

# Yeovil Town win their place in history

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No club can afford so clear an example of the unpredictability of football as Yeovil Town. For nearly forty years this small Somerset county town has been producing teams that have consistently shown that in football, the reputation counts for nothing, the performance on the day for everything.

The list of League clubs to whom Yeovil have played hosts is long and often impressive. Crystal Palace, Exeter City, Liverpool, Manchester United (twice), Sheffield Wednesday, Bury, Bournemouth, Colchester, Chesterfield, Oxford United, Southend and Shrewsbury have all played against Yeovil. Yet only a few have overcome the combination of the celebrated Yeovil slope—in reality less marked than its reputation suggests—and the ability of Yeovil Town, or Yeovil and Petters United, as they were called before the Second World War, to rise to the occasion of the FA Cup.

Yeovil's supreme achievement came in an FA Cup tie played on 29 January, 1949 when, lying sixth from the bottom of the Southern League they met Sunderland of the First Division of the Football League, a team eighth in their class and studded with great names of the period—Shackleton, Robinson, Watson, Turnbull, Hall and Mapson. The result? Yeovil Town 2 Sunderland 1. The prize was a tie with Manchester United in Round 5. There can have been few more dramatic matches in all soccer history.

## The slope, Sunderland thought, had been greatly exaggerated

A remarkable feature about Yeovil's greatest season was that they reached the third round without a line of publicity in the national press. Coming into the competition in the fourth qualifying round they beat Lovells Athletic, a Welsh works team from Newport, Monmouthshire, Romford in Round One and then Weymouth in Round Two.

The meagreness of Yeovil's previous opposition may have given Bury, their next opponents, a false sense of complacency. Certainly Bury never got into a game that Yeovil won 3-1 and could have won 5-1 without being flattered. Prior to this match, Bob Keeton, the Yeovil Number 4 had gone to the local public library where he happened to drop on a quotation from the poet Dryden. He pointed it out to a London sports journalist: 'They can conquer who believe they can.'

Keeton's maxim worked well enough against Bury but only the foolhardy could give a team, low in the Southern League and with a total weekly wage bill of £70 per week, any kind of chance against one of the country's most glamorous clubs. The chance of victory looked even slighter when Hall, the regular goalkeeper, who had once been with Orient, cut his knee on a bottle-top in the pre-match training. The injury was serious; Hall needed five stitches and he failed to pass the fitness test. His place was taken by Dickie Dyke, a 23-year-old solicitor's clerk who had played only one game in Yeovil's senior team.

The match was played on one of those fine, cold, diamond-bright winter afternoons. The population of Yeovil at the time was around 19,000 and inside this country cousin of a ground were jammed 15,000. Outside, with no hope of getting in, at least another 5,000 milled around,

making entry difficult for the lucky ones who had tickets. Local reporters occupied the four-seater press box, which created an emergency that the Yeovil club solved in two ways.

The 150-odd journalists from all over Britain and some parts of Europe were accommodated in the front row of the stand to which planks of fresh timber had been nailed to give them a writing surface and in desks borrowed from the junior school adjoining the ground and put on the touch-line. It was an incredible sight to see distinguished soccer columnists squeezed into desks usually occupied by six year olds.

Sunderland's official party had inspected the ground on Friday and announced themselves satisfied. The slope, they thought, like the reported death of Mark Twain, had been greatly exaggerated.

'If we should happen to get beaten, there will be no complaints about the pitch, or the slope, from Sunderland,' announced their chairman Colonel Joseph Pryor and manager Bill Murray. Less than twenty-four hours later they had to stand by those words.

Yeovil Town lined up in green jerseys and white shorts. The team was made up of an assortment of publicans, glove-cutters, clerks, warehousemen and labourers. Only the player-manager Alec Stock, later to manage Roma, Queen's Park Rangers and Luton, could boast any experience of League football!

Referee W F Smith of Aldershot set the long-awaited match in motion and from the first whistle Yeovil went into the attack. When Mapson had to go down quickly to a curling drive from Eric Bryant, who spent his weekdays humping corn for a Yeovil chandler, the locals felt the chance of a Yeovil win become more than a possibility.

With ten minutes gone Yeovil suffered a second disaster to match the loss of their goalkeeper Hall. A pulled muscle made the winger Hargreaves a virtual passenger for the rest of the game; no substitutes, of course, were then allowed. The match as a contest seemed certain to curl up and die. Yet the injury, if anything, forced Yeovil to greater efforts and tighter cohesion. Mapson conceded a corner and Keeton put a vicious drive only inches high. Alec Stock spoke no more than the truth when, asked about the Hargreaves handicap, said 'We simply ignored it.'

Fate was to give Yeovil another kidney punch. Mapson, holding the ball, was bundled over the line by the burly Bryant. Instead of giving the goal the referee awarded Sunderland a free-kick. In the 28th minute, however, Yeovil put the ball in the Sunderland net again and this time the goal stood.

Centre-half Les Blizzard lobbed a mid-field free kick to inside-left Alex Wright. He slipped a waist-high ball to player-manager Alec Stock who swivelled on his right leg and smashed a fine shot well to the left of Mapson.

From the kick-off, whereas Sunderland had waited for the ball to come to them, Yeovil had gone to meet it. But now they had to face Sunderland's reprisals. The main anxiety was Dyke, but although obviously raw he was a big, fearless fellow with an equable temperament.

He made a succession of fine saves until, with 62 minutes played and the score unchanged he missed a long pass into the goalmouth by full-back Barney Ramsden and Robinson tapped it over the line for what he later described as 'the

easiest goal of my life'.

At the end of ninety minutes the score stood at 1-1 and normally, that would have meant a replay at Roker Park and a very different story. But this was the final post-War season when extra-time applied to original ties if they were drawn—part of the Government's austerity campaign to avoid unnecessary journeys and loss of working days in the years just after the War.

So the capacity crowd already emotionally limp settled down to a further half hour and most must have felt convinced the superior stamina of the First Division stars would decide things. As the extra period began, thick mist enveloped the ground. Now there was a new matter to consider, the distinct possibility that this historic match would be abandoned on a heart-breaking note of anti-climax for Yeovil. Suddenly with only seconds remaining to the end of the first period of extra time, the mist lifted and clearly revealed Shackleton with the ball on the halfway line.

He stood juggling the ball up on his instep, facing his own goal. He was faced with a number of alternatives; he could turn it and dribble or pass; he could hook it out to either wing; he could pass back or even bang it into the crowd for safety. Any one of these things he could have done and Sunderland would probably have escaped with a replay. Being 'Shack' he tried an overhead kick to his centre-forward. Being 'Shack'

*Right Dyke, the Yeovil goalkeeper clears a Sunderland attack, a solicitor's clerk, he played brilliantly after being drafted into the side to replace the regular goalkeeper Hall, who had cut his knee in the pre-match training.*

*Below Hall was back in the team for the fifth round tie against Manchester United; he saved this shot but could do little to prevent United's 8-0 win.*

*Opposite below right Alec Stock, the Yeovil player-manager and captain described his job at Yeovil as 'one of many parts'; here he completes his desk-work, prepared for more physical activities.*

*Opposite below left An air of geniality pervades the pre-match formalities; after their defeat Sunderland's smiles turned to scowl: as they locked themselves in their railway carriage.*

