

# West Ham

Irons in the Soul

Pete May



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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For Nicola, Lola and Nell

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*Pete May  
June 2002*

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# 1. HURRY UP HARRY

Harry Redknapp has been sacked. My initial response, gazing at the stark capital letters on page 302 of Ceefax, is one of incredulity. It's 9 May 2001, and season 2000-01 is meandering to a close, with West Ham having secured survival in their penultimate game of the season by beating Southampton 3-0 at Upton Park. It's been a disappointing season for the club. A run to the quarter-finals of the FA Cup included great victories away to Manchester United and Sunderland, before losing at home to Spurs in the quarter-finals. But in the league, form has slumped since a 5-0 Boxing Day thrashing of Charlton, and the club has won just three out of seventeen league matches since then.

The talismanic Paolo Di Canio has struggled with sinus and Achilles tendon problems for two months, playing while taking antibiotics and unable to train properly, and Redknapp has struggled to accommodate the flair of both Di Canio and Joe Cole in the same side. There's also been a hangover from the sale of Rio Ferdinand. Redknapp did brilliantly in talking up his price. He turned down an offer of £15 million from Leeds, resulting in the Elland Road club returning with a bid of £18 million – a world record for a defender. With the transfer system possibly close to collapse and a new stand to finance, the board felt the price was too good to turn down. Protests from the fans were muted as, although Ferdinand had huge potential, errors in concentration still resulted in him giving goals away.

Harry would have been upset at losing a home-grown player whom he described as 'a Rolls-Royce' of a defender, but as befits a legendary 'wheeler dealer', he immediately

set about spending nearly eight million of the Rio cash on six signings. Indeed, so many players from around the globe arrived on loan deals or as new signings that it was tempting to think Redknapp had opened a backpackers' hostel at Chadwell Heath and was preparing to flog all the different nationalities a set of discounted Lonely Planet guides to London he'd picked up from a stall by the South Bank (the arts centre that is, not the old West Ham South Bank).

Rigobert Song, Titi Camara, Christian Dailly, Ragnvald Soma, Svetoslav Todorov and Hayden Foxe all arrived as new signings, but none of these players had proved an instant success. Strangely, the two loan signings who had looked most at home in the Premiership, French wing-back Sebastien Schemmel and Finnish international defender Hanu Tihinen, were not kept on by Redknapp.

But, despite the poor second half to the season, Redknapp leaving West Ham is a huge shock to the football world. The announcement makes the national news that evening and Redknapp's face is on the front page of the next day's *Guardian*. The board has announced that Redknapp has left 'by mutual consent' after a meeting with chairman Terence Brown, but most commentators realise this is football jargon for being given the sack. Redknapp, who has two years left to run on his contract, says that it was an argument over funds for new players that had 'gotten out of hand'. He emphasises: 'Leaving the club was the last thing on my mind when I went over this morning. I never dreamed it would happen. After meeting the chairman it all changed and I found myself out of work. Life in the Premiership will be even tougher next season and I wanted three players to get us up to scratch.'

Harry Redknapp had been at West Ham for nine seasons, two as assistant manager to Billy Bonds and seven as boss, and in many ways he was the club. True, when up against the likes of George Graham he was sometimes out-thought

tactically, as in the FA Cup defeat last season but a club with limited funds was never going to get anyone better at manipulating the transfer market. Astonishingly, he took the club into fifth place and the UEFA Cup, via winning the Intertoto Cup, while still making a profit on transfers.

My partner Nicola finds my sadness and disbelief difficult to fathom as I stare at the Ceefax page with the expression of a man who has just placed a year's salary on Titi Camara topping the Premiership scoring charts. For amid all the continental coaches, 'Arry Boy was a proper old-style English gaffer – constantly stressed, with a battered face and bags under his eyes, but always ready with a quip for the press. Redknapp and his assistant, Frank Lampard, were always more Regan and Carter than Eriksson and Grip. On 'Arry's manor the cast read like a plot from *EastEnders*: 'Arry's assistant Frank was his bruvver-in-law. 'Arry's boy Jamie had legged it to Liverpool but Frank's boy, Frank Junior, was still at the family firm.

