



## Inside Leeds United's great escape and a terrible season that must not be repeated

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May 22, 2022

167

[Leeds United](#)'s last taste of relegation came in 2007, and on the eve of that season Ken Bates invited the coaching staff to a lunch at Elland Road. It was how Bates liked to kick things off — a last chat between chairman and manager before business got underway.

Leeds had lost in the Championship play-off final a few months earlier, falling one win short of the [Premier League](#). Bates wanted to know how his manager, Kevin Blackwell, thought the next nine months would go and Blackwell was painfully honest. There's a danger we might go down, he warned. The squad is past its best and hasn't seen enough improvement. Another promotion bid would be asking a lot. Bates' wife was so annoyed by the negativity that she got up and left the table.

There was none of that friction at Leeds last summer, or nothing out of the ordinary. Marcelo Bielsa was not in the habit of sharing dinner with the club's board and the board knew better than to distract him with a new season about to begin. Talks about a contract extension had been protracted, but Bielsa's contract talks usually were and these negotiations had been less complicated than the previous round. He was showing no inclination to leave. On the contrary, he had carefully monitored the installation of new state-of-the-art pitches at the stadium and training ground — work costing seven figures. His attitude was unchanged and physically Leeds had never seen him in better shape.

The contentment, the confidence, the sense of order — so much of it felt like another lifetime as Leeds avoided the guillotine by the skin of their teeth at [Brentford](#), clawing themselves to safety on a final day to beat all final days. There was [Stuart Dallas](#) saying in July that the club's readiness was "more advanced" than it had been for the 2020-21 Premier League season, optimism born of the fact that the players were smashing running targets at Thorp Arch. There was Andrea Radrizzani talking about his attempts to persuade Bielsa to de-stress, describing the day before the season began as "like the night before an exam. Obviously you stress but

when you have done your job well, relax and enjoy". In everyone's opinion, Bielsa was on top of his.



Orta celebrates with Marsch after Brentford (Photo: Adrian Dennis/AFP via Getty Images)

There was Victor Orta joking about the fan who sent him a letter detailing 62 ways in which Orta went wrong while Leeds were heading for ninth in the top flight. "You have to have a lot of free time to do that," Orta said. Bielsa's coaches privately believed this season might be more challenging, but after a top-half finish in their first year after promotion, their caution was relative. It was business as usual, life as usual and Leeds as they had come to be. The colour draining from the faces of Radrizzani, Orta and CEO Angus Kinnear said everything as relegation crept up on them and almost swallowed them, their self-assurance blown apart. From top to bottom, the club had been blindsided.

But after the torment came the reprieve, an emotion so sharp that only a relegation battle can cause it. On the pitch, in the dugout, in the directors' box there was love, there was relief, there was beauty in living to fight another day, the apparent inevitability of the drop turned on its head. A scrape as close as this cannot happen again, not if Leeds want to be all they can be, but there was, momentarily, a glorious sheen on Leeds as they swarmed the pitch at Brentford; many wrongs to right but, against the odds, the heart still beating.

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One of Bielsa's side projects in his last close season was the construction of a gym at Elland Road, costing more than £100,000 and built for the non-playing staff who worked there day to

day. It was designed by his wife and named after a long-time employee at Leeds, Peter “Stix” Lockwood, with whom Bielsa was close. Leeds were elevating their infrastructure — pitches, gym equipment — but not dramatically elevating their squad. The plan was to sign a left-back and a central midfielder, their two priorities. They were also open to moving on a winger if any of those Bielsa rated became available as the transfer window wore on.

Bielsa signed off on a £12-million deal for Junior Firpo from [Barcelona](#) and, after much analysis, asked Leeds to go after [Conor Gallagher](#). Gallagher was available on loan from [Chelsea](#) but the approaches made for him by Leeds and [Crystal Palace](#) for him were different. Patrick Vieira, Palace’s manager, spoke to Gallagher personally and promised him regular starts. It was not Bielsa’s style to do the same or to make any guarantees. He had famously put [Ben White in the under-23s dressing room after signing him on loan from Brighton](#), despite the fact that White would go on to be ever-present in Leeds’ promotion season. Players earned their places and nobody got special treatment.

