

How Roy Hodgson steered Fulham on long road to Hamburg

The Cottagers' manager has taken the club from the brink of relegation to a remarkable Europa League odyssey

The whistle for half-time shrills at Eastlands and, as the home support break from applause into another rowdy chorus of "Sven-Goran Eriksson", Roy Hodgson peels himself up from his slouch in the visitors' dugout. It is a little after 3.45pm on Saturday 26 April 2008 and Fulham, trailing 2-0, appear condemned to the Championship. Much has been made of the slog the Londoners began yesterday to Hamburg's Nordbank Arena, but nothing compares to the journey this club has embarked upon since Hodgson stared relegation in the face.

A 600-mile coach journey involving a cross-Channel ferry and a night's stopover sounds nightmarish preparation, but a Europa League semi-final is the stuff of dreams for Fulham. The transformation of this team from the unlikely escapologists of two years ago, to European qualifiers last season and now contenders to lift the recently revamped Uefa Cup remains astonishing. Carlo Ancelotti could claim Chelsea's first ever Double this season. If he fails, Sir Alex Ferguson may steer Manchester United to a fourth Premier League title in succession and his club's 19th domestic championship. Yet Hodgson will still be many people's manager of the year.

Back at Eastlands that afternoon a little shy of two years ago, that prospect was unthinkable. Hodgson had been named as Lawrie Sanchez's successor at Craven Cottage at the end of December 2007 with the side 19th in the Premier League and still reeling from a thrashing at Tottenham Hotspur on Boxing Day. They lost the new manager's first three league games, all derbies, and had won only three of his 15 league matches – hardly the stuff of renaissance – by the time City eased into their two-goal lead. The introduction of Diomansy Kamara 26 minutes from the end smacked of desperation yet, from the moment the Senegalese lashed in the visitors' third deep into stoppage time that afternoon, Fulham have not looked back.

Birmingham and Portsmouth were beaten in the final two games of the campaign, the Cottagers squeezing breathlessly above the cut-off on goal difference at Reading's considerable expense. Theirs had been a frantic, adrenaline-fuelled recovery yet, from the basis of preserving Premier League status, Hodgson has instigated a more measured, long-term revival.

"He changed the whole way we were playing," said Danny Murphy, whose header at Fratton Park on the final day had kept the side up. "He made us more of a footballing team than the direct-ball team under Lawrie. It hadn't been ideal for the players we had: we had footballers, rather than just 6ft 2in athletes.

"Roy brought in some of his own personnel and made some really astute signings. The squad suddenly had more experience and, with time, we were able to adopt the style and pattern of play that he wanted. It was clear very quickly that we were moving forward as a squad and a team. His knowledge of the game, his philosophies ... he has that temperament a manager needs. He never gets too down, and



he doesn't let us get too carried away when we're having a good spell, either."

There have been plenty of them. Mohamed Al Fayed had been seeking style as well as survival in appointing the much-travelled Hodgson, and the manager has provided both. Fulham may not scintillate every week but they are easy on the eye – their wingers are inventive, with Murphy the heartbeat in midfield – organised and fiercely disciplined. This squad is not the deepest, which makes it all the more remarkable that Hodgson has shuffled his pack so efficiently as to stay comfortable in mid-table while playing what could amount to 19 European games. Only Bordeaux, with 20 in 1995-96, have ever played more in a single European campaign. His players are so steeped now in what is expected of them that they have become, in effect, interchangeable, which allowed what appeared to be a second string to play with panache through the early stages of the Europa League.

The method is simple: constant drills to increase awareness of responsibility, discipline and defensive duty. "People say that his sessions aren't always the most free-flowing because he is so meticulous in everything he does," said the former Fulham coach Dave Beasant.

"He probably spends more time preparing the team for what they have to do when they don't

have the ball than what they need to do with it. Shape, discipline, knowing where you have to be positioned in relation to your team-mates: he will stop a practice game every couple of minutes to point out if people are out of position or not covering in the right way. It is stop-start, but thorough. You can see the influence his time in Serie A with Inter had on his style. He is a true scholar of football."

There is room for creation within his system, but those mavericks who do not buy into the workaholic structure are moved on. Jimmy Bullard, once this team's talisman, was shipped out to Hull midway through last season for £5m, with a fraction of that money reinvested on the journeyman Dickson Etuhu. He, like Simon Davies, Aaron Hughes, Chris Baird, Paul Konchesky and Bobby Zamora, has thrived amid a "team first, individual second" mentality. "Roy came in with a philosophy and created an organised team," said Murphy. "We have a side made up of effective team players."

Few other Premier League managers spend as much time as Hodgson actually coaching their players on the training pitch. "He has a more continental approach," said Brede Hangeland. "He spends more time on the training ground than other managers over here. He's there every day and does most of the work himself, and is

involved in the day-to-day sessions and tactical planning. When he has something to say, people listen."

There are few teams as organised in the top flight these days. Their away record remains unimpressive but, since surviving the 2007-08 season, this side have conceded three goals only four times in the Premier League – at Manchester United, Chelsea, West Ham and Stoke. Liverpool, who would once have considered them cannon fodder, have failed to score against them at Anfield in each of the last two seasons. Manchester United have been humbled twice in the league at Craven Cottage. The rout of Juventus in the last 16 of the Europa League still defies comprehension.

Returning to Hamburg for the Europa League final, a stage Hodgson's Inter graced in 1997, would represent a staggering achievement and, inevitably, further his claim to succeed Fabio Capello with England. For now, though, he and his side serve as an inspiration for the Premier League's current also-rans. "They are a clear example for everyone to follow," said the Wigan manager, Roberto Martínez. "Roy is a gentleman and a football man and, in the modern game, you don't get those things together too often."