Harry called his wife 'the missus', once admitted to a fanzine that he'd never eaten a curry and said, 'The last film I went to see was *Doctor Zhivago*,' which was released in 1965. When I interviewed him after the launch of his autobiography, he claimed not to recognise Leicester Square, saying he only went out in the East End or in Bournemouth. When he saw a tramp begging on the streets he quipped: 'That's the ex-West Ham manager, that is!' He then compared himself to his son Jamie and his pop star wife Louise. Harry met his own wife Sandra at the Two Puddings pub in Stratford. 'There was a dance upstairs. It was dark and I had a result really. I think she liked my mate better, but got lumbered with me.'

After assembling his Foreign Legion in 1996, Redknapp declared: 'I'm just an uneducated East End boy. How can I be expected to speak all their languages?' And you can't imagine Wenger or Eriksson throwing sandwiches at players who don't track back. Harry once confessed: 'I did hit Don

Hutchison on the head with a plate of sandwiches at Southampton. He had the lot, egg and tomato, right across the nut . . . he wouldn't accept what I was saying and it all got a bit naughty.'

On hearing that Florin Raducioiu had decided to visit Harvey Nichols rather than be involved with West Ham in a Coca-Cola Cup tie at Stockport, Harry's first reaction was probably: 'Who is this Harvey Nichols and can I sign him on a loan deal for Saturday?'

There will be no more announcements that Harry's seemingly permanently skeletal squad is 'down to the bare bones'. And no more of his famous 'rickets' in the transfer market (can you imagine Arsene Wenger announcing 'I've made ze ricket with Boa Morte?'), such as when he signed 'those dodgy foreigners' Raducioiu, Boogers and Dumitrescu. Like Barry Fry, he fitted revolving doors on his dressing-rooms and, for the first time in my West Ham-supporting life, the club made a profit on many transfer deals. The likes of Bilic, Berkovic, Hartson, Hughes, Unsworth, Lazaridis and Foe were all sold on for big profits while he managed to gain class players such as Paolo Di Canio and Trevor Sinclair at ridiculously cheap prices.

It shouldn't have ended in this manner and it's typical of the lack of glasnost at West Ham that the board has not revealed the reasons for Redknapp's departure. The main reason would seem to be that the board had lost faith in his ability in the transfer market following the disappointing post-Rio sale signings. Redknapp too had perhaps grown tired of competing with the top six with such a limited budget, knowing that at least £6 million of the Rio money would probably go towards the new Dr Martens Stand. Another contributing factor might have been the sheer turnover of players during Redknapp's reign. There were 134 deals buying and selling players, with each deal involving massive signing-on fees and ever-increasing wages. Redknapp later suggested that the chairman, Terry

Brown, had taken offence over comments he made in an interview to the fanzine *Over Land and Sea*, in which he said the chairman couldn't add up because he had only spent £9 million of the Rio money and not the alleged figure of £14 million. Whatever the truth, Terry Brown and the board at least owe the fans – the main shareholders in the company – some sort of statement.

You suspect that there is much more to tell and the real reasons will one day emerge. As at all football clubs, there is no shortage of rumour. Redknapp has been airbrushed from Hammers' history. The summer edition of *Upton Park News*, mailed to season ticket holders, has no mention of Redknapp bar a glib admission from managing director Paul Aldridge that the appointment of Redknapp's successor 'caused great controversy in the press and among some supporters'. The first programme of the new season is destined to have a mere reference to 'managerial alterations' and not even a thank you to Redknapp for his nine years of service.

Harry has gone and West Ham fans can only hope that the board has not dropped a ricket.

## 2. DEATH BY CEEFAX

The day after Harry Redknapp is sacked, *The Guardian* runs a list of contenders for the post of West Ham United team manager. These include Charlton boss Alan Curbishley, ex-England managers Terry Venables and Kevin Keegan, former Arsenal and Spurs boss George Graham and current player Stuart Pearce. Perhaps it is all part of a Baldrick-like cunning plan and the board has decided that the club has gone as far as it can with Redknapp and is now going to appoint a top boss to have us challenging for those European Champions League places. Then again, maybe not.