Gallagher weighed up his options and chose Palace, a move close to home in London and a safer bet when it came to game time. He was Bielsa’s top choice and Leeds were unable to conjure anyone else who satisfied their head coach or came in at the right price. They proceeded without a new central midfielder and crossed their fingers about [the return of Adam Forshaw from long-term injury](#), even though Bielsa said later that he had doubts about whether Forshaw would recover to an extent that allowed him to cope in the Premier League. It was apparent that by leaving that hole empty, the club were taking a risk.

Leeds and Bielsa, though, were largely in agreement about the strategy. There was a touch of frustration behind the scenes that the Argentine was not keen on Noa Lang, the Dutch winger at Club Brugge. Leeds scouted Lang closely and saw clear attacking quality in him, along with serious resale value. Bielsa was unconvinced by Lang’s defensive qualities, something he needed in a winger, and Leeds let their interest go, but a difference of opinions like that was not unusual. Bielsa had always been singular and specific about targets. That was shown at the end of August when Leeds received a tip-off that [Burnley](#) believed [Manchester United](#) were ready to listen to bids for Dan James. [James ticked all of Bielsa’s boxes and Bielsa had been tracking him for over two years](#). He sanctioned an offer immediately.



Early results were a big concern (Photo: ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP via Getty Images)

By then, at the end of the season's first month, Leeds were searching for a spark. Their early performances had been flat, beginning with a heavy defeat to Manchester United on the opening weekend. Little about Bielsa's training regime had changed, although his video sessions were often longer and as the season progressed, he no longer limited [murderball sessions](#) to one a week, determined that increases in effort would rectify their form.

The principles were the same as they had been for three years, and so was he. When Leeds' players opted to change ends before a 1-1 draw against [Wolverhampton Wanderers](#) at Elland Road in October, they did so because a wind reading suggested to Bielsa that shooting towards the South Stand before half-time might give them an advantage. Covering bases was what he did. But the first point of concern was a 3-0 defeat to [Liverpool](#) in mid-September, a game in which Bielsa's team were opened up as easily as they had been at Old Trafford. The vulnerability in those games was obvious and while the board did not actively ask Bielsa for more pragmatism, there was concern about whether the tactics invited results like those too easily.

