

Show Us Your Colours!

ALOB Talks to 'True Colours' Author and Football Kit Supremo John Devlin

It has been ventured in some quarters that the reason for our poor away performances at Norwich City, QPR and Blackpool were because Wolves were wearing the distinctly odd black and dayglo strip which looks as though it has been commissioned from the halloween section of Asda. Strangely there could well be something to this theory as we talk all things football kit related to John Devlin who has produced two excellent books dedicated to subject. His first book 'True Colours' was published in 2005 and chartered the football kit history of all the Premier League's teams at the time. Each entry is accompanied by a stunning illustration of every design and a story of its evolution. This was followed up more recently with a second volume in the same format which includes a host of other teams, including all Wolves kits going back to the late seventies – all thirty five of them! It really is developing into a rich body of work and I recently caught up with John to discuss this fascinating subject in more detail.



'True Colours' Volume Two

ALOB: First of all John, what inspired you to embark on 'True Colours'?

Well, I've been drawing football kits in coloured pencil and felt tip pens since I was about 7 or 8 and have always loved studying football kit design. The highlight of my football year was the start of the season when all the exciting new designs were unveiled. Despite the large promotional campaigns that accompany modern kit launches there was something more exciting about a new shirt when it didn't change so frequently. I always kept an eye open for a book that presented the kit history of various clubs but it never appeared. It then dawned on me that I would have to do it! Fortunately this coincided with me returning to college at 28 to study Graphic Design which gave me the ability to produce the illustrations to a professional standard.

ALOB: What do you feel makes a good football strip?

Almost a contradictory mix of tradition and modernity with a healthy dose of flair and self-restraint. A shirt needs to reflect the traditional, familiar colours/style associated with a club (and I think this extends to away shirts as well) but brought up to date, reflecting modern trends and fashion. It needs to be contemporary – I've heard from kit designers who say that players are very conscious if they turn out against a side in a flash, modern design and they are wearing a kit that doesn't match up.

ALOB: Conversely, just how bad does the Wolves 92/93 shirt rate?

No comment! No seriously, perhaps this is an example where modern fashion had perhaps been allowed to influence a kit too much and restraint had gone out of the window. Having said that, the design featured a traditional collar design and at least retained the club's colours. Putting it into context at the time, many many shirts were as 'challenging' as this one – very few clubs escaped at this time!

ALOB: Just how important do you feel a kit design is?

I think it's very important – not just in terms of colour theory and the different psychological effects a colour can have on people – but also in terms of looking good, smart and up to date. I believe it can help players perform better when they are wearing a well designed strip. On researching 'True Colours' it was amazing how many times a team got promoted or won a cup in a season when a particularly good kit graced their backs. Plus as I mentioned earlier, players are very fashion conscious and want to wear a shirt that looks up to date – as no doubt do the supporters.

ALOB: Many fans would argue that the purity of the kits in the fifties and sixties were far better than the heavily sponsored outfits of today's game, what's your view?

A couple of years ago I would have disagreed, believing that sponsors' logos etc are now so much of an accepted part of the game that they do become intrinsically linked to the clubs and almost act as an additional identifier. High street fashion is covered with logos/motifs; why not football shirts? I hate to say it but I do like the heavily sponsored kits favoured in Europe as well – it's an important part of the game now and I think the additional logos are interesting. However, having been researching older kits just lately there is a certain beauty in the designs – clean, simple lines with a good cut. How smart did Man Utd look in their 50s kit last season against Man City (who were wearing a poorly executed butchering of their 21st century strip)?

(contd...)



HOME KIT 82-85
Wolves first sponsored shirt

ALOB: Just how big an impact did shirt sponsors have on the game?

Massive – in terms of aesthetics it brought football right into the modern world. It also helped secure a vital bond/relationship between local companies/businesses and their team. Quite often in the early days these deals were brokered because the chairman of a local company wanted to show his allegiance to the team he followed. Or in large multi-national companies they may have had a large office based locally to the club. Now of course it's different and it's all about money – and this can't be underestimated. The income a good sponsorship deal can bring is considerable.

ALOB: Why do you think it took so long for the replica shirt revolution to take off and what were the key milestones and influences?

This is an interesting question – look back through any crowd photos pre-early 70s and you seldom saw a football shirt in the crowd – it just wasn't the done thing. The trend then of course was scarves, rattles and rosettes. Early 70s programmes include football shirts amongst the club merchandise that could be brought but way down in the list after teddy bears, keyrings and sometimes panties! Of course back then shirts weren't branded – once manufacturers' logos appeared on shirts and they realised they could sell (at a premium) authentic replica versions of the club kit, everything changed. Admiral really pioneered this approach – primarily with their England kit contract in 1974 and Don Revie – and then later with their kits for Manchester United, Leeds, Southampton etc. Umbro, Adidas and the other companies then followed suit. I guess it just enabled supporters to show, without doubt, who they supported and to indicate their allegiance. Interestingly though, most replica shirts in the 70s (and to some degree the 80s) were primarily in children's sizes, making vintage adult shirts very rare today.