Curbishley, who has done superbly to establish Charlton as a Premiership side, seems the obvious choice. Still only 43, he used to play for the Hammers and clearly still has affection for the club. But Charlton issues an instant hands-off warning and over the next few weeks Curbishley rules himself out of contention and, damningly, even implies that Charlton might have more potential than West Ham. Kevin Keegan is soon signed up by Manchester City; Terry Venables makes it clear that after saving Middlesbrough he plans to spend more time with his autocue on ITV's *The Premiership*; George Graham is presumably judged to have too much of a defensive reputation to suit the West Ham Academy's tradition of attacking football; while Stuart Pearce is ruled out for not having sufficient managerial experience and joins Keegan for one final season playing at Manchester City.

While no one wants to manage West Ham, England midfielder Frank Lampard makes it very clear that he doesn't want to play for the club again. A little like Private

Pike in *Dad's Army*, young Frank is upset because the club has been beastly to his dad and uncle (sacked assistant manager Frank Lampard Senior and Uncle Harry Redknapp). Obviously he's upset at the sacking of two members of his family, but you wonder how he would have responded had he been at, say, Manchester United. Would he just have muttered something about being a paid professional and opted to see who the new manager was?

Meanwhile the search goes on. Last season, when Rio Ferdinand returned with Leeds to play at Upton Park, it was a bit like a successful student returning home to meet a slightly embarrassing blonde ex-girlfriend from Essex. By mid-June it's the club itself that seems desperate for any kind of partner. It's a bizarre feeling not having a manager. During my 31 years of watching the Hammers the club has only had five managers and, whenever there has been a change, an appointment has followed swiftly. But not this time. It's clear the board have sacked Redknapp without having any replacement in mind. Anyone new to the country in the last month would have read the tabloids and assumed that 'Managerless West Ham' was the club's full name. Every day there's the same despairing scan of Ceefax desperately searching for news of West Ham appointing a top manager. But instead all there is to find is Frank Lampard's agent inviting bids and news of reserves almost being loaned to Peterborough. Sartre was wrong. Hell is not other people but waiting for a Ceefax story that never comes.

In *The Soccer Tribe*, Desmond Morris wrote that football fans view their manager in much the same way as some tribal societies see witch-doctors. The witch-doctor is attributed with powers that might result in rain, while the football manager knows similar spells and incantations which might result in a title reign. But now our tribe had lost its medicine man. When Nietzsche wrote that 'God is dead' it was probably while his team was without a gaffer.

And who will defend West Ham's interests among the Darwinian world of the Premiership? Alan Curbishley at Charlton is able to sign youngsters such as Luke Young from Tottenham and Jason Euell from Wimbledon, while all we do is fail to see off the predators. My sense of unease is compounded by the sale of Frank Lampard to Chelsea for £11 million. It's pretty good money and Lampard has less potential than Carrick or Cole. But even so, had we had a top manager like Curbishley, Venables or Keegan installed they might have persuaded him to stay. Now both Ferdinand and Lampard have gone, the board have sent out the message that we are a selling club. Carrick, Cole, Di Canio and Sinclair will surely be next.

Once the early candidates are ruled out it's Steve McLaren, the Manchester United number two, who appears to be about to take the job. He would be an imaginative choice, and is recommended by Sir Alex Ferguson. Only news of his talks with the board leaks out, Middlesbrough move in with a counter offer, and McLaren clearly prefers their brochure to ours. Hibernian's Alex McCleish mutters that it would take 'a very good offer' to entice him from Edinburgh. There are rumours of a move for ex-Holland boss Frank Rijkaard and then silence.

Peter Gabriel keeps telling me 'Don't give up' but then you remember that line about 'so many men no one needs' and imagine them all ending up at West Ham to replace our sold-off stars. It's beginning to look as if William Hague might be retiring a little too early. We may just be needing his leadership skills next season.

You wonder what West Ham must be putting in their job advert. It probably reads something like: 'A vacancy has arisen at West Ham United for the post of Team Manager. This prestigious position offers: a transfer budget of 50 pence; bonus of £25 for avoiding relegation, erm, we mean winning the Premiership; a hugely talented team of injured players; your choice of company car from Dagenham



Motors; a couple of rejected Fila tracksuits; the chance to sell a used Lampard to Chelsea or Leeds; company outings to Southend once a year; gratis luncheons in Ken's Café. Ambitious self-starters please apply in writing to Mr Terence Brown.'

