



# **The Sideways Sammy**

## **Half-Way Review**



# A Foreword

This half-way review is an attempt at a progress report for the league, Coventry City as well as holding my pre-season predictions to account.

A lot has changed over the months since I released my season preview. Back then the return to Coventry seemed like a pipe dream but mere weeks later 27,000 Sky Blues fans packed the Ricoh Arena for what was an evening intoxicated by joy and hope. Other teams in this division may not perhaps have experienced quite the highs and lows that we have experienced. But every club will have their own story affecting their hopes and dreams for the rest of the campaign.

This half-way review is about looking back on the season but also looking ahead to what is in store in the final few months. Aside from the very top and the very bottom, the league table is laid out in an accordion fashion. Teams from 19th to 7th place are equally as concerned about securing safety as they are hopeful about mounting a challenge for the play-offs.

League One as a division sits right on the edge between the lower leagues and the elite levels of English football. The heady heights of the Championship at one end contrasts with the morass of League Two below it. Established big clubs like Sheffield United and Bristol City rub shoulders with recent non-league sides such as Crawley Town and Fleetwood.

The format of this guide will be first to assess where everything stands at the half-way stage. Then it will be focusing on what might be salvaged this season for Coventry City and how. The final section is a look towards the future for both the division and Coventry City.

Hopefully this will be a comprehensive guide on the past, present and future of this League One season. All statistics are accurate to the day of publication which is January 6th 2015.

Enjoy

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# Introduction - Where We Stand

It has been a bizarre start to the season at Coventry City. We have had a full range of emotions from the joy of the return to the city, confusion at the sale of the Ricoh Arena to Wasps, dismay at the club's most embarrassing result for decades in the FA Cup but still the optimism that there is time to turn things around. This season could act as a real cross-roads for the club where the decline either continues apace or it is finally dealt with and turned around.

What has to go down as the biggest disappointment of the season is the dissipation of the momentum that we should have built upon returning to Coventry. Winning that Gillingham game in front of 27,000 people felt like a real watershed moment for the club, very quickly though the old feeling of anxiety and apathy at the Ricoh Arena returned. For many now, the inability to make the best of one of the club's

biggest chances to instil some positive momentum has made the return to being the 'same old City' even harder to take.

Perhaps in the joy of our grand return, we underestimated the impact that the exile of a football club would have. One of the most genuinely exciting Coventry City teams since the days of Robbie Keane was dismantled piece-by-piece as a result of our time in Northampton. Their replacements were mostly made on the assumption of further football in exile and were set-up to avoid defeat and survive rather than enthral and expectant Coventry audience.

Mistakes have undoubtedly been made this season but it seems that whenever they have happened, they have been punished in the cruellest way imaginable. Reda Johnson's red card at Scunthorpe was extended by an injury. A team that had at that fateful point been third in



the table, eventually lost to a side whose manager proved to be out of his depth and the team picked up just one point over the following six league games.

Or Lee Burge making the mistake of reacting to a non-league player looking to wind him up and gets sent off with the referee failing to notice that Burge had been fouled first. Or once again Reda Johnson believing his own hype in that game and taking a crucial penalty that would have surely engendered a big come-back.

The purchase of the Ricoh Arena by Wasps has changed things for this football club. Whether you look at it as a defeat against the club or a victory against our owners, things will never be same again at Coventry City. It is perhaps endemic of a drop-off in interest of Coventry City that such a big decision that reduces the club's long-term prospects has only been met with only a sighs of frustration rather than organised mass fury.

The move has solidified the general feeling that Coventry City is slipping into the periphery. For nearly the entirety of the past two decades the club has gradually declined and any sense of optimism has been crushed at the earliest opportunity. There feels like there can be nothing done to turn the situation around.

For many, Coventry City are no longer any kind of draw as they always let you down. It explains why attendances dropped from 27,000 to 11,000 in back-to-back home games. For those that still care it is heart-breaking but the inconsistent performances of the team this season perhaps justify some reticence in believing things can be turned around.

It has felt for quite some time now that after so many decent results and chances to build momentum having being eschewed this season, that the season has already passed us by. At the time of writing and albeit having played several games more, there are only four points separating us from the play-offs. Given how inconsistent most in this division are, there should be more optimism that we could be one of

those teams that makes a late surge into the play-offs. Most Coventry City fans would though have to see it actually happen to believe it could.

Part of the intention of this half-way review is to assess whether this team has a realistic opportunity of salvaging something from the season. Sometimes it takes a while for managers to find the right blend of players in a tactical system and there have been signs that a winning team could be forged out of the raw materials that Steven Pressley has available to him.