HOME KIT 85-88
Steve Bull made his debut in a shirt like this

By the late 70s Umbro were producing boxed sets of complete club kit that included long sleeved shirts. The early 80s saw a kit revolution with the influx of foreign brands such as Le Coq Sportif and Patrick. The market for replica shirts grew throughout the 80s slowly but surely. When football's popularity exploded after Italia 90 the growth accelerated and, in my view, peaked at Euro 1996 when the whole of England seemed to own a replica shirt. In that period the Premiership was launched and eventually with it the ability to personalise your replica shirt with players' names and squad numbers which again increased sales. Since then the demand has been steady but has perhaps been knocked by scandals in price fixing and the increase in new designs.

ALOB: How much is the UK football kit market worth?

I have no idea! Ten years ago it was said it was worth around £200m. I would imagine it's less than it was back in the mid 90s when you couldn't go anywhere without seeing men, women and children all wearing a replica kit. Of course new designs are more frequent now and although some prices are higher it's often not long before they're reduced in club shops.

ALOB: Just how much competition is there between kit manufacturers and how long does a typical deal last with a club?

Again, a difficult question. There are some well known kit manufacturer competitors e.g. Adidas and Puma who of course were both founded by two German brothers who later fell out. The feud lasted after their deaths and is now still ingrained in the culture of both companies. I'm not aware of any other kit companies with such a fierce rivalry, in fact the industry is quite incestuous as far as employees go with some kit designers managing a spell at more than one kit manufacturer in their careers. Also, now several firms have merged or been taken over: *(contd...)*

Adidas bought Reebok 3 or 4 years ago and Nike bought Umbro last year. The length of the deals today vary enormously. Even with some large brands the contract often lasts for just one or two seasons. Back in the 70s and 80s though teams changed manufacturers pretty frequently – especially smaller clubs.



One of the more ‘challenging’ designs

ALOB: A recent trend has seen Premiership players throwing their shirts into the crowd after the match – do players receive a new shirt to play in at every match?and are they supplied free by the kit manufacturer?

I believe some of the bigger clubs do get a new shirt every match (often in both short and long sleeved options) which are supplied by the kit manufacturer. These are referred to as ‘match prepared’ in shirt collecting circles. But in the lower leagues this doesn’t happen and shirts often have to last the whole season with the payment for replacements coming out of the players’ pockets.

ALOB: The amount of detail you enter into on each shirt design featured in ‘True Colours’ is incredible – you must have come across some good stories in your research?

The devil is in the detail! The funniest stories do occur around misspellings – Diadora’s kit for Crystal Palace a couple of years ago managed to spell the club’s name as ‘Chrystal Palace’ on the home shirt. Plus, you may remember an amber, black and red Umbro away kit for Nottingham Forest in the mid-90s? The shirt featured a ghastly paint-splattered effect on the shirt that incorporated the Forest badge, the name of the club and incredibly, ‘ubmro’. Other interesting stories are that Umbro included collars on their early 90s Man Utd shirts apparently because of Eric Cantona’s fondness for turning them up and the amount of times a team’s shirt colour (especially away jerseys) is altered to coincide with the corporate colour scheme of an incoming sponsor. There

have been a few occurrences of players customising their kits as well, Vinnie Jones used to trim the length of his shorts when baggy ones were introduced during his time at Chelsea in the early 90s and Duncan Ferguson would cut the neck of the rather constrictive collar Umbro introduced in a late 90s Everton shirt. And there was the legendary grey Manchester United shirt from the mid 90s!

ALOB; Wolves fans are incredibly proud of our unique, distinguished colours – just how lucky are we?

From a supporter’s point of view very lucky – you can’t miss a Wolves fan and their allegiance can never be questioned; from a kit designer’s point of view, perhaps not! Having such a strong traditional colour scheme can prove a nightmare for designers when they try and create something new for a shirt. This can backfire on supporters as I’m sure Wolves fans who remember the 90s will testify, with some home designs that could be viewed at best as ‘challenging’. Plus it often means that designers’ creative flair is allowed to run unchecked on away shirts.

ALOB: What are your plans for future ‘True Colours’ projects?

I’ve got several plans at the moment, some I have to keep up my sleeve for now I’m afraid. Although I’m still adding features and articles to my website www.truecoloursfootballkits.com And I’m always busy researching, illustrating kits etc. I’m also working with several clubs who are running my illustrations in every edition of their matchday programme and I hope to get some more new work out there soon. Getting ‘True Colours’ published (by A&C Black, with the initial print run of the first book selling out) was my lifelong ambition and has led to several other experiences; I have been lucky enough to write articles on football kits, appear on several radio shows and also was delighted to be asked to judge the 2007 Football League Best Kit Award.

ALOB: Finally, if Wolves are promoted, just what sort of income could we reasonably expect from a shirt sponsor?

It’s very difficult to say but I would imagine you would be looking at about £0.8m to £1m per year for a 4/5 year deal. But with some clubs struggling with sponsorship as the recession takes hold the culture may be changing. West Brom will go the entire season without a sponsor, and Aston Villa decided to support children’s hospice Acorns on their shirts this year instead of a lucrative deal.

ALOB: Thanks. Keep up your great work in documenting and preserving a key part of football’s heritage.

True Colours Volume 2 is available from Amazon or directly from the publishers A&C Black (www.acblack.com). For more information about John’s work see his website www.truecoloursfootballkits.com. We would like to thank John for allowing us to use his illustrations in this article.

Jim Heath