Around this time there are rumours that Glenn Roeder might be a candidate. He took over the side for the final game of last season at Middlesbrough, but was told not to bother applying for the post. He has been a coach for a couple of years at the club, but was below Redknapp and Lampard in seniority and had only an average managerial record at Watford and Gillingham.

The club then announce that anyone renewing their season ticket who does not approve of the new manager could have a refund. Maybe the catch is that West Ham will never get a manager. Who could us fans blame if there was no one in the dugout? Ourselves?

By mid-June most fans are praying that West Ham appoint just about anyone to give the illusion that someone is in control of our footballing destiny. Like Michael Stipe, I risk losing my religion if this continues. My club is adrift, rudderless on a sea of Premiership money, no stars to guide this wandering bark, heading towards the murky bottom of the Nationwide.

Finally, on 14 June, after 37 days of footballing purgatory, comes the underwhelming news that Glenn Roeder, yes, Glenn Roeder, has been appointed the ninth manager in the club's history. Cheap option is nearly every fans' verdict. Someone who won't complain while the club is asset-stripped. Maybe all that waiting around wasn't so bad after all.

For his photo call, Roeder stands in a hard hat before the rubble that is the former West Stand, looking like a man who has just failed the audition for *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*. Roeder himself admits that he was not the club's first choice and says that he feels like a 100-1 outsider winning the Grand

National: 'The horses fell one at a time and I was the last one standing.'

True, he might prove to be a great manager and has coached England alongside Glenn Hoddle. Like John Lyall, he might be a very nice man. But surely appointing someone with no Premiership experience is a huge risk.

With typical loyalty, less than 100 fans ask for their season ticket money back. But more pressure is placed on Roeder when, at home in Italy, captain Paolo Di Canio publicly questions the appointment of such a low-profile manager and hints that he himself might be driven out of the club. 'I told them what I thought and they did the exact opposite. They listened to some of the young players at the club instead. Naturally I'm not too happy about this and, judging by the reaction of the fans, neither are they,' he declares. 'At the end of last season Paul Aldridge asked me what I thought of Glenn. I said he was a great coach and he should definitely stay on as assistant. But I also said I thought we needed an experienced figure. I still believe that.'

PDC adds that although Roeder was not his personal choice as manager, 'This is Glenn's big chance and I will be fighting tooth and nail alongside him. Who knows, maybe he will lead us to the Premiership and prove himself in battle . . . Still, this does not change the fact that many fans feel betrayed and I feel that my views and those of others were not taken into account. When I return to London we're going to have a serious talk. I would hate to think that someone at the club is trying to push me out. If this is the case they're not going to succeed. I will not be pushed around.'

Most bookies have him odds on for an early dismissal and one even has West Ham down with Bolton as 3-1 to be relegated. Presumably we have to give the man a season to see if he can do the job, although uncomfortable

comparisons with Chris Hutching's short reign at Bradford City last season come to mind.

Poor Joe Cole is wheeled out to give quotes on Ceefax about Roeder being one of the top coaches he has played under, although at Joe's age you wonder how many coaches he's had beyond his school games master.

Encouragingly, Roeder starts in a businesslike manner, appointing ex-Hammer Paul 'Sarge' Goddard as his assistant, Ludek Miklosko as goalkeeping coach and, in an overdue move, bringing in John McCarthy, a sports scientist, before arranging some rushed pre-season friendlies. He also insists that Fredi Kanouté, who is rumoured to favour being reunited with his former boss at Lyon, Jean Tigana, now at Fulham, must honour his contract.

Roeder's initial foray into the transfer market is a good one. He buys a familiar figure, French full-back Sebastien Schemmel, who was on loan at the club last season but was inexplicably not signed from Metz by Harry Redknapp. He played in the epic victory at Manchester United in the Cup and from his first game at Charlton looked a very useful, pacy wing-back, even if his crossing was somewhat erratic. Even in the dire second half of the season Schemmel never stopped running in a woefully underperforming team. What's more, his value seems to have reduced from £4 million to a mere £465,000, so it's a relatively risk-free signing for Roeder.