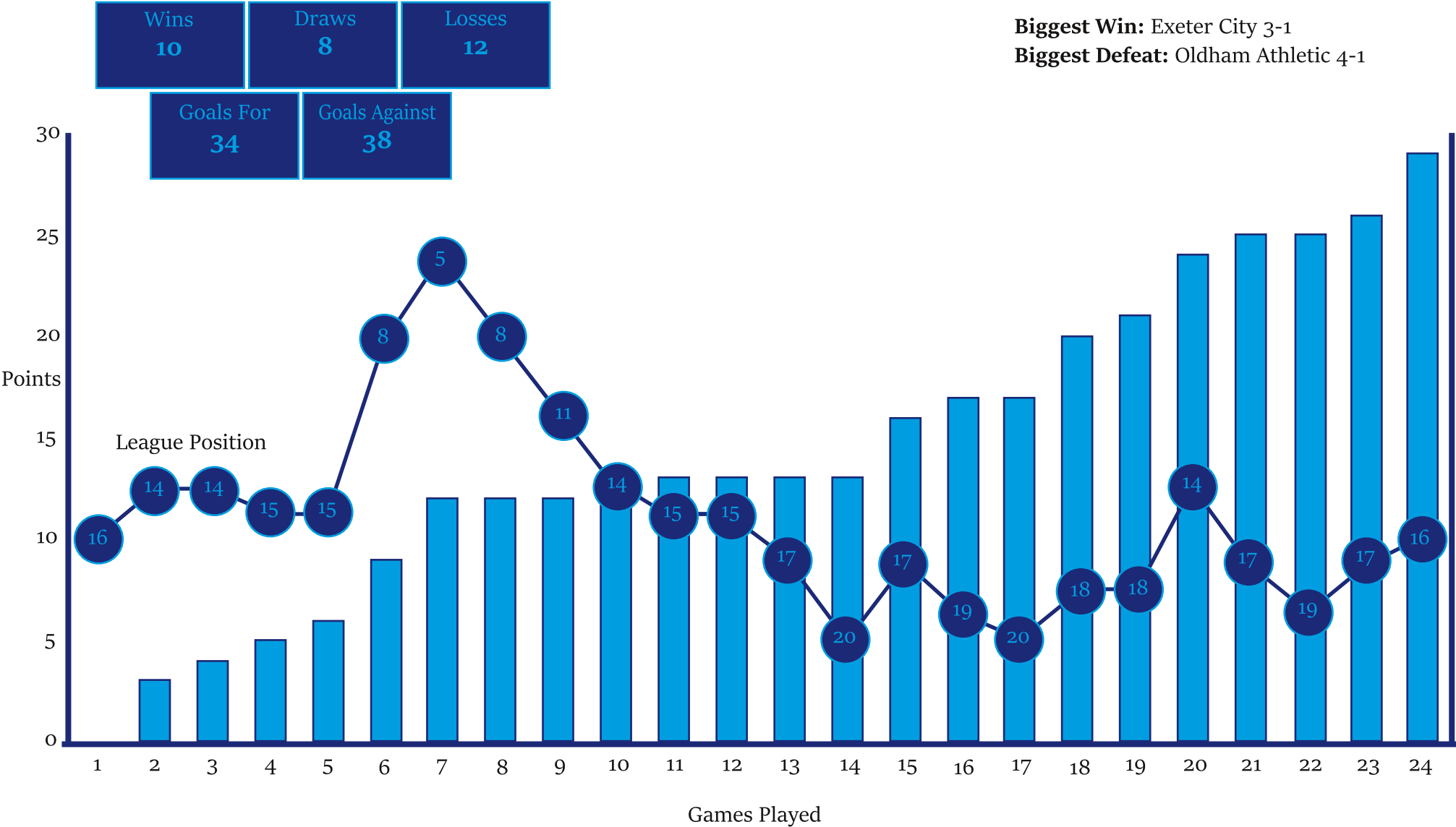
The past 12-18 months have not presented the stablest of environments for our manager to forge a winning team but there is now a lot more in place for Steven Pressley to take full advantage of getting things right. More than that, barring anything dramatic happening off-the-pitch, any success that can be achieved in the final few months of the season should be able to be taken into the next one.

As ever with Coventry City, there is as many reasons to be cheerful as they are to be fearful about what the future holds.

# The Season Thus Far

League Cup: 1st Round Exit  
FA Cup: 1st Round Exit  
Football League Trophy: Area Semi-Final Exit

Biggest Win: Exeter City 3-1  
Biggest Defeat: Oldham Athletic 4-1



# Vs Last Season

## Points Accrued

This Season



Last Season



Difference

-16

## Goals Scored

This Season



Last Season



Difference

-26

## Goals Against

This Season



Last Season



Difference

-9

## Overall Record

This Season



Last Season



Difference

Wins -4	Draws 0
Losses +5	





# Club-By-Club Progress



## BARNSELEY FC



## Barnsley

**Manager:** Danny Wilson

**Top Scorer:** Conor

Hourihane (11)

**Position (Predicted):** 17th  
(8th)

**Difference:** -9

Despite currently residing in the recesses of lower mid-table in League One, Barnsley fans may feel that progress is being made at Oakwell. After a long period of being relegation scrappers in the Championship, there were always going to be deep-running scars at the club that were not going to be solved quickly.

Barnsley have pursued a new strategy this season in putting the emphasis on developing young talent at the club, either purchased from the lower-leagues or produced by the academy. Just three players from last season are now regular starters this time around, a combination of upheaval in the summer and a young playing squad was going to take time to result in a settled team.

The star this season has been summer signing Conor Hourihane, who in half a season has netted just five fewer goals than in three seasons at Plymouth Argyle. Dale Jennings from the wing is starting to produce the form that made Bayern Munich take a chance on him. Sam Winnall was starting to look every bit the player who top-scored in League Two last season before a recent injury.

Although Barnsley's current league position does not look like a sign of progress, it is of course distorted by the games in hand that they have over other teams. Were they to win those two games they have over a few others, they could at least rise to 8th place. Their form has been patchy throughout the season but that is largely to be expected with a team with so many young players.

The minimum target for Barnsley this season should be at least a top-half finish but the play-offs are eminently achievable for them. The rest of the season may be viewed from the management at the club as a chance to lay down foundations for future challenges. Brentford last season showed that this can be a workable approach but whilst there is still something to reach for this season, Barnsley should not be written off.



