

## Rise and fall of Parma by Stuart Fuller

Twenty years ago last May Parma won the UEFA Cup, beating fellow Serie A side Juventus over two legs. It was another triumph for Nevio Scala's side who featured the likes of Dino Baggio, Faustino Asprilla, Tomas Brodin and Gianfranco Zola. The Gialloblù (the yellow and blues for those who failed GCE O'Level Italian) had a bright future and less than two years later under young coach Carlo Ancelotti they finished runners up in Serie A and grabbed another UEFA Cup title.

Twenty years on and the club will be starting the season in Serie D, the fourth tier of Italian football after a season from hell that saw their president engulfed in a criminal scandal, the team finish bottom of Serie A and finally the club filing for bankruptcy. They don't do matters by half in Italy. The fans, whilst understandably a little bit miffed by events off the pitch, can at least look forward to the club somehow surviving albeit at the expense of playing their football next season in places such as Jolly Montemurlo with its 400 spectator capacity stadium or fellow financial meltdowners Piacenza.

Last season the players went months without being paid resulting in strike action that saw the games against Udinese and Genoa postponed whilst new owner Giampietro Maneti was arrested on serious financial allegations just a month after he bought the club for €1. In March they had no choice but to file for bankruptcy, with debts of over €74 million, effectively relegating them with two months still to go in the season.

Serie D is the equivalent of our county league structure. Teams at this level are part-time and the regional structure of nine leagues of between 18 and 20 sides leads to a complex end of season play-off structure to determine promotion and relegation. Few teams ever rise quickly through the leagues in Italy meaning it could be some years before we see Parma back in the top flight again.

The club is not without hope. In some ways they've seen this all before. In April 2004 the financial collapse of major sponsor Parmalat led to the club being declared insolvent although the league allowed them to remain in Serie A. However, this time around there is certainly more responsibility being laid at the door of the club, which is why they will start in the fourth tier of Italian football. The club do not own the Stadio Ennio Tardini - in fact only Juventus own their own stadium in the whole of Serie A which is why so many of them are in dire need of modernisation - which is a blessing as the local council have said they can continue to play there whilst former striker, and one time most expensive player in the world, Herman Crespo has offered his coaching services free of charge.