His next move suggests that the new boss might be more than a yes man. No one seems to have known that the Aston Villa goalkeeper David James was for sale. But Roeder manages to sign the England international goalkeeper for £3.5 million. James played for Roeder as a youngster at Watford, so clearly must have some respect for the man. The new boss is bullish about the signing: 'By getting David and other potential signings, people will see that the club and I mean business. When was the last time West Ham

signed a current England player with his best years ahead of him?’

The signing of James shows an encouraging ruthlessness, for although Shaka Hislop is a fine keeper, when he returned after injury last season his confidence seemed to dip and he looked suspect on crosses. Only then the unthinkable happens. West Ham’s Australian defender Hayden Foxe has already been sidelined after a freak training ground accident where he caught his finger in a bib. Now David James is selected to play for England in a friendly against Holland at White Hart Lane on the Wednesday before the season kicks off. In a collision with Martin Keown he injures the posterior cruciate ligament in his knee and is likely to miss most of the season. Four days before the new season, West Ham’s one big signing is crocked. Glenn Roeder describes it as ‘a massive blow’ and adds ‘it makes you wonder if these internationals should be played’. Roeder is not only untried, he’s unlucky too. It’s the sort of injury that can turn a season and West Ham fans start to wonder if, with a rookie boss, the club will be able to survive in the Premiership for a ninth successive season.

## **TOP TEN HAMMERS’ INJURIES**

**DAVID JAMES’S KNEE LIGAMENTS:** Crocked by an Arsenal centre-back on his own side while playing for England before he had even played a competitive game for the Hammers.

**DEVONSHIRE FLU:** Alan Devonshire returned after injury for a couple of games, caught flu, and then disappeared for 18 months before re-emerging to help the Hammers finish third in 1985-86.

**PHIL PARKES’S SEPTIC ELBOW AND ARTHRITIC KNEES:** Has any other goalkeeper ever managed to have both a septic

elbow and arthritic knees and still look better than Allen McKnight?

**STEWART ROBSON'S CYCLING SHORTS:** Nobody knew exactly what Stewart Robson's injury was, but the suspicion was that his entire body was held together by his Lycra cycling shorts.

**TREVOR MORLEY'S KNIFE WOUND:** Missed the second half of the 1990-91 season after being stabbed following a 'domestic incident' at which his wife Monica was present.

**HAYDEN FOXE'S FINGER:** Missed the start of the 2001-02 season after catching his finger in a training ground bib in a 'freak accident'. The injury was so bad that another knock might have meant him losing his finger.

**BILLY BONDS'S TOE:** The Hammers' skipper once managed to trip over his slippers, fall downstairs and injure his toe.

**JIMMY GREAVES'S ALCOHOLISM:** Signed for West Ham and, perhaps understandably, hit the bottle.

**ALVIN MARTIN AND STEVE WHITTON'S CAR CRASH:** Whitton remembers that 'Alvin had this bloody Toyota Supra, a flying machine, and he just put his foot down'. Going round a bend in Stratford the car went through a couple of trees and a lamp-post. Alvin broke six ribs and Whitton broke two ribs and dislocated a shoulder.

**SIMON WEBSTER'S LEG:** After joining the Hammers he went for a 50-50 ball with Julian Dicks in training - and was never seen again. Now one of the club's physiotherapists.

### **3. GLENN'S GLORIOUS GLADIATORS**

Liverpool 2 West Ham 1 – 18 August 2001

West Ham 0 Leeds 0 – 25 August 2001

Derby 0 West Ham 0 – 8 September 2001

Green Street is my boulevard of broken dreams. Since 1970 I've walked from Upton Park tube station to the Boleyn Ground past shops that defy all attempts at gentrification.

By the station doors stands the West Ham programme stall, which has fallen victim to the greengrocer's apostrophe, offering match day 'programme's'. Stepping over the odd pile of police horse manure, we reach Green Street. On the right is the Queen's fish and chip shop, where on match days legions of fans in replica shirts queue for chips and saveloys. Beyond this is the market, fronted by a stall which appears to sell nothing but outsize bras for Dawn French. Behind the market are what used to be referred to as 'the Beirut flats', a once dismal council monolith full of burnt-out windows, which has at least been slightly improved by some cladding and paint. After the market is the perpetually packed Queen's pub, and beyond this the Belly Busters burger store and the tools and ironmongery shop of Derrick A Cross, the sort of establishment that looks like it's been there since the war and will remain there forever selling useful selections of kitchen utensils, brushes, buckets and mops.