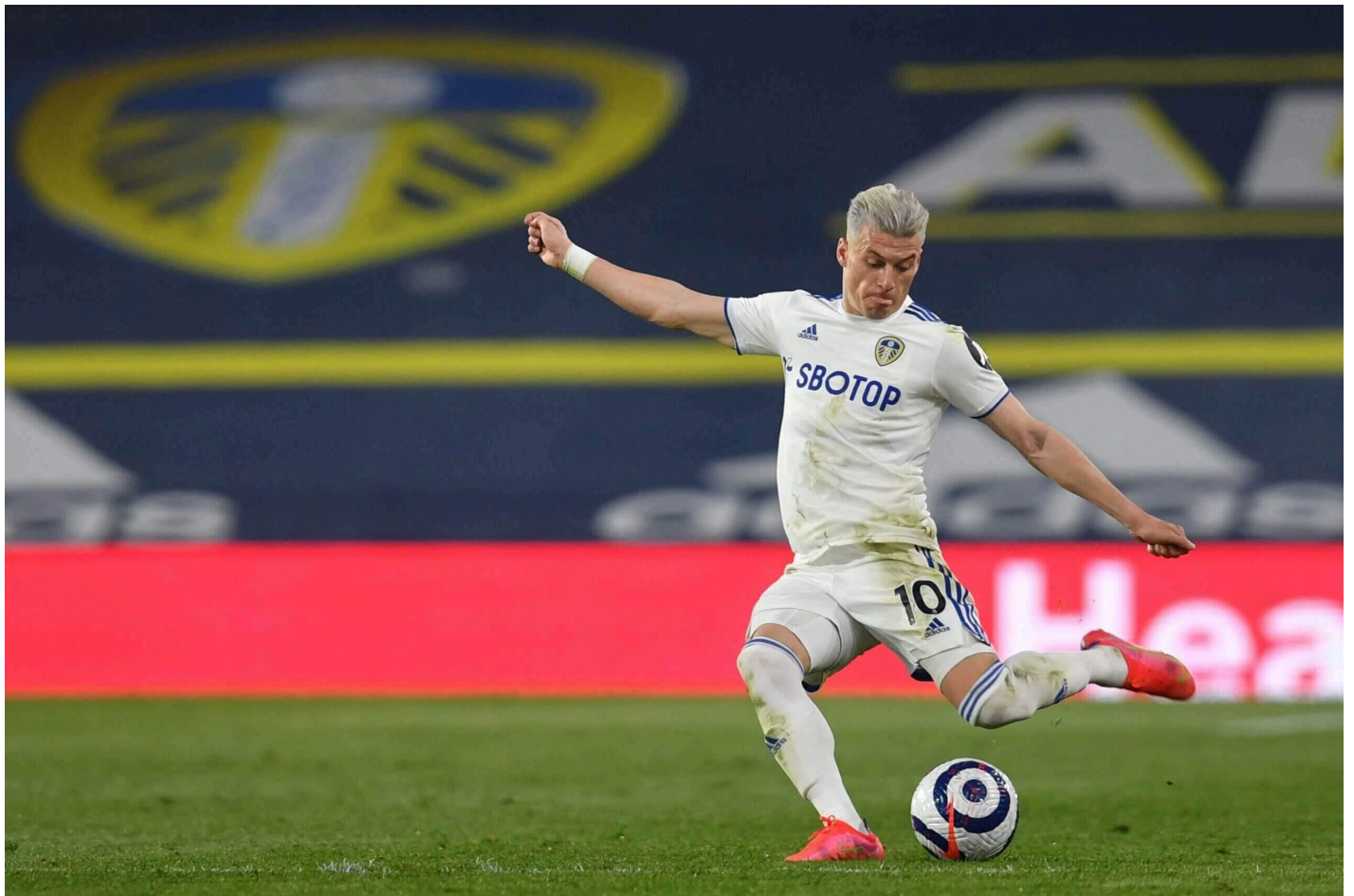
The same went for injuries. A rising list of absentees in the first-team squad begged the question of whether training needed to be tailored or eased, if nothing else to protect the players who were fit, but there was no drop-off in the intensity at Thorp Arch. One of Bielsa's stipulations when he accepted the job at Leeds was that the training ground would be his domain and the club would not interfere with his methods. To that end, Orta, the club's director

of football, tried to visit Thorp Arch no more than once a fortnight and had no office there. Radrizzani also kept his distance.

Full-throttle preparation had previously done wonders for Bielsa and he was not inclined to rein it in. Managing the team was his prerogative, which is why he was resistant to suggestions from the top that, in the absence of the injured [Patrick Bamford](#), [Joe Gelhardt](#) might play more. Bielsa was consistent in his outlook and never keen to make exceptions to the rules. [Raphinha](#) took umbrage at being substituted at half-time [during a 3-0 defeat to Everton in February](#) and went in to speak with Bielsa the following week. Bielsa digested the conversation and then named Raphinha on the bench for Leeds' next game at home to Manchester United, sticking to his collective principles.

While the size of the squad was roughly as Bielsa wanted it, Leeds and Orta were no less keen to invest in under-23s and use the best of them to flesh out a small senior group. Pablo Hernandez and Gaetano Berardi had been allowed to leave at the end of the 2020-21 season without much resistance, both of them resolved to move on well before the final game. Orta tried to talk Gjanni Alioski into signing a new contract and, after a meeting at the Dakota Hotel in Leeds at the end of May, an understanding appeared to have been reached but the salary proposed by Leeds was gazumped by an offer from Saudi Arabia. At no stage of the summer window was the signing of an out-and-out centre-forward ever on the agenda, though Leeds are positioning themselves to bid for a striker once this season finishes.