## Bradford City

**Manager:** Phil Parkinson

**Top Scorer:** James Hanson  
& Billy Knott (6)

**Position (Predicted):** 5th  
(12th)

**Difference:** +7

The summer felt like the end of an era at Bradford City. With Nahki Wells long gone and key players such as Gary Jones and Nathan Doyle shepherded out of the exit door at Valley Parade, Bradford City looked to be at a crossroads. Their replacements had mostly been signed on the cheap thanks to a gamble on handing a massive contract to Aaron McLean failing to pay off.

At best, this season looked set to be a building year with an emphasis on playing more attractive football with younger players. Given how successful Bradford City under Phil Parkinson had been in playing direct football around the bean-pole James Hanson, there was the risk then that Bradford may have found themselves in a potential relegation scrap due to an identity crisis.

That has proven not to be the case with Bradford sneaking under the radar of late to find themselves in the play-off positions after the festive fixtures. The change in style has worked with Billy Knott in particular looking to be a real find as a dynamic, creative midfielder. Billy Clarke in attack is another who has impressed this season which has helped deal with the intermittent absences of James Hanson through injury.

The question is whether Bradford truly have the capability to mount a bona fide play-off push. Going for them is that they are now in a good position at the half-way point and there are not too many outstanding teams below them that they will be worrying about. Going against them is a lack of squad depth and a tendency to sometimes over-complicate things in the final third.

They seem equally capable of staying the course as they do completely falling off it. This season has been defined by inconsistency from every team outside the top four and it is making the play-off picture hard to call. Valley Parade can be a fortress at times and Bradford should be able to rely upon their home form which may be just enough.





## Bristol City

**Manager:** Danny Wilson

**Top Scorer:** Aaron Wilbraham (10)

**Position (Predicted):** 2nd (1st)

**Difference:** -1

Bristol City started the season in imperious form, avoiding defeat in their first 16 games before back-to-back defeats. After such an emphatic run, there was the danger that things could fall apart after a few bad results. Steve Cotterill though has continued his solid work from last season in making sure they have bounced back over recent weeks, that they are currently second is down to the game less they have played than Swindon Town.

The partnership of Sam Baldock and Jay Emmanuel-Thomas in attack looked to good for this division yet Steve Cotterill has built a winning team having sold Baldock to Brighton and only used Jay Emmanuel-Thomas as an injury-time impact substitute. Those two have been effectively replaced by Aaron Wilbraham and Kieran Agard who have 17 goals between them already.

That Bristol City have scored 42 overall goes to show what a fantastic team effort that it has been at the currently three-sided Ashton Gate. Cotterill introduced a spine for the team in summer by signing Luke Ayling, Mark Little, Korey Smith, Luke Freeman, Wade Elliott and his two star strikers. Add in the form of Aden Flint and Joe Bryan who were already at the club and a near-perfect deployment of the 3-5-2 formation goes to show the impact that a settled team and clear idea of how to play can have.

This has been a division that has mirrored a middle or long-distance running where the early pace-setter struggles to maintain their pace for the whole distance. Leyton Orient and Tranmere have both failed to secure promotion despite long early unbeaten runs which will be in the back of many Bristol City fans' minds. In contrast to those two, this is not a team giving the impression of over-performing and only Preston from their rivals have a manager like Steve Cotterill who has experienced promotion in the Football League. It may not quite be a procession but Bristol City should edge their way back into the Championship.



## Chesterfield

**Manager:** Paul Cook

**Top Scorer:** Eoin Doyle (20)

**Position (Predicted):** 7th (17th)

**Difference:** +10

Chesterfield have probably benefited this season from not being such heavy favourites in most of their league games. Last season in League Two they often had to scrape results due to opponents setting up to frustrate against Chesterfield who spent heavily in the transfer market last summer.

In contrast, this season has seen much teams give them more space to attack whilst budget restrictions prevented too many changes in the summer. They entered the season without a proven goalscorer after missing out on Michael Higdon but the surprise form of Eoin Doyle has propelled a solid team-unit to the fringes of the play-offs.

Aside from Doyle, Gary Roberts in attacking midfield continues to be a talismanic figure for Chesterfield. Sam Morsy and Jimmy Ryan in midfield add quality to some solid organisation across the rest of the pitch. Chesterfield do not give the impression of a side that has recently been in League Two and are competing toe-to-toe with the best in this division rather than sticking with a defensive game-plan.

It has been a tougher past few months compared to their excellent start of the season. Teams are wary of Chesterfield's threats and are giving up less space in behind once again, which has made it harder for Eoin Doyle to replicate that explosive early form. They will be limited in their ability to make quality additions in the January transfer window which will make it hard to challenge for a top-six position.

The season thus far though constitutes a massive improvement upon 2011/12 where they suffered relegation from this division, winning the Johnstone's Paint Trophy, despite having Leon Clarke and Franck Moussa in their ranks. There is the quality in this Chesterfield side to keep up with the play-off pace, but they would need to keep a fully-fit squad for most of the rest of the season.





## Colchester United

**Manager:** Tony Humes

**Top Scorer:** Freddie Sears  
(12)

**Position (Predicted):** 23rd  
(22nd)

**Difference:** -1

The decision to replace youth-team-coach turned manager Joe Dunne with youth-team-coach turned manager Tony Humes hardly seemed to be one to take Colchester to the next level. Under Dunne, Colchester had flattered to deceive, always looking a few results away from being one of the surprise teams in the division, only to go on damaging losing runs.

Early on, the appointment of Humes looked to be an inspired one with Colchester scoring plenty and winning a few games. However, a leaky defence has made that early run under Humes look much more like a honeymoon period than an inspired managerial appointment. A 6-0 defeat against MK 'Dons' in December has highlighted the weakness of this Colchester side.