On the left-hand side of Green Street stand halal butchers, kebab shops and proof that feminism never reached the East End. Ever since I've been coming to West Ham – my first match was in 1970 against Blackpool – a sign has stood

above a dry-cleaning shop reading 'Don't kill your wife - let us do it!' That sign has travelled from sexist outrage to post-lad mag irony, just through never changing. Maybe it will be listed soon.

By Tudor Road are the front gardens where scarves and old programmes are sold and where from 1989 to 1992 I helped sell the fanzine I contributed to, *Fortune's Always Hiding*. Later, Shane Barber, the editor of *On A Mission*, took over the selling spot and published my column Mayday until he left the country for Germany. Outside Upton Park Domestic Appliances stand numerous old fridges and cookers (Harry Redknapp probably learnt all he knew about salesmanship there), while next door stands Ken's Café, a proper greasy-spoon in which it would be no surprise to see Kaff Beale berating her customers. The food is marvellous value compared to the catering inside the ground - with egg, chips and beans costing only £2 - and it's here that victories are anticipated and defeats digested.

The shops and markets mirror the other London clubs' views of West Ham. Chelsea Village it ain't. Arsenal, Spurs and Chelsea fans all view life at Upton Park as distinctly downmarket. Even the club's nickname of 'The Irons' betrays its working-class roots; West Ham started life as Thames Ironworks in 1895, a works side for the shipbuilding company of the same name. Yet amid the dodgy tower blocks and chip shops, class and romance have mingled with poverty. East London might be where London's unsightly and dangerous industries have traditionally been dumped, but its football fans have always expected a little fantasy, perhaps as a buffer against reality. This has, after all, been the home of Moore, Hurst, Peters, Brooking, Devonshire, Di Canio and Cole, players who with one moment of skill can enliven a week's toil at the typeface.

It's a street of many memories: in the early '70s Geoff Hurst puffing out his cheeks to score the winner against Liverpool in a League Cup tie after a great run by 'Arry

Redknapp on the wing; policemen confiscating DM boots from skinheads outside the North Bank; the barracked Bobby Gould diving to score with a header after a Frank Lampard cross in a thrilling 6-2 victory against Leicester; a splendidly sideburned Trevor Brooking firing home a sumptuous goal against Derby; Devonshire and Brooking exchanging countless one-twos on the left; Trev whippin' in crosses with either foot; Frank McAvennie poaching two late goals to beat Everton 2-1 in the season we nearly won the league but because of a strike nothing was televised; Ray Stewart scoring that late penalty against Ipswich; Paolo's volley against Wimbledon and his attempted walk-off against Bradford . . .

Today it's a stultifying, sweaty August afternoon in East London in 2001 as West Ham kick off their first home fixture under the Roeder regime. It's so hot that even East Enders have declined to overdose on saturated fats. Ken's Café is deserted, bar about five people. There's plenty of space to observe the team photos from the '60s, a Hammers mirror and yellowing posters of the likes of Julian Dicks. 'That's how I like it,' declares proprietress Carol, apparently oblivious to the loss in income. Over the years Ken's has been the scene of fanzine meetings, post-match inquests and endless shouted requests for customers to collect 'number 37 egg, chips and beans! I'm not telling you again or it goes in the bin!' It's also where my own football academy meets to discuss the finer nuances of the game.

There's Big Joe, who has been around since the days in the 1980s when we both worked on the award-winning fanzine *Fortune's Always Hiding* and, perhaps rather aptly for a Hammers fan, now works in the comedy industry. Gavin and Nigel are both journalists and closet Uriah Heep fans. Perhaps because of their anti-social activities as both heavy metal and West Ham fans, they have remained friends since their days together at Brentwood School, the alma mater of Frank Lampard Junior. Nigel is Steve Potts's



number one fan and Gav is brilliant at finding real ale pubs in the vicinity of any ground in the country.

