

Number 44: SATURDAY NIGHT'S ALRIGHT FOR FIGHTING

Millwall were Crystal Palace's closest neighbours, one of only two other South London teams in the Football League. They had a tough reputation, and when we were drawn against them in the second round of the FA Cup, ten days before Christmas 1975, none of my older friends talked about "taking" their end the way they did when we'd gone to places like Swindon and Gillingham and I'd been brought along for the ride. But still, we were Palace, and our away following dwarfed most club's home crowds, Millwall's paltry six thousand included. We'd be just fine.

Jeffries and I went in the car with his mum, who dropped the two of us off a short ways from the ground, by a corner pub she figured as an easily identifiable landmark to meet at afterwards. We walked down to the ground together, Jeffries's mum went into the posh seats as usual, and Jeffries and I paid our way into the away terrace. There we joined thousands of Palace fans, the Dulwich Crew included. Everyone was in fine voice. Millwall fans taunted us from the opposite end, and from the side off to our left as well, the one without seats, but that was all to be expected. The taunts got worse when Palace scored in the first half but that was to be expected as well.

What was not to be expected was what happened at half time. Almost as soon as the players had gone down the tunnel to the dressing rooms, a couple of hundred Millwall fans along the half way line simply jumped across the hoardings, ran down the pitch, and invaded our terrace, as if it was routine entertainment. The police were powerless – or too scared – to do anything, and the Palace supporters scattered in every direction, many taking a beating as they fled.

For the last couple of years, touring round the lesser clubs of the football league, we Palace fans had felt invincible. We only had to show up and the home fans would stop singing. But now here we were, still very much in South London and yet completely out of our depth. There were no Dulwich College boys in the Millwall crowd, nobody from Alleyn's, and whatever tough council estates the Palace area could claim to its name clearly had nothing on the tower blocks of Peckham, or the Aylesbury Estate on the Walworth Road.

In the chaos of the violence, Jeffries and his mates vanished. I didn't see them again all afternoon. The second half passed slowly, the Palace supporters silent, their scarves hidden despite the fact that they still outnumbered those from Millwall. Coincidentally or not, Millwall pulled a goal back with almost the last kick of the game which, this being a Cup match,

meant they'd be coming to Selhurst Park for the replay just three days later. By one of those coincidences that made football what it was, we were already due to visit their ground again for the regular League game the following Saturday. That gave us two more very real chances of getting beaten up in just the next seven days.

I shouldn't have wanted to return to Millwall the following week. More than that, I shouldn't have been allowed. Without Jeffries to lead me back to the meeting point, I got hopelessly lost coming out of the ground after the Cup game, and took to walking the streets in rectangles, searching for a pub that I hadn't bothered to remember the name of, let alone the location. I couldn't ask anyone, because then I'd have to give away the fact that I was a Palace fan, and that seemed like a dangerous thing to do, even for an eleven year old. Besides, I didn't know what to ask. All I knew for sure was that it had been dark since half time, it was cold, the few shops I'd passed on my way back and forth to a Millwall ground known - for good reason, I now realized - as The Den, were all closing up, and the pubs I kept checking for signs of familiarity were filling with the same sort of people who'd so effortlessly "taken" the Palace end at half time.

At one point, I stood hopefully outside one of these pubs anyway, desperately trying to convince myself that it was the right one - though neither Jeffries nor his mum were there waiting for me - and as I loitered, a luxury coach pulled up at the traffic light. Inside were the Palace players, in their suits, looking perfectly relaxed, obviously content with the draw. I waved at them to show my allegiance. David Kemp, our centre-forward, waved back at me and smiled, gave me the thumbs up. Then the lights changed, the coach pulled ahead of me and I was left alone again.

I eventually got through it. Keen though I was to start crying in the hope that someone would come along and solve my problem for me, I found a working phone box instead - it took a while, they tended to be vandalized for the sake of it - and retrieved enough spare change from my pocket to call home, something I was not used to doing. Sure enough, my mum was near tears herself when she picked up: Jeffries's mum had already put in the difficult call to say that she'd lost me in one of the worst parts of London, and they were about ready to call the police and report me missing. I was able to read off my location - printed beneath the phone for 999 calls and other emergencies, like mine - and after I waited there for what seemed like an eternity, Jeffries' mum finally pulled up in her car, tears of fear or anger or panic clearly visible on her cheeks. Jeffries, sat alongside, didn't look too happy either. He'd clearly been blamed for losing me - and there was no point his trying to explain about the fighting. His mum had missed it when she went in for her half-time drink.