What Colchester do have going for them though is Freddie Sears, a fairly reliable source of goals and players like Gavin Massey, Sanchez Watt and Rhys Healey who have all proven to be fairly potent attacking weapons at times in this division. In addition, the return of David Fox to the club complements a midfield that has the talented Craig Eastmond and Alex Gilbey to boot. It is not a through a lack of talent that has seen Colchester slip into the bottom four but a lack of experience which is really costing the U's.

The recent signing of Kaspars Gorkss was a stated attempt by Humes to add that experience that they have been missing throughout the season. The veteran Latvian is on a short-term contract and keeping him for longer could make a difference. Gorkss alone though might not be enough and the team need to get wins in order to avoid getting left behind by those sides improving in this division.

It will be a massive challenge it seems to keep Colchester United in this division. Tony Humes has a lot to prove that the decision to appoint him was justified, they need results right now, and fast.



## Crawley Town

**Manager:** Dean Saunders\*

**Top Scorer:** Izale McLeod  
(8)

**Position (Predicted):** 21st  
(23rd)

**Difference:** +2

\*Interim for John Gregory

It will not be noted by many, but the fact that it took Crawley until the 23rd game to fall into the bottom four is some achievement given the clear limitations of the squad at their disposal. Crawley are a hard club to gauge where their expectation levels are so it is hard to tell whether their fans are happy they have not been cut adrift at the bottom or are disappointed to see their club's first relegation battle in a long time.

With that being considered, it is hard to tell whether John Gregory had to make so many rather odd summer signings (mostly no-named youngsters and League Two journeymen) due to budget cut-backs or by choice. It seems to be a mix of both which adds further to the question of whether Crawley are currently over or under-performing currently.

John Gregory has now had to step aside in order to undergo open heart surgery and Dean Saunders has stepped into the fold. There are similarities between the management style of the two with both focusing on defensive organisation first but the move further adds to the uncertainty over what Crawley are expected to achieve this season and in what manner.

Aside from Izale McLeod and the young Welsh winger Gwion Edwards, there is little be the way of genuine quality for Saunders now to work with. The former Doncaster and Wolves man has talked about making his own signings in the January transfer window which will give further indication into just how much of a plan John Gregory's summer transfer business was. An interim manager making permanent signings would also add further oddity to an already odd club.

With teams above and below them in the table generally improving, I would not be surprised at all to see John Gregory's/Dean Saunders' Crawley Town end the campaign in bottom position. Where they go from there is anyone's guess.



## Crewe Alexandra

**Manager:** Steve Davis

**Top Scorer:** Marcus Haber  
(4)

**Position (Predicted):** 22nd  
(24th)

**Difference:** +2

It was a summer wherein Crewe lost a several key players and then were not able to replace them in the transfer market with no outstanding academy talent coming through either. Crewe started the season in woeful form and are only now starting to catch up for lost time with the rest of the league.

There are though signs of life at Gresty Road thanks to some useful loan signings from Steve Davis. The giant Uche Ikpeazu has returned to the club after a decent loan spell last season and gives them a presence in the final third. Nicky Ajose too has made an impact since making a loan move from Leeds United. It has though been an ever-rotating crop which has given a disjointed feel to Crewe's form this season.

The emerging George Cooper from the academy aside, the rest of Crewe's permanent players are mostly obdurate, solid, hard-working performers. In a division where they look to be slightly lacking in quality all over the pitch, this has made it difficult for Crewe to do little more than hope to catch teams out on the counter-attack. If Davis cannot secure Ajose and Ikpeazu in particular on longer-term deals, Crewe may struggle to continue an encouraging recent turnaround in form.

Either way, Crewe will be facing a difficult challenge to survive, with the overall impression being that they simply are not good enough player-for-player to compete with most in this division. With the likes of Yeovil, Leyton Orient and others around them in the league looking like improving, Crewe may struggle to keep up with the pace. There is though a siege mentality being build, Steve Davis will have to harness everything he can muster from that to survive another season at this level.



## Doncaster Rovers

**Manager:** Paul Dickov

**Top Scorer:** Curtis Main  
(6)

**Position (Predicted):** 15th  
(18th)

**Difference:** +3

The preparations for this season at Doncaster had been undermined by a failed takeover attempt from former Chairman John Ryan and One Direction star Louis Tomlinson who managed to fail the 'fit and proper persons test' from the Football League. It left manager Paul Dickov with the task of rebuilding a squad on around 50% of the budget that he had spent most of the summer preparing for.

At a time when most of the rest of the teams in this division had finalised their squads for the season, Dickov had to pick from the bottom of the barrel with limited resources to help Doncaster attempt to recover from last season's relegation from the Championship. An opening day win against fellow relegationees Yeovil proved to be a false dawn with Donny struggling to find consistency, particularly at home, thus far.

Recent wins over Swindon Town and us have shown that Doncaster still have some Championship quality in the squad and there must be questions raised against Dickov for taking so long to realise the talent at his disposal. Richie Wellens, James Coppinger, Harry Forrester and a few others are star players in this division but have perhaps been restricted by an overly cautious game-plan from Paul Dickov that is best suited for teams fighting survival rather than those with bigger ambitions.

Doncaster sit in the group of teams who will be equally concerned about avoiding the drop as they are about challenging for the play-offs at this stage of the season. They have the ability to put a run together and make a dash for those patently achievable final places in the top six but there is the sense that Dickov will be first and foremost looking to ensure survival after a difficult summer. Despite some clear mitigating circumstances, you would imagine that the season thus far has been a frustrating one for Doncaster fans to endure.