The rest of our squad includes Dan, who works in the press office at a TV company and has probably wasted more wagers on unlikely West Ham scores than any man alive; Matt, who is a political correspondent with an anorak's knowledge of football, the sort of man who can tell you the combined age of Oldham's midfield; and Fraser, who somehow manages to combine being show-business correspondent for a glossy celebrity magazine and attending glittering film premieres up west with living in Ilford and supporting the Irons.

A midweek visitor is Dirty Den, another *ex-Fortune's Always Hiding* man and *On A Mission* fanzine writer, whose job on a national Sunday newspaper prevents him from attending Saturday games. Despite being from Northern Ireland he's developed an unhealthy love for West Ham and Celtic, and is our own resident expert on the sexploits of Frank McAvennie and the crazed genius of Paolo Di Canio.

West Ham have started the season with a predictable defeat at Anfield. But instead of the anticipated thrashing we've been decidedly unlucky. After Owen's early goal the Hammers came back to win a penalty when Svetoslav Todorov, in for the injured Kanouté and having thankfully ditched the Alice band for a decent haircut, was bundled over by Hyypia. With typical nonchalance, Paolo Di Canio, starting the season with a shaved head, chipped the ball over Liverpool keeper Arphexad into the exact spot where he was standing a second earlier. Paolo then ran to hug his new boss and a slightly embarrassed Glenn Roeder nearly dropped his notebook and pen in surprise.

West Ham played tightly and Song and Dailly did well at the back, alongside the new signing Schemmel and veteran Nigel Winterburn. It's only a moment of brilliance from Michael Owen that won the game 13 minutes from the end. Allowed just a fraction too much time by Dailly, he arrowed

a shot into the far corner from a seemingly impossible position wide on the right.

So perhaps Glenn Roeder's reign will not be the disaster everyone expects, even if the Hammers are one of the bookies' favourites for the drop and Roeder is still ranked as a good bet for an early-season sacking.

The Leeds game was in some doubt. Only at West Ham would the ground itself have to take a fitness test. It was only confirmed yesterday that the ground had received its safety certificate, but with Upton Park having recovered from Devonshire Flu the game can now go ahead. The old West Stand was demolished at the end of last season and builders in yellow hard hats now watch the game from the emerging and impressive Doctor Martens Stand. Seeing the structure, the visiting Leeds fans chant 'Is that the Rio stand?', which it probably is, having been partially funded by the sale last season of Rio Ferdinand to Leeds for £18 million.

Interestingly, and typical of the club's lack of openness, is the fact that the programme makes no reference to Harry Redknapp, although former player turned pundit Tony Gale is critical of the side's 'tactical naïveté' last season, perhaps indicating the board's thinking.

But at least match day announcer Jeremy Nicholas is upbeat. 'Let's give a huge Upton Park welcome to Glenn's Glorious Gladiators!' he exclaims, sounding very much like a man who has just discovered the concept of alliteration.

Perhaps sensing the unfairness of his early-season vilification the home fans seem willing to give the unheralded Roeder a chance. A minute's silence for the late Les Sealey, the former Hammers' keeper and coach, ends with a collective roar of hope for the new season.

As the match kicks off our eyes are on the new boss. After nine years of Harry it's a shock not to see an agitated used car dealer on the line; instead we have an implausibly tall and angular man in a dark suit who looks almost like a

Dickensian creation. He stands in front of an impressive new transparent dugout. 'He must have insisted on the flash continental style dugout before he took the job,' muses Dan. Only Roeder never actually gets in it, he just stands by the touchline, arms folded, with the demeanour of an East End undertaker trying to prevent 22 players trampling over the floral tributes.

Gavin, who is to football timekeeping what Frank McAvennie is to chastity, then makes his first late arrival of the season, greeted by a cry of 'Legend!' from Nigel. It's immediately apparent that the Hammers have a better shape than last season, when numerous players seemed to play 'off the cuff', as Harry would say. Roeder has said that he hates the words 'free spirit' and has assigned Joe Cole to a left-sided role in midfield as he sticks to a 4-4-2 formation as opposed to Harry's five at the back. The other big shock is Rigobert Song's facial hair; sporting a grey goatee beneath dreadlocks he now resembles Titan from Stingray. It's almost as embarrassing as Julian Dicks's one-time Forrest Gump cut.

