Steve McClaren: The man who took FC Twente’s slogan away

A club experiencing both Steve McClaren's competence and shortcomings is FC Twente, whose slogan once was: “One day we will be champions”

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Our thanks once again to our Geordie exile in Holland, Paul Benneworth, who this time shines a light on Steve McClaren, the man who turned FC Twente into Champions.

Despite the curious - if not out-of-character - manner of his unveiling, Newcastle United have generated some positivity with Steve McClaren’s appointment as head coach. At Middlesbrough, he led the last north east club to win serious silverware, and he has always retained his strong regional links.

He’s clearly no world-class manager in the mould of Pep Guardiola or Jose Mourinho. Too many short, unsuccessful managerial spells did nothing to dent his passion for the game and his willingness to take on short-term assistant roles.
He’s probably long beyond being driven by a mixture of hunger and a belief that he’s a man on an sharply upward curve. In choosing NUFC, the step up from the Championship offers a chance to restore some lustre to a distinctly tarnished reputation.

The phrase ‘flawed genius’ applied to a manager, conjures up an image of a Jekyll-and-Hyde trainer whose tactical nous and daring gambits leads their club to the brink of greatness, only to fail at the last, leaving their club fighting for its survival. But that clearly doesn’t fit with McClaren’s CV, who’s more of a competent manager with a couple of blind spots in his armoury.

One club that experienced both his competence and his shortcomings is FC Twente, a club whose slogan before his arrival was:

“One day we will be champions.”

In his first spell in charge, he banished that to the history books, and losing only three matches all season had the fans chanting “there’s only one Steve McLaren.”

After bringing the club to the heights of a Champions League group stage success, his second stay from 2012 was to prove rather less happy. In scenes reminiscent of the Wally with the Brolly that spelled the end of his England tenure, a gutless 4-1 home capitulation to FC Utrecht being the final nail in his coffin.

His spells at FC Twente expose both sides of the man, self-effacing and personable, able to get the best out of a modest selection, but a nervy perfectionist who exhausts himself and irritates his squad.

He was certainly lucky when he arrived at FC Twente to inherit a first team steadily maturing and growing in skill, many of whom would later play in the bigger European leagues, including our own Cheick Tioté. He nurtured this group with some verve, including players like Kenneth Perez and Blaise N’Kufo who were already in the twilight of their top-level careers.

FC Twente was a selling club, and in his first summer at the club, top players including Edson Braafheid, Eljero Elia and Marko Arnautović were all sold, but replacements were found and prospered in their short stays in the Grolsch Veste. His first spell proved he is capable of taking a good team to the next level–FC Twente hugely over-performed under his leadership, enjoying arguably the greatest days in their fifty year history.
But his second spell demonstrated that he’s not a man who thrives on chaos. After the heady successes of McClaren and Prud’homme, the board started to take increasingly erratic and costly gambles, leaving a financial shambles that culminated in this season’s six-point deduction for persistent financial irregularities.

The club slid from second to sixth, fuelling fan frustration who fervently believed the club was slowly but surely replacing Feyenoord as Holland’s third team. He failed to get the best out of striker Luuk de Jong, and the team failed to effectively gel around their rising stars, including NUFC-transfer target Douglas Nacer Chadli and Ola John.

A series of poor player purchases is partly to blame for his failure in the second period, with Glaynor Plet, Leroy Fer and Wesley Verhoek all experiencing severe dips in form.

The board, held in warm affection by the fans, covered this up with a concerted attack on a group of local journalists who started to raise questions as problems bubbled up in the club accounts.

When the summer of 2012 saw a churn of players including a number of club record purchases, the pressure was on McClaren to perform, and by February 2013 with the club stuck in limbo in the Europa Cup places, he accepted the club’s severance offer.

In short, his history suggests that his chances of success at Newcastle have far more to do with how the madness playing out above him rages on through the summer transfer window, than on the tactical choices he makes on a weekly basis, or his efforts on the training ground.

As Newcastle fans, we should perhaps be grateful that we’ve found a serious managerial candidate, someone more than a glorified assistant coach, who’s willing to muck in and get his hands dirty, and I expect a flying start from him next season.
But when our club’s woefully flimsy structures start creaking once more, I hope that McClaren isn’t left floundering to be scapegoated for NUFC’s perennial mismanagement.