

Premiership Profile: OLIVIER DACOURT & DAVID BATTY

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On a night of heroic performances for Leeds United against Deportivo La Coruna in the Champions League last Wednesday, Olivier Dacourt and David Batty provided the midfield steel and dynamism on which the Leeds victory was built.

The hard-working Frenchman and the hard-as-nails Englishman shone in a tireless and often inspired Leeds side, biting into tackles to win the ball and consistently using it to good effect. Batty's calm defensive cover and Dacourt's energetic creativity underlined the growing stature – particularly in Europe – of David O'Leary's team.

After the first half of their season was characterised by inconsistency in the Premiership, Leeds have put together an impressive run of results since Christmas. Significantly, this run has coincided with Batty's return to the team after a troublesome long-term injury that once looked like ruling him out for the entire campaign. Dacourt, meanwhile, is enjoying a productive second spell in English football and showing signs that a suspect disciplinary record is being brought under control.

Dacourt began his career in the French League with Strasbourg, for whom he made 127 appearances before joining Everton in Summer 1998. In his one season on Merseyside he played in 30 Premiership matches (scoring twice), and it was a disappointment to many Toffees fans when he left for Lens at the end of the 1998/99 season.

After finishing fifth in the League and reaching the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup with Lens (where they were beaten by Arsenal), Dacourt returned to England when O'Leary paid £7.2 million for his services. He has quietly but effectively added grit and guile to the Leeds midfield, and now stands on the threshold of great things with his adopted Yorkshire club.

For Batty, in contrast, the Leeds midfield has always been his spiritual home. Born and bred in the city, he played in 211 games for the club between 1987 and 1993, winning a League Championship medal with Howard Wilkinson's team in 1992. He then moved to Blackburn Rovers but was sidelined with injury for most of Rovers' Premiership-winning 1994/95 campaign.

In 1996 he was signed by Kevin Keegan to add strength to Newcastle United's Premiership challenge. However, the Magpies had to be content with finishing runners-up to Manchester United in both the 1995/96 and 1996/97 seasons. Batty was also a runner-up for Newcastle in the FA Cup, Arsenal winning 2-0 in the 1998 Wembley final.

Ruud Gullit's arrival on Tyneside was the beginning of the end of Batty's association with Newcastle, but he made it clear that the only club he wanted to join was Leeds. O'Leary obliged by bringing him back to the club in December 1998 for £4.4 million. His second spell at Elland Road has been disrupted by injury, but he at last seems to have overcome his fitness problems and, at 32, is able to lend considerable experience to O'Leary's predominantly youthful squad.

While a criticism of both players might be that neither scores enough goals, the quality of their all-round contribution is such (in a squad blessed with strikers such as Mark Viduka, Alan Smith and Robbie Keane), that O'Leary will usually find a way to accommodate the pair of them in his strongest team.

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