A sumptuous 60-yard ball from Di Canio sees Sinclair volley over early on, but it's a welcome sign that Paolo has recovered his sense of magic after his poor form at the end of last season. At one point he beats Leeds's aggressive right-back Danny Mills three times. Viduka heads over for Leeds and it's a tightly contested workmanlike game. Rio Ferdinand has received predictable applause from the home fans as he returns to Upton Park. When he first came back with Leeds last April he scored in an easy 2-0 win. At least it looks like West Ham will give them a tougher game this time.

Even Dailly and Song are playing well again in central defence and honest artisan John Moncur is working hard to compensate for the absence of the sold Lampard in midfield. Young Michael Carrick is taking more responsibility too and goes close with an audacious lob over Martyn from

40 yards out. The thought occurs that this is a working-class club and at least the side are putting in an honest day's labour for once. Too many games at the end of last season just drifted away.

In the relentless heat the game is more perspiration than inspiration, but two minutes after the break Joey Cole has the ball in the net, only for the goal to be disallowed on the dubious grounds that Todorov has impeded Nigel Martyn. Toddy, as Harry liked to call him, still looks too lightweight for the Premiership, but creates a good chance for himself before curling the ball wide. Young prodigy Jermain Defoe replaces him for the last 20 minutes and immediately has a confident strike at goal.

It's Rio Ferdinand who denies the Irons a win. In one sublime movement Di Canio cushions Sinclair's cross, drags it back and sends Mills 20 yards off in the direction of the A13, only for his shot to be blocked by Rio's instinctive, saving challenge.

The game ends in a goalless draw. The side appears to have a shape, and having played well at Anfield and taken a point from Leeds it hasn't been that bad a start to the season.

As we walk towards Upton Park tube Dan and myself are impressed with the new boss's demeanour. 'I think Roeder's been taking lessons on how to stand,' says Dan. At least we now have a boss who poses with the authority of the Wenger-like technician, tie neatly in place and arms folded.

After the match Roeder announces himself 'very satisfied' with the two performances so far and says: 'We've set our benchmark . . . I thought Paolo had scored and so did he. It was just a nuisance Rio came back to haunt us.'

With the Frank Lampard money still to be spent, Roeder's aim is to improve the squad with high-quality players. Later that week he spends a club record £5 million on signing Don Hutchison from Sunderland. Hutch scored 11 goals in 35 games for the Hammers during his first spell at the club and

also earned a reputation for drinking and high-jinks. But he has apparently matured while at Everton and Sunderland and was last season's player of the year for the Black Cats.

Hutchison clearly has a good scoring record, and has hopefully given up the habit of hiding his wedding tackle behind Budweiser labels, as he did so infamously in a holiday snap that found its way into the *News of the World* while he was at Liverpool. He uses that very same organ (no, the paper, not that one) to reveal that he has changed lifestyle since his last spell at Upton Park.

'I regret a few of the things that happened last time I was down here but most of all I regret letting the fans down,' admits Hutch. 'I used to think I could go out when I wanted, drink as much as I wanted, then still get up and play football. I was a lot younger back then. I thought I was invincible.'

Opinion is divided among Hammers fans. Joe feels that £5 million for a 29-year-old who he thinks is moving for more money is too much.

'What, we're buying him back because he drinks less?' exclaims Joe in disbelief, after we discuss the *NOTW* interview.

'Yeah, he's down to five pints a night now!' declares one of the more cynical members of our party.

On the other hand, the value of one older Hutch is just under half a Lampard, so it might be about right in an inflated market. Dan comments via e-mail: 'It's good to see we've found a Biro that works and signed someone at last. Pound for pound, he's probably worth the dough. We really need a bit of bite right in the centre and, as we found out last year, he's not afraid to shoot. Just as long as they're not tequila shots, we'll be laughing.'

Hutch makes his debut in another goalless draw at Derby, notable for the return of Fredi Kanouté for 53 minutes before the inevitable hamstring injury flares up again. West Ham have defended well, but played three games without scoring