## Fleetwood Town

**Manager:** Graham Alexander

**Top Scorer:** Stephen Dobbie, Josh Morris & Jamie Proctor (4)

**Position (Predicted):** 12th (16th)

**Difference:** +4

It was an impressive start to the season for Fleetwood, who like Chesterfield seemed to have been thriving on not having to break down massed ranks of opposition defences. Graham Alexander's style of management could have been accused of being cautious given the way Fleetwood ground out results during their promotion campaign in League Two but that looked in the early weeks of this season to be more of a means to an end than a deliberate choice.

Fleetwood have over the course of the season dropped back into mid-table and are just quietly getting on with their business. Antoni Sarcevic, who impressed as their creative fulcrum last season, has been a mute presence on the field of play and the big summer signing Stephen Dobbie has disappointed to the degree of being a substitute to the pacey Matty Hughes, a player who has never scored in the Football League.

They are not exactly a side set up to defend but Fleetwood that has meant that their lack of goals has not been costing them as much as it would other teams. There have been signs in recent weeks that Graham Alexander is finding a way to get more goals from his team, especially Blackburn loanee midfielder Josh Morris who now has three in two games. They would be a dangerous prospect in the final months if they could continue to add goals to their game.

Whilst Fleetwood are one of the better financed teams in the division, their reputation in the Football League means that anything above avoiding a relegation battle will be seen as a massive achievement this season. They can enter these final few months of the campaign knowing that anything they do now will be a bonus in their first season in the third-tier. They may well decide to take stock of their progress over the past decade for the second half of the campaign and look to mount a more concerted challenge for the play-offs next season.



## Gillingham

**Manager:** Peter Taylor

**Top Scorer:** Cody McDonald (9)

**Position (Predicted):** 20th (13th)

**Difference:** -7

After keeping Gillingham comfortable in League One last season after being handed a mish-mash of a team playing with no confidence from Martin Allen, Peter Taylor was looking to stamp his mark on Gillingham this time out. Experienced staggers such as Adebayo Akinfenwa and Adam Barrett were shown the exit door and in came younger talent such as Luke Norris and John Egan.

Around 27,000 Coventry City fans saw first hand that Peter Taylor had built a useful side at Gillingham that were capable of competing with most in this division. Poor away form prevented them from building momentum early on and that recently seeped into their home form, sending the Gills right to the precipice of the relegation zone at the half-way stage. Recently, Peter Taylor has been paying the price for an inability to squeeze out results with his job.

His successor looks to have some job on his hands when he is appointed. There are useful players there in the form of Bradley Dack, Jermaine McGlashan and Cody McDonald to be a very handy side at this level but this is a young team that is struggling to learn some of the dark arts of the game. Additionally, Gillingham are going to struggle to compete financially in the January transfer window and with teams below them finding some form, things could get worse still.

By no means a poor side but they seem to be letting the season get away from them with decent performances without getting results. Although Gillingham have been a second-tier in the not-too-distant past, it often feels like they are a club that will always struggle at this level. Looking at the goal difference of the bottom five teams shows that they are just slightly better than relegation material but many of those below them will have momentum in the second-half of the campaign that Gillingham do not seem to have.





## Leyton Orient

**Manager:** Fabio Liverani  
**Top Scorer:** Chris Dagnall (6)  
**Position (Predicted):** 19th (5th)  
**Difference:** -14

It has been an utter shambles at Leyton Orient this season. Francesco Becchetti's summer takeover was supposed to help build upon the excellent work Russell Slade had done at Orient on a shoestring budget. Instead, that money has achieved the exact opposite in turning Leyton Orient from a stable, over-performing side into an unstable, under-performing one.

Slade has since left this car-crash of a season a long time ago. The circumstances of his departure were farcical in the way he successfully defended his job after Becchetti put pressure on it, only to stick two fingers up at the chairman to take the Cardiff City job mere weeks later. Since then, things have accelerated into a full-on omnishambles with three different managers being handed the job before Fabio Liverani, a man with just six games prior managerial experience, stepped into the breach.

Almost none of Leyton Orient's summer signings have played up to expectations. Darius Henderson has been distinctly average and Jobi McAnuff is a shadow of the dangerous, pacey winger he was a couple of seasons ago. Last season's heroes in Romain Vincelot, Mathieu Baudry and Lee Cox have been the better performers once again but the shambles and a couple of injury crises have left Leyton Orient around the relegation places for much of the season.

The Christmas period though has been kind to Leyton Orient and Fabio Liverani, with three straight wins lifting them from 23rd to 19th. If Liverani can make this recent up-lift more permanent, there are all the ingredients there for a much more successful end to the season than the start. Orient may be one of those classic Football League teams that mounts a promotion push despite struggling for the opening part of the season. The focus right now will firmly be on escaping the lower echelons of the division before any greater ambitions can be had.



## Milton Keynes 'Dons'

**Manager:** Karl Robinson  
**Top Scorer:** Benik Afobe (18)  
**Position (Predicted):** 4th (6th)  
**Difference:** +2

Milton Keynes 'Dons' have perhaps viewed the lack of quality in League One this season to end a few seasons of austerity-led mid-table anonymity. The summer saw Karl Robinson finally add the quality in the final third that the fake Dons had been missing in recent times and that fire-power has been the headline-grabbing focus this season at Milton Keynes, that and a League Cup hammering of Manchester United.

In particular, Benik Afobe in attack and Dele Alli in midfield have added quality and purpose to some often pleasing to watch MK 'Dons' build-up play. Afobe has pace and power and has finally added goals to his game that had been missing during earlier loan spells away from Arsenal. Alli, although not a new signing, is a player whose development over the past 12 months has been staggering. A product of a very good academy in Milton Keynes, Dele Alli is fast becoming one of the best, dynamic midfielders outside of the Premier League.