The results, the form and the accumulation of injuries created tension at Elland Road, caused by pressure that had not been present at any stage of the 2020-21 season. When January arrived and the winter transfer window opened, Bielsa found that some of the under-23s who worked closely with his first team were restless about their lack of game time. Cody Drameh went to him directly and asked to leave on loan for Cardiff City. Bielsa was frustrated by Drameh's request but had a policy of allowing anyone who wanted to move on to go. He had taken that stance with Samu Saiz in 2018. Drameh's transfer was agreed.



Leeds lost Alioski (Photo: PAUL ELLIS/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)

Later in the window, [Crysencio Summerville](#) tried the same approach after loan bids for him materialised but while Bielsa wanted to respond in the same way as he had with Drameh, Summerville's exit threatened to leave a gap in the squad that would have to be filled at short notice. Leeds made enquiries about [Kenedy](#) at Chelsea and [Takumi Minamino](#) at Liverpool but neither enquiry went anywhere. Bielsa said no to some of Orta's suggestions but, equally, the target he approved — RB Salzburg's Brenden Aaronson — fell by the wayside as Salzburg withstood two offers from Elland Road, the second around £20 million. As the window closed, public expressions of confidence in the team's ability to stave off relegation were at odds with the fact that Leeds had been actively searching for signings.

Sources have told *The Athletic* that January weakened the relationship between Bielsa and the board; that on reflection, that was when a change should have come if indeed a change had to be made. The club's game at [Aston Villa](#) on February 9, a 3-3 draw, troubled the boardroom as Leeds went from 1-0 up to 3-1 down in the space of 13 minutes. There was no real resistance in their defeat to [Everton](#) three days later (a sorry defeat after which Bielsa, a devout Catholic, took himself off to mass) and around that time, some of those closest to Bielsa began to doubt that year four of his tenure would lead into year five. The struggle for results was persistent and the pressure was draining, weighing on the 66-year-old heavily.

By the end of a 4-2 defeat to Manchester United on February 20, the possibility of an immediate managerial change had come into play. Some in Bielsa's backroom, and Bielsa

himself, believed a second-half fightback against Manchester United had shown how committed the players were to him, but a few days later a 6-0 defeat to Liverpool ensued. His last game, on February 26, was a 4-0 loss to [Tottenham Hotspur](#) — but even before that game kicked off Leeds were mobilising to replace him. Bielsa's confidantes are convinced that knew his fate in advance. After full time, senior club officials spoke with him and left no doubt that they had lost faith in him. The attitude of the board was that the squad had hit the wall.

Jesse Marsch, by that stage, was teed up to take the job. He and Orta had been in touch, on and off, for two years having got to know each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. Orta kept a constant watch on other coaches, aware that Bielsa existed on one-year contracts and might one day need replacing at short notice, and had made contact with Marsch after analysing his work at RB Salzburg. Orta's background work convinced him that Marsch was one of the more talented coaching prospects in Europe.

Although the appointment of an American made it look like a decision influenced by Leeds' minority shareholder, 49ers Enterprises, Marsch was Orta's recommendation. 49ers Enterprises were on board with changing head coach but did not drive the choice of Marsch specifically. The season had been so difficult that irrespective of the outcome, Leeds were already at the stage of questioning whether they would renew Bielsa's deal at the end of it. Marsch was top of the list of options to take over then and Bielsa's sudden sacking expedited his arrival. He arrived in England less than 24 hours after Bielsa's dismissal was announced. Leeds are not believed to have formally interviewed any other candidates in the week of Bielsa's exit and the speed of the turnaround meant that some of the backroom staff who came in with Marsch were interim appointments, at least at the outset. Marsch, on the other hand, signed a deal to 2025, apparent confirmation that he wanted the job whether Leeds stayed up this season or not. He had given some thought to what would happen in the summer and singled out Chris Armas, Ralf Rangnick's No 2 at Manchester United, as someone he wanted to add to his coaching team further down the line.



