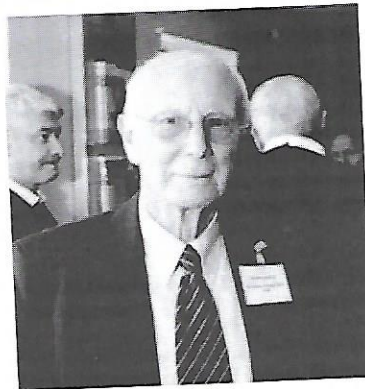


ALLEN BATSFORD

A football gent - and a top, top manager

The following article was originally shown on *The Independent* website, by **Ivan Ponting**.



Allen Batsford was the manager who led Wimbledon into the Football League in 1977 after inspiring the Plough Lane club to lift three consecutive Southern League titles and guiding them on one of the most compelling of FA Cup giant-killing adventures.

In 1975 Burnley became the first top-flight victims of a non-League side in more than half a century, and mighty Leeds United were given the fright of their lives before edging past Batsford's gutsy team only after a replay.

But that bald outline of his headline achievements, impressive as it is, barely begins to do justice to the lifelong commitment and remarkable expertise of one of sport's unsung artisans. Batsford was a football man to the very core of his being, embracing the game with heart and mind and sinew, approaching his task with a meticulous professionalism immensely rare in non-League circles. Those who came within his ambit, such as Dave Bassett - who was destined eventually to take Wimbledon all the way from the League's basement to its top flight on a shoestring budget - learnt all they needed to know about shaping a collection of disparate individuals into a tight, efficient unit.

Deeply thoughtful and utterly pragmatic, Batsford based his method on a well-drilled defence and a relentlessly industrious midfield. He believed that if his players kept the game simple, eschewing expansive flourishes but doing the ordinary things well, then ultimately his opponents would make

mistakes on which his own men could capitalise. A lot of people paid lip service to such a code, but Batsford stood out at that level in that he was not merely a physical trainer - although certainly he demanded of his charges a fearsome degree of fitness - but a genuine coach. He told them what to do and how to do it in game situations; he didn't merely din the rudiments into their heads, but was eloquent enough to make the majority of them understand.

Batsford found he had to be a stern disciplinarian, but he was a shrewd psychologist, too, knowing which characters needed an arm around their shoulders and which, such as the lively and forthright Bassett, responded to a more astringent approach. To all of them, though, he displayed loyalty and warmth and, almost invariably, he received respect in return.

As a boy, Batsford made his first mark at county level with Middlesex and believed he was on the verge of a breakthrough at the age of 17 when he turned professional with Arsenal. However, although he graduated to the Gunners' reserves, the callow inside-forward cum wing-half failed to make the grade at Highbury and soon was forced to make his living outside football. Still he was besotted by the game, and he played for Folkestone Town, Ramsgate and Margate before entering part-time management with Feltham Town of the Surrey Senior League in 1963.

Gradually Batsford became ever more fascinated with tactics and strategy, and in

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1967 he stepped up to take charge of Walton and Hershaw, where Bassett, a defensive midfielder, became one of his key performers. Serial success followed. Walton took the Athenian League crown in 1969, soon graduating to the more prestigious Isthmian League, in which they finished as runners-up in 1973. There was heady consolation for the near-miss, however, as they beat Slough Town in the Wembley final of that season's FA Amateur Cup and also overcame Fourth Division Exeter City in the first round of the FA Cup.

A season later Batsford scaled his loftiest peak yet when, after holding Brian Clough's Brighton to a goalless FA Cup draw at Walton, his team romped to a 4-0 replay victory at the Goldstone Ground. Before the tie Clough had talked of a clash between his own "thoroughbreds" and Batsford's "donkeys", but afterwards the great man was magnanimous in defeat, admitting that the non-Leaguers fully deserved their win and behaving graciously to his conquerors.

In 1974 Batsford moved on to Wimbledon, taking a group of Walton players with him, including Bassett. Immediately he moulded the newcomers, together with the handful of survivors from the previous Plough Lane regime, into a potent machine and they finished the campaign as Southern League champions.

Gloriously, too, they dumped Burnley out of the FA Cup at Turf Moor, neutralising the international likes of Leighton James and Bryan Flynn to win 1-0. Then, even more sensationally, they defied the formidable power of Leeds – who would finish that season as European Cup finalists – by drawing 0-0 at Elland Road, thanks in considerable measure to goalkeeper Dickie Guy's penalty save from Peter Lorimer. Still unbowed, Batsford's plucky part-timers stuck to their work ethic in the replay at Selhurst Park, where they were defeated only by Bassett's unlucky own goal.

Thereafter the Dons completed their hat-trick of Southern League titles before being elected into the Football League's Fourth Division, at the expense of Workington Town, in 1977. But with the club having scaled the loftiest peak in its history, the

script began to go awry for the manager. He had never been enamoured of the new owner Ron Noades, a dynamic but controversial businessman, and when results were poor during that first Football League autumn the relationship deteriorated apace.

Batsford, who had been working for a concrete company in the mornings as well as steering his team, grew increasingly frustrated with what he saw as dreadful organisation – he reckoned there were no paid talent scouts, no one to vet opponents and no one to help him with the coaching. Noades did bring in Dario Gradi to run a youth system, but Batsford did not mesh comfortably with the new man and, after being infuriated when the players had to drive their own cars to an away match at Rochdale over Christmas because no team bus was provided, the manager walked out in early January 1978.

While Gradi became the new manager at Plough Lane and, with Bassett as his assistant, led Wimbledon away from the relegation zone, Batsford returned to non-League circles, first enduring an unhappy stint with Hillingdon Borough before thriving once more with Wealdstone, whose squad included the future England international, and current manager of England under-21s, Stuart Pearce. In 1981-82, Batsford led the Stones to success in both the Southern League's championship, which secured promotion to the Alliance Premier League (the equivalent of the modern Blue Square Premier League) and its challenge cup, then to third place in their first season in the Alliance.

Subsequently he suffered heart trouble and left Wealdstone, but he recovered to coach at Queen's Park Rangers, then serve as general manager of Dulwich Hamlet before running the Millwall youth team and acting as a talent scout for Bassett during his former protégé's managerial stints with Watford, Sheffield United and Nottingham Forest.

Batsford remained dedicated to football until the last, and it was on his way home from watching Chelsea play Fulham in late December that he collapsed and died at Fulham Broadway tube station.