Still, we were at Selhurst Park on Tuesday night, among the Palace faithful on the Holmesdale Road, all of us unusually quiet due to the many Millwall fans in our midst; not for them the formality of the away end. But it was alright: we won 2-1, ensuring we'd go on to play the big teams entering the FA Cup in the New Year, and that Millwall would be left with nothing but to try and claw their way out of the Third Division. *That* would teach them. And then the following Saturday, there we were again, Jeffries and me back at the Den, despite it all. We even got there the same way as the previous week – in Jeffries's mum's car. Our parents' faith in us was... well, it was something, that was for sure. At least this time we figured to meet right outside the ground afterwards. And at least this time, Jeffries and I decided to put safety first; figuring that Millwall would be waiting for us back at the away end, we went into the opposite end from the previous week. But there was no such thing as a safe end for away fans at the Den, and we found ourselves surrounded once more by the enemy. Jeffries stayed silent throughout the match, keeping a close eye on me from a few feet away as a couple of kids my own age came up and harassed me.

-Palace fan, aren't cha? They taunted. -Should kick your head in. We'll get you afterwards. Palace cunt. We'd do you now if you weren't here with yer dad.

...And so on. I wasn't there with my dad. They'd mistaken an older man the other side of me for someone who cared about me. But I wasn't about to tell them any different. And even though they didn't shut up for most of the match, Jeffries wasn't going to get involved unless he really had to. At some point in this process of bringing me onto the terraces, he must have hoped I would hold my own. But neither of us had ever been to a ground where 11-year olds took on other 11-year olds. We were only a few short miles from West Dulwich, but we were a long way from home.

Still, the embarrassment of our collective cowardice in the face of Millwall was quickly put behind us, as Palace went on the biggest cup run of its history – of any Third Division club's history. After seeing off non-league Scarborough in the Third Round, we were drawn away – all our Cup matches, by one of those coincidences that made football what it was, were away from home - to the mighty Leeds United in the Fourth Round. It was such a big deal that my mum caught Cup fever and bought tickets for us to go up on the coach and then sit alongside Jeffries's mum in the posh seats; I came down with a *real* fever two days before the match, we cancelled the trip, and I had to listen to the commentary while in bed.

We won, 1-0. This wasn't just another football result, the way it was when we'd beat Millwall or Scarborough; this one was proper back page news. A Third Division team – Crystal Palace! - had beaten First Division Leeds, one of the biggest clubs in all of Europe. We could take on anyone now. Even the mighty Chelsea – well, the formerly mighty Chelsea, they were in the Second Division themselves these days - for a Fifth Round tie on February 14. Our manager Malcolm Allison played it for every column inch it was worth. He'd already taken to wearing a fedora, like the gangsters of old, and now he rented a bunch of toy machine guns, dressed the players up in matching gangster suits and fedoras of their own, had them photographed mowing down a pretend opposition, and told everyone to expect a St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

The fans did their part to oblige. From across London they came to Stamford Bridge: the hardest of Arsenal, who weren't playing; of West Ham, who were playing away; and even of Tottenham and Millwall, whose true nutters gave up attending their own team's London fixtures for the chance to join the biggest free-for-all scrap of the year. I watched it all unfold from the seats. It was my mum's treat, of course; I wasn't used to sitting down at a football match. But when Palace went 2-0 up just before half-time, thanks to an incredible display of dribbling from Peter Taylor, and all hell broke loose in the North Stand, where the Palace fans were congregated - alongside plenty rival Chelsea and all the other London lunatics - I was glad we'd done so. The fighting went on through half-time, and into the second half, and seemed to continue for the rest of the match, aided by the drama on the field: Chelsea pulled the game back to two a-piece before Peter Taylor – it had to be him – scored a late winner.