There is genuine squad depth at MK 'Dons' this season. If Afobe is out, they have proven League One goalscorers in Will Grigg and the currently loaned-out Tom Hitchcock to call upon. Carl Baker, Daniel Powell, Danny Green and Dean Bowditch all compete for two ancillary attacking roles where just one of those four would be integral for most other League One sides.

There is always that elephant in the room when talking about MK 'Dons'. On the one hand, their creation is a sad indictment of the way English football has become. On the other, AFC Wimbledon are an established League Two club and there is an argument to say that the damage caused by the creation of MK 'Dons' has been repaired. As they look set to move up in English football, there is a need to remember and hope that it was just a one-off. The concern is that every piece of success that comes their way justifies their existence.



## Notts County

**Manager:** Shaun Derry

**Top Scorer:** Garry Thompson (7)

**Position (Predicted):** 10th (15th)

**Difference:** +5

12 months ago things looked desperate for Notts County. The appointment of Shaun Derry had only resulted on modest improvement with the team regularly matching winning streaks with losing streaks. Survival was scraped out in the final weeks but the summer saw the spine of last season's team extracted with only four of those who lined up on the final day of last season available to Derry at this moment in time.

What should have led to another season of struggle instead saw Shaun Derry somehow continue that momentum from the end of the previous season. Notts County have spent most of the season within touching distance of the play-offs and have been one of the surprise packages. Superhuman levels of work ethic and team spirit has allowed the likes of Mike Edwards, Gary Jones and Garry Thompson, who were unwanted by other League One sides, to form the basis of an impressive start to the season.

Shaun Derry has also used the loan market to his advantage with the additions of Nottingham Forest duo Louis Laing, centre-back, and Stephen McLaughlin, a winger, adding class to supplement the foundation of gritty hard-work. Like his managerial mentor Neil Warnock, Derry has also instilled some of the dark arts of football into his side which has made them nasty to play against and helped them grind their way to a number of victories in tight games.

Whilst there is a sense that Notts County have perhaps benefited from several teams below them with far greater resources under-performing, that would be harsh on the assured way with which they have been led by a talented young manager. Their form over the past few weeks has been less impressive although there standing right now owes much to games in hand held over others in the division. Notts County's exceptional team spirit makes them a team that should never be written off.



## Oldham Athletic

**Manager:** Lee Johnson

**Top Scorer:** Jonathan Forte (13)

**Position (Predicted):** 14th (14th)

**Difference:** 0

Having lost their star player from last season in Jonson Clarke-Harris, which added to the previous loss of James Tarkowski months earlier, Oldham Athletic were perhaps in danger of finding themselves stuck in another season of struggle. Despite being arguably weaker than at the same stage 12 months ago, Lee Johnson has made Oldham into a better team overall.

Much of this season has seen Oldham play some fantastic football but fall just short of mounting a full-on push for the play-offs. The form of Jonathan Forte, a player who did not play a single game last season, has been vital for them with the pacey forward scoring 13 of their 29 goals this season. Forte has struggled for fitness for much of the season and recently Oldham have lost 4-0 to Yeovil and 7-0 to MK 'Dons' with the defence struggling to compensate for a toothless attack.

A number of teams in this division who may feel they are currently in something of a false position given the games in hand situation, recent heavy defeats give the impression they are where they deserve to be. On paper, the potential signing of Ched Evans should bolster Oldham's hopes of returning to their impressive early form and takes the goal-scoring burden of Jonathan Forte. Evans will not be the player he was when he began his prison sentence and it may take time to get him to full match fitness. Not only is there no moral case for giving Evans another chance, there may not even be a footballing one.

The season is finely poised for Oldham, they could brush some recent poor form or let their season slip away. Whilst they are unlikely to fall into a relegation battle, it would be certainly be a disappointment for this season to end without a feeling of progress after such a good start. They may be hinging a lot of their hopes now on treading through the minefield of the Ched Evans situation unharmed.



## Peterborough United

**Manager:** Darren Ferguson

**Top Scorer:** Marcus Maddison & Conor Washington (6)

**Position (Predicted):** 11th (3rd)

**Difference:** -8

There is growing pressure on Darren Ferguson's job at Peterborough this season, they were relegated from the Championship by the narrowest of margins two years ago and were eliminated in the play-off semi-finals last time around. Thanks to some strong financial support from their chairman and a smart transfer policy, it is taken as read that Peterborough should be challenging for promotion in the third-tier and to be outside of the play-off zone at any stage of the League One season is considered under-achievement at London Road.

Losing Britt Assombalonga was never going to be helpful for their chances despite the sizeable financial return they got for their star striker. The form though of two signings from last season finally coming good, Conor Washington and Kyle Vassell, looked to have offset the loss of Assombalonga. In addition, Marcus Maddison's signing from Gateshead looked to be inspired with the winger doing his best Cristiano Ronaldo impression with some eye-catching goals from set-pieces. However, those three have been in and out of form too often to compensate for Peterborough's classic leaky defence, leaving the Posh in mid-table.

For Darren Ferguson this season may be his final chance to prove that he is a good manager and not just a lucky one to have found himself at one of English football's most stable and innovative clubs. The recent loan signings of Aaron McLean and Craig Mackail-Smith hint at a yearning for the older, simpler days for Peterborough and Darren Ferguson where goals and promotions came so easily. But those two appear to be shadows of the players there were whilst previously at the club.

Peterborough were expected to challenge for automatic promotion in a weak looking League One this season, instead the focus is now on taking one of those two play-off spots which still look up for grabs. They are within touching distance of the top six and are not a million miles away from actually getting there.