There were concerns over whether players were overtrained (Photo: Robbie Jay Barratt – AMA/Getty Images)

Leeds described him as someone who could oversee a smooth transition from Bielsa, painting them as similar in some respects, but there were immediate changes at Thorp Arch: more one-to-one communication with the players, a softening of the training week, alterations to hotel stays before games and, in principle, a gentler touch with players returning from injury. It was not a secret that Bamford's most recent injury, a foot problem, had been sustained during long shooting drills, although Marsch attempted to hurry him back in March and saw Bamford pull up again. Tactically, the move away from Bielsa's man-to-man marking system began overnight. It was a swing in philosophy at a crucial point in the season, using players who had been programmed for Bielsa's football.

Man-marking, latterly, had been Bielsa's bane — the aspect of his team other sides were trying to exploit. One of Liverpool's goals at Anfield in February, scored by [Joel Matip](#), had been practised in a training drill beforehand because Jurgen Klopp could see how building an attack in that way would open Leeds up and give the centre-back an opportunity to score. Liverpool's staff were overhead discussing the strategy after full-time, commending themselves on the fact that it had worked.

Marsch worked on tightening the defence and hit a run of form through March and April. Some players liked the change of pace at Thorp Arch and some liked his accessibility, but visually they were a team trapped between one philosophy and another, prone to confused

performances. [Marsch's comments in the media drew criticism and scrutiny](#) and in the last 10 days of the season there was an active effort to speak less and say less. The chants for Bielsa during Leeds' final home game were a stark example of how far he was from convincing a crowd who had not made peace with Bielsa's dismissal. Perhaps salvation in London on the final day will help. As for the board, they accepted that changing head coach with 12 games to go was no guarantee of survival; more a toss of a coin so late on. To the visible relief of Radrizzani, it came up heads.

Leeds have had a little madness about them all year — [Gelhardt's winner against Norwich City](#), [the equaliser against Brighton](#) — but Pascal Struijk's header last weekend felt like it might be the last of it. Marsch spent this week deciding whether to risk Bamford at Brentford, only for Bamford to come down with COVID-19. Bamford in his sick bed symbolised the timeline since August perfectly. But a little madness lingered: Raphinha putting Leeds one up against Brentford, Sergi Canos equalising and then incurring an immediate red card, Brentford finishing with nine players and Harrison sealing a 2-1 win in injury time.

Burnley, beaten by Newcastle at Turf Moor, took the fall. Leeds felt like they were flying. After so much hell, it was heaven for an instant. Raphinha threw himself into the away end. He and Orta embraced on the pitch, on their knees and in each other's arms. Luke Ayling started the day on crutches but had lost them by full-time, too ecstatic to plod around. So close to dropping and yet, somehow, Leeds clung to the rope. They will not talk of the Bielsa era as one that ended back where it began.

So where next? Marsch will continue as head coach and his contract runs for the next three seasons. The club have agreed a fee for Aaronson from RB Salzburg, and have also been working on [Aberdeen](#) defender [Calvin Ramsay](#) and a Premier League centre-forward. They planned with the top flight in mind and, by virtue of a manic last day, they have snatched another year in that division. When it comes to the debrief that has to follow, they would do well not to hide from the list of shortcomings.

Above all, they will have restore some of the goodwill lost over the past nine months. Leeds, for what felt like eternity under Bielsa, were the happiest of clubs, progressive and tight with everything in front of them. But something Bielsa said on the eve of this season, in a press conference rather than around a dinner table, sounds prescient now. "There's a special moment in the development of a team where the recognition of what happened before, it disappears and the demand for what's next increases," he said. That was Leeds last summer, high on all that lay behind them and blind to the terrors to come.