 2009/10 season, full of optimism again, for some, but not all. Alas, having lost 2 of their 3 best goal scorers last season and their highest goal scorer of this particular season, Mark Wright, who left for Brighton in June 2009, it was never going to be easy to repeat the success of 2 seasons ago.

And so it turned out, what with numerous injuries and an ever changing defence, who hardly had any time to get to know each other; it was a difficult season and they ended up finishing 12th. However, this was not before Ince had announced on April 16th that he planned to leave the club after the last match of the season. He said, "Having discussed with the chairman the plans for next season, I don't feel it will be possible to take the team forward as I would have liked due to the budget cutbacks that he (Pete Winkelman, the Dons chairman) is going to have to make," he said. "I have enjoyed my time and will take some great memories from both spells here."

For the remaining 4 games Karl Robinson took over team affairs, Ince having now left, although he was officially still manager. It was believed this was to allow him to 'serve' four of his five match touchline ban before he moved to another club, who, it is presumed, wouldn't take too kindly to him spending the first five games watching from the stands. Following Karl Robinson's temporary appointment, there was a marked improvement in the team's performance, if not the results. The team seemed to play with more energy and desire, which was encouraging for the future.



Over the last few games of the season, speculation was rife as to who would be the next 'big name' to take over at the helm. Despite the large number of applicants, including some respected names, Pete Winkelman finally plumped for stability rather than change, and appointed Ince's assistant, Karl Robinson, as manager on a 12-month contract. This appointment made him the youngest manager in the Football League, at 29 years of age. Karl was widely respected within the game as one of the country's brightest up-and-coming coaches. He worked for eight years in the Liverpool Academy under Anfield legend, Steve Heighway, earning his UEFA B and A coaching qualifications during his time with the Premier League club, and his Pro Licence during the summer of 2010. When Ince

departed for Blackburn in the summer of 2008, Karl was among the staff to join him, again as first team coach. Following Ince's departure later that season, new boss Sam Allardyce was quick to secure Robinson's immediate future. Having looked like potential relegation candidates for long periods, Blackburn secured a 15th-placed finish.

Alongside Karl, at *stadiummk*, the vastly experienced former England coach John Gorman was appointed as Assistant Manager, with Alex Rae retaining his position as first team coach. Gorman had joined the coaching team just before the last game at Walsall and would add an experienced head to the team.



So, after an encouraging last few games of the season the Dons once again looked forward to a new season, under yet another new manager, but this time the appointment was made from within, to keep a certain amount of stability at the Club. It was therefore with a great deal of excitement that everyone was looking forward to the new season and a new start under England's youngest manager.

Continued in Part 3, 'The Karl Robinson Era'.

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