My best mate at school, Adrian, called me later in the evening; he'd been among the thousands who fled the fighting to take refuge over the barriers close to the touchline. Jeffries, on the other hand, was among the few hundred who gravitated to the core of the aggro. He was able to point himself out – his back to the camera, fortunately for his family's continued standing – in the photos that graced the Sunday newspapers. He saw himself on *Match of the Day*, too, on which Jimmy Hill analysed a terrace kung-fu kick with the same detail that he did the goals. Jeffries became a hero on the terraces after that, respected by the real Palace hard-core, and he shortened his name almost overnight. From then on, we knew him as Jeff.

The Cup run took us back to Stamford Bridge just a few weeks later. We had gone all the way up to Sunderland for a 1-0 win in the meantime, and I'd been amongst the several hundred whose supporters train didn't get in until half-time, necessitating a sprint from the station past the home end, where 12-year old kids dropped bricks on us from the back of their terrace.

Again I sat in the seats with my mum, and again it was the right choice; the Palace fans got in so late to the so-called away end that they found the police had let the home fans in in the meantime. Still, we saw the only goal of the match, and though the train back to London proved mighty draughty after Sunderland fans threw bricks at it from a bridge not far from the station, again, it didn't matter: we had made it to the Semi-Final.

Everyone in the country seemed to be a Palace fan by now, including loads of kids at school who tried to convince me they'd liked the club all along. It annoyed me, but I couldn't blame them. We all knew that the FA Cup was the oldest tournament in the world, the biggest in the world, the most exciting and the best in the world, and Palace offered proof, a Third Division team that had made it to the last four. Along the way, Malcolm Alison and his fedora hat, and his taunting of opposing fans, and his fondness for a page three model or two in the players baths, had turned Palace into the most exciting club in the country... One that was just a single win away from Wembley.

We didn't get there. The Semi-Final was played back at Chelsea as a supposedly "neutral" location for such a grand occasion and our opponents, Southampton, successfully nobbled Peter Taylor early on; without our boy wonder, we couldn't put up a fight, and lost 2-0. And there was no violence on the terraces that day, either, just a crushing sense of disappointment. Jeffries's parents had arranged a drinks party in the evening, intended as a celebration for reaching the Final; it felt like a funeral wake, instead.

The League season itself ended just a few weeks later. Back in September, we'd looked certain for promotion. Now, though, we were playing catch-up on all the games that had been postponed while we'd been on that cup run, and the facts were finally laid out for us like the most basic of Maths equations: unless we could win our last home match *and* our last away game the following Saturday, we were doomed to another season in the Third Division. On a Tuesday night in late April, after the season had officially concluded for almost every other club, an impressive crowd of 28,000 showed up to Selhurst Park anyway, hoping against hope for the best.

Among that number was my friend Adrian, and what looked like an unusually large number of away fans at the top of the Whitehorse End. This didn't make sense: our opponents, Chesterfield, were a small team from the other end of England, they weren't in the promotion race, and it was a Tuesday night. Surely they couldn't have brought a thousand or more supporters with them?

Then, it clicked. They *weren't* Chesterfield fans. They were Millwall. While we'd been enjoying the Cup glory, Millwall had been winning their league games. If we didn't win tonight, Millwall would get promoted to the Second Division. They'd be playing the likes of Chelsea and Southampton next year as a matter of right – and we'd be doomed to another season playing Chesterfield, Gillingham and the rest. Who could blame the Millwall supporters for taking the short trip across South London to taunt us?

The match finished 0-0. Millwall were promoted, and we were stuck in the Third Division. We had nothing to show for our season – except, that is, for the greatest memories in the club's history. And so, when the final whistle went, thousands from the Holmesdale Road terrace invaded the pitch, as was every club's last-home-game-of-season ritual. Adrian and I were among them. (Jeffries stayed up top of the terrace, as if working out some other course of action.) As we reached the half way line, eager to catch the players before they disappeared into the tunnel, several hundred fans invaded the pitch from the opposite, Whitehorse Lane, end. They didn't run towards the players. They weren't singing Palace songs, either. Nor did they stop to sing songs celebrating their promotion; that wasn't their style. No, they just charged right at us, the Palace fans. And we did what, by now, facing Millwall, came naturally for Palace fans. We ran.