

THE ULTIMATE FOOTBALL MAGAZINE



Believe in the Sign

Mark Hodkinson
POMONA PRESS, £9.99

*Less champagne
lifestyle, more life
spent in the local*



Beneath the champagne existence of the Premiership lurks an underclass where survival is success and where instead of players attending West End premieres, hero worship is lauded on those who struggle to make the guest list of the local working men's club.

Growing up in Rochdale in the early-'70s, Mark Hodkinson opted to support his local side – despite them being the ugly sister among a bevy of more glamorous siblings such as Manchester United, Manchester City... even Bolton.

But Rochdale it was, and Hodkinson's unwavering passion provides the backbone for *Believe in the Sign*. Neatly skipping between his early football memories and beautifully-crafted tales of growing up in the town, Hodkinson's life is played out to a backdrop of Dale's ever-changing managers constantly proclaiming a new dawn.

Explaining his affection for the Dale by taking us on a journey through his formative years, Hodkinson's emotive writing and touching recollections, especially about his father, are cleverly woven into a commentary of failure and

miserable on the pitch at his beloved Spotland. Though it all sounds very Nick Hornby, the grittiness of the tales and the alternating football and non-football themes set it apart from the multitude of *Fever Pitch* rip-offs on the market. Stories such as his part in the search for a missing young girl, later found murdered, bring real depth to a childhood in which the misfortune of supporting Rochdale still has an impact well into adult life.

The result is a charming and thoroughly engaging book, which is in stark contrast to most of what passes as football literature these days. Whereas the latest Premiership autobiographies tend to bore all around them like a bar-room braggart gulping champagne, *Believe in the Sign* huddles away in a smoky snug slowly supping a pint of stout. That, plus Hodkinson's honesty in opening up his childhood, is what makes this a real gem of a book.

Jeremy Butler

Best quote

"Dad fell silent after the game and the hurt burned black around him as it did me. We were united in our disgust for those useless, heartless, hopeless bastards down there in the mist." Hodkinson endures yet another miserable day at Spotland.