## Port Vale

**Manager:** Robert Page

**Top Scorer:** Ben Williamson (9)

**Position (Predicted):** 8th (19th)

**Difference:** +11

The first few weeks of the season had seemed to have made a mockery of the 'second season syndrome' tag that had been applied to Port Vale after a surprising top-half finish last season. Things unravelled for Port Vale and Micky Adams fairly quickly with the former Sky Blues manager leaving with a sense of staleness to the club. Their current league position under new manager Rob Page suggests that a new sense of direction has been found, although they are elevated by having played one or two games more than many around them in the table.

Page's job upon appointment was to oversee a transition at Port Vale from the direct football under Adams with veterans, to more expansive play with younger players. With some genuine quality in midfield in the form of Michael O'Connor, Chris Lines and Michael Brown and some pace in attack through Mark Marshall, Dany N'Guessan and Ben Williamson, there is a decent side at Vale Park at the present moment. They could surprise many once again by the end of the season.

Performances rather than results are the priority at Vale Park and there is no pressure at this moment in time for Page to achieve instantaneous success. This season may now simply be about assessing who they want to keep in their squad going forwards and laying down some foundations for future improvement.

The pressure of getting sucked into a relegation battle that was there a month or so ago has been dissipated. This provides Page with a great environment to learn the ropes in his first managerial role. His first few months have demonstrated some potential but it is still early days before it can be described as anything more than a good start.





## Preston North End

**Manager:** Simon Grayson

**Top Scorer:** Joe Garner  
(11)

**Position (Predicted):** 3rd  
(2nd)

**Difference:** -1

Preston North End have started this season in almost exactly the same manner in which they ended last year, which is to say that they have been relentlessly consistent. Over 2014, no League One side picked up more points than Preston so it may be disappointing for their fans that they have so rarely been in the top two of the division during that period of time but they are right in the mix for promotion this time around.

Grayson has overseen a slight change-up in style compared to last season. Instead of playing a simple 4-4-2 with the emphasis on remaining solid for 90 minutes, a 4-3-3/4-2-3-1 has been implemented with a greater emphasis on retaining possession. This has allowed more technical players like Neil Kilkenney and Paul Gallagher to take the lead at Deepdale this time around.

They have relied heavily though on the goalscoring exploits of Joe Garner. The former Carlisle and Watford striker has picked up a season-ending injury and had to be quickly replaced by both Jermaine Beckford and Sylvan Ebanks-Blake. Those two should more than compensate for the loss of Garner but both have been surviving on past reputations in recent years and need to recapture their motivation to play the game. Still though, Simon Grayson has made a name for himself in getting League One teams promoted and that gives Preston an edge in a tight race for promotion.

They are though a less explosive side than those around them in the table and that could mean that points will be hard to win in tight games. But Simon Grayson has been in this position before and been able to maintain a solid pace no matter what the time of the year has been. Promotion is a distinct possibility but the play-offs would not be a place that would hold too much fear for Grayson and Preston.



## Rochdale

**Manager:** Keith Hill

**Top Scorer:** Matthew Done  
(13)

**Position (Predicted):** 9th  
(21st)

**Difference:** +12

Rochdale's rise to the upper echelons of League One this season has been shocking as it has been thoroughly deserved. This should have been a team worrying about not just relegation but finishing bottom of the division altogether. Having lost last season's top-scorer Scott Hogan to Brentford and replaced him with Calvin Andrew, a player who has scored 13 goals in a nine-year professional career. Keith Hill though has built a team on limited resources that has been more than simply competitive at this level.

Keith Hill seems to have a way at Rochdale that transforms bad players into good ones and decent players into great ones. Look no further than leading scorer Matthew Done who has been converted from an emergency left-back in League Two into one of League One's leading goalscorers as a false 9. Stephen Dawson was a surprising signing from Barnsley in the summer and has been a dominant force in this division. Ian Henderson as well has been an inspirational creative fulcrum for Rochdale like he was last season.

It does seem inevitable that Rochdale will eventually fall back into a position more befitting of their resources. That process has proven to be more gradual than expected with many still finding their travels to Spotland a tough time. Rochdale are now able to play the rest of the season unburdened by expectations and that could be to their advantage if the division remains tight in the final months.

Just staying in this division is a remarkable achievement for Keith Hill and Rochdale. It proves that in a League One discourse that is often dominated by talk of budgets, simple things like good tactics and man-management are a much more powerful resource. Rochdale can enjoy the rest of the season having already achieved what they set out to do.



## Scunthorpe United

**Manager:** Mark Robins  
**Top Scorer:** Paddy Madden (11)  
**Position (Predicted):** 18th (9th)  
**Difference:** -9

Having recorded a world record unbeaten run and promotion from League Two after taking the reins at Scunthorpe United, Russ Wilcox proved this season to be rather out of his depth when faced with a division of teams with equal or better resources available to them. Wilcox was fairly quickly disposed of early in the season to be replaced by Mark Robins, who has since led a slowly-building charge into mid-table.

As in his spell with Coventry City, Robins has done simple things to get the Iron back on track this season. The loan signings of Liam O'Neil from West Brom and Luke Williams from Middlesbrough have looked particularly astute as Robins has once again demonstrated his ability to spot young talent from clubs in higher divisions. Progress was slow in the early weeks but Scunthorpe are now unbeaten in the league since the beginning of November.

After leaving Coventry City to take another shot at the Championship with Huddersfield, Scunthorpe might be the ideal club for Mark Robins to work at. He has both the financial backing that he lacked with Coventry City as well as less of the expectations that he faced at Huddersfield. Robins has always been accused of being a mid-table manager, Scunthorpe are a club who will not be ashamed by that tag and may help him to achieve more than that during his time there.

