

Obituary: Paul McCarthy (1971-2017)

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Author: @wwfcofficial



Paul McCarthy was one of the greats.

Signed by Alan Smith in the summer of 1996, ‘Macca’ was one of a number of new faces at Adams Park in the turbulent era that followed Martin O’Neill’s exit from the manager’s post. Many of those new arrivals failed to reach the high standards set by those players who’d achieved such phenomenal success in the years that had gone by, but Paul McCarthy was different.

Born in Cork, the defender began his career with Brighton & Hove Albion, making close to 200 appearances in a seven-year stretch. Whilst not the tallest, Macca was a physical presence not to be messed with – rugged, strong, but not short on quality.

His first season at Adams Park brought about mixed fortunes and plenty of instability in the team, with Macca being one constant in a much-changed backline. Terry Evans, Jason Cousins and Matt Crossley were regular defensive partners as he settled into the club

with 45 appearances and one goal in his maiden season in south Bucks.

An injury sustained in February 1998 cut short his second season but he returned to feature 36 times in the following campaign, starring in both wins over Manchester City and earning a second of four red cards in his Wycombe career in a fiery encounter at Luton Town.

Macca was an established and hugely respected member of the side by the time the 2000/01 campaign came around, and had begun to develop a canny knack of scoring vital goals. He netted an extra-time winner over Barnet in the first round of the League Cup, and also sealed a home victory over Notts County that October.

But his next five goals ensured his name – and those of his teammates – would be written into Wycombe Wanderers folklore for eternity, playing his part in the incredible run to the semi-final of the FA Cup.

The first came in uncharacteristic fashion for Macca – a stylish overhead kick to see off Millwall in a second round replay. Wycombe had never scored an FA Cup third round goal in their history, but he put an end to that with an equaliser against Grimsby at Adams Park, and then opened the scoring in the replay success.

McCarthy epitomised the never-say-die spirit of that side with a last-gasp equaliser at full-stretch in the fifth round replay at Wimbledon, forcing a penalty shootout in which he converted his spot-kick in an 8-7 triumph.

Next up were Leicester City in the quarter-final, and McCarthy nodded home the first goal which is often overlooked due to the nature of ‘Ceefax hero’ Roy Essandoh’s fairytale last-minute winner.

Macca and co defended resolutely against a Liverpool frontline containing Robbie Fowler, Michael Owen and Emile Heskey in the semi-final, going down 2-1 at Villa Park, before attentions turned the

following year to winning promotion.

The Irishman played 32 times as the side fell away from the play-offs towards the end of the year, but did strike a last-gasp winner over QPR to spark euphoric scenes at Adams Park, and found himself a victim of measures to cut costs and reduce the average age of the squad the following season, keeping a clean sheet in what was to be his final game for the Chairboys against Huddersfield before moving on to Oxford.

From there, he dropped into non-league with Hornchurch and then Gravesend & Northfleet – soon to be known as Ebbsfleet – where he won an FA Trophy winners' medal in 2008.

Paul returned to Adams Park for a dinner to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the cup run in 2011, but kept in contact with friends from the club and is said to have kept a close eye on Wanderers' results through the years.

The sad news reached the club on Monday morning that he had died suddenly of a suspected heart attack.

He leaves a legacy, never to be forgotten, and scored 19 times in 259 appearances for the club.

Rest in peace, Macca.