

Pride, Passion, Wearside. By Milo Challis

Stop. Breathe. Enter the throng. Climb up to your seat. Scoot along the row, apologise to your neighbour. Stop. Breathe. Arms out. This is it, belt it now, "WISE MEN SAY..."

It's 9am, January the 22nd. There's a crispness in the Wearside winter's breeze as I step off the Metro, that's not just it though, something else lingers but I can't quite put a finger on it. It's a feeling that rests on the tip of my tongue, it buzzes in my ears. Yet its name eludes me. We walk.

It may be early but the high-street is thriving. What, on any other day, would be a cacophony of random voices is today a chorus of unity. A sea of red and white shirts bounces in front of me, hopeful, bordering on delirious. Today we forget our troubles, we're no longer chained by the monotony of everyday. Today we gather as one, we are the twelfth man, we have bigger things to attend to now.



The crowd disperses, we have our own pre-game rituals in the hours leading up to kick-off. Some frequent the cafes, chattering in hushed tones about whether we'll play five at the back. Others find refuge in the bars where we recant comical anecdotes, littered with half-truths and liberties, about a particularly cold away day at Shrewsbury in the cup just two weeks ago. I join this circle, sitting in silence like a young child eager to learn. I want to know their stories. I *must* know. The television plays feebly in the background, sharing pundits' professional opinions about how today's game will go. What our manager will look to do, how the boys will look to play. But we know better, these are *our* lads. We'll come to our own conclusions, so thank you but no thank you.

Eleven o'clock, time to leave. We grab our coats, scarves, anything that shows the world you're a Mackem. The sun shines brighter the closer we get to midday. The city seems to glisten as if it were silverware, mine to grasp, to adore, to take pride in. I am new to the city, a pilgrim. But no-one cares. They have adopted me as one of their own. All they demand is devotion and that I can give. As far as they are concerned, I am one of them. And as far as I am concerned? I belong to this city now, to this club and to these fans. I may not be born here, but I've found new life in its streets. As we exit our pre-match refuge I stop and take in the atmosphere. In my eyes, this is now home.



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We walk again. We meander down through the streets, anticipating what may or may not happen. Stop a minute lads. What? Team sheet's out. To the layman, stopping in the street is an irritation, looking at your phones whilst others have somewhere to be is an unforgivable act of ignorance. But now? Well, word has spread. The wheels stop and the crowd comes to a halt. We split into our groups as we all look at a mate's phone, poring over the starting eleven. Some are happy, jubilant even. Others are not so sure. But it's out of our hands. Our lads know what they have to do and so do we. We'll scream their names whatever. We'll chant until our throats are hoarse and dry. Right, phones away. The songs begin again and, once again, we walk.



We've reached Wearmouth bridge now. In my eyes, little else in the world can compare itself to the views offered by this steel behemoth. To the right is Roker Beach and the docks. And to the left? Our final destination, the Stadium of Light. To the home fans it declares itself proudly, our beacon to the world. Built on the pits, it reminds us of our city's heritage. Once, coal was our finest export, now its football. The world famous red and white strip, the Wearside pride. Whilst our home welcomes us, it glares ominously upon away fans who dare make the journey.

However, despite the glorious views offered by the mouth of the Wear, it is something smaller that catches my eye. The golden gilded crest of the city, welded into the bridge, gleams in the morning sun. It is unmissable. I cannot take my eyes off it, it is beautiful. It is heritage. But it is more. Below the crest, dutifully adorned and protected by the two lions, are written the words 'Nil Desperandum Auspice Deo.' *"When God is on our side there is no cause for despair."* And how can we despair? God gave us football.

With the bridge crossed and the city centre now lying dormant behind us, we begin our final ascent. Our ascent into the Light. As we walk in line, a hubbub of voices, I notice something. It isn't much, it's simply white graffiti on a brick wall. But its words are alluring. *"Passion. Pride. Wearside on our way!"* The words encapsulate our club. Times have been tough; things haven't always gone our way. But we endure, we live through it. Like painted words on a wall, through all weather, we remain. I think about this for a minute longer, but now we're here. The Roker End looms above me, lying in wait, expecting a show. Match protocol now applies. I run and grab my programme and join the queue for the turnstiles. Step forward. Ticket out. Scan ticket. You're in. For a minute I can't breathe, my lungs are tight. The air is thick with the breath of 49,000 people. It is thick with anticipation, of hope. The stands await. It's time.



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I take the tentative step out into the stadium bowl. The sun burns for a split second as the brightness of day juxtaposes the darkness of the concourses. Rippling through the crowds are red and white flags, flying proudly in the Roker End. For a minute the football is a sideshow. The clouds of red and white levitate in air as if time is frozen, it is spectacular. But I'm holding up the queue, time to move.

Right foot first. Now the left. Up the stairs. One row, two rows, three. Stop, evaluate. Check ticket again, row 36. Right, ok. Keep moving. Whatever you do, don't get in the way. Right, that's it, row 36. Stop again, what seat? Ok, here we go...

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We've made it, through Prokofiev's 'Dance of the Knights', Republica's "Ready to Go" and finally "Can't Help Falling in Love". This is not just a football match; it is an homage to music. It's a cultural event. It is as if we are hosting a ceremony, the crowd is a musical guest, singing with one voice as we introduce the teams. We boo and hiss the opposition as if it is a pantomime and we cheer our lads as if they are the storybook hero. Finally, the crowd subsides and the shrill of the whistle pierces the air as if puncturing an atmospheric balloon inflated by the fans. The referee is in control now. This is his domain.



10 minutes passes, and then 30 and then, like that, the first 45 is up. It's a nervy affair, no one wants to put a foot wrong, make a mistake. We retreat to the concourse as the half winds to a close. Together we dissect the game so far, we debate, we concur we commentate. They've been too shy in front of goal. Just shoot, be brave. The passing, it's too slow. The concourse is our locker room, we give the team talks here. Then, in dribbs and drabs, we reconvene in the stands. We are the red and white army, half-time was our leave but now we're back on the front. Back to war. And war it is. The second half starts with a fury absent from the first half. In the 49th minute the Black Cats roar into life, Stewart is in until he's not. Dael Fry pulls him back and is shown a straight red. Stewart's penalty is saved but he will not be stopped and slots in the rebound. 51 minutes gone, 1-0. Half an hour passes, there are shots on goal but little to write home about. But then Diallo slots home an audacious shot which curls itself into the back of the net. 81 minutes gone, 2-0. And that's the game. The atmosphere explodes, the derby is ours. We leave singing as we return to the city in celebration. But I stop one minute longer, I stand by Stokoe's immortalised figure and drink in the atmosphere. I finally grasp the word I could not quite determine earlier that phrase that beguiled me. It is awe.



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