This season is far from over for Robins and Scunthorpe and they could be one of those teams that people talk about as coming from nowhere to end up with a top six finish. A lot of that will depend upon whether they can extend some key loan deals and if a couple of quality additions can be made in January. They are not quite out of the woods in terms of a relegation battle but Scunthorpe can look towards the rest of the season with optimism.



## Sheffield United

**Manager:** Nigel Clough  
**Top Scorer:** Marc McNulty (9)  
**Position (Predicted):** 6th (4th)  
**Difference:** -2

Typical Sheffield United, they are in the play-offs, they are having another brilliant cup run but there is still the sense that they are underachieving somehow. In fairness, that momentum they ended last season with lasted less than 90 minutes into the new season with a home defeat to Bristol City followed by a loss at Sixfields against the Sky Blues. Last season's key men were arguably Harry Maguire and John Brayford who are both no longer with the club and have not been properly replaced by manager Nigel Clough.

Clough is continuing his reputation as a 'nearly man' in football and despite the cup runs and a decent league position appears to be holding his team back somewhat. Similar to his spell with Derby, he has brought in some very good players and played some quite nice football. Yet Clough makes frankly bizarre decisions sometimes as a manager, such as playing with either too many strikers or none at all. He also rarely sticks with the same team for too long and that has led to Sheffield United dropping a number of points needlessly.

Despite being in the play-off spots, they have been cut adrift by the division's top four teams by quite some distance. They showed last season that nothing is decided in this league until the very end but they should not have been in a position of needing another super-human run of form to make or break their season. At the moment, Nigel Clough is not getting the best out of the talent he has at his disposal.

Sheffield United have a poor record in the play-offs and many fans of the club will not see a play-off spot as the achievement that most other Football League fans do. If Clough cannot break that hoodoo this season in the play-offs, he may find himself under more pressure in his job than there is currently. This is a club that is actually too big for this division and will find its way out if it eventually, Nigel Clough can either realise that potential or watch on as somebody else does.



## Swindon Town

**Manager:** Mark Cooper  
**Top Scorer:** Andy Williams (15)  
**Position (Predicted):** 1st (11th)  
**Difference:** +10

After falling short of the play-offs despite a very good run at the end of the season, Swindon Town have built on that disappointment and now sit top of the table. A summer defined by transfer inactivity, the loss of Ryan Mason and Alex Pritchard after the end of their loan deals and a court battle over the ownership of the club should have destabilised Swindon, instead Mark Cooper has built on the promise the team showed last season.

There have been so many key performers for Swindon thus far. In defence, Nathan Thompson and Nathan Byrne add pace and the ability to play from the back. In Massimo Luongo and Yaser Kasim they have the two best passing midfielders in the division, with Ben Gladwin and Louis Thompson both providing quality in supporting roles. Up front, they have Michael Smith, Jonathan Obika and Andy Williams having a three-way shoot-out to be the club's (and the division's) top-scorer.

A severe lack of squad depth beyond their immediate match-day squad might prove to be Swindon's one major flaw heading into the crucial final months. Yaser Kasim and Massimo Luongo head to the Asian Cup on international duty which takes a lot away from how Swindon Town play. The talented Chelsea youngster John Swift has been brought in on loan and with Ben Gladwin and Louis Thompson already at the club, the loss of Kasim and Luongo might not be the blow it would have been at other clubs.

Whilst their current table-topping position is a slightly false one due to the quirks of the calendar, Swindon have achieved a lot thus far against the odds. Not only have Swindon been winning this season but they have been doing so with panache. They have come close to promotion from this division a number of times in the not-too-distant past but this season has a special feeling about it and Swindon must now take full advantage of that.



## Walsall

**Manager:** Dean Smith  
**Top Scorer:** Tom Bradshaw (14)  
**Position (Predicted):** 13th (20th)  
**Difference:** +7

Just another standard season for Dean Smith at Walsall. Lose a host of key players in the summer, replace them with players that few people know too much about, start slowly, improve as the season goes by. The loss of last season's top-scorer Craig Westcarr and key defender and captain Andy Butler should have been a hammer blow for Walsall's chances this season, once again Dean Smith is a miracle worker at the Bescot.

If there is one player to pin Walsall's season thus far on, it should be Tom Bradshaw. A player who once went nearly two years without a goal, Bradshaw has been an absolute revelation in grabbing 12 goals for his club whilst also having playing a pivotal role in the build-up play. Honourable mentions should also go to Romaine Sawyers and Michael Cain in midfield. Sawyers is a frustrating player at times but can make things happen at the drop of a hat in the final third. Cain's presence at the club in central midfield has coincided with a remarkable run of form in recent months.

There is potentially also much more to come from Walsall, currently sitting handily in touching distance of the play-offs. Last season's star Sam Mantom is returning to full fitness and the like of Jordan Cook and James Baxendale have been rapidly improving as the season wears on in as wide players. Walsall's academy continues to produce useful players which this season has given Dean Smith some decent squad depth to utilise.

Walsall have been quietly improving over the course of the season and they will fancy themselves as capable of challenging for the play-offs, especially after an eye-catching 3-0 win over MK 'Dons'. They are still far from the finished article but have been growing steadily more consistent throughout the campaign. Once again avoiding danger despite the restrictions at the club should always be regarded as an achievement but Walsall will now be one of the sides hoping for much more whilst the play-offs remain an achievable prospect.



## Yeovil Town

**Manager:** Gary Johnson

**Top Scorer:** Kieffer Moore  
(4)

**Position (Predicted):** 24th  
(7th)

**Difference:** -17

For tiny Yeovil Town to be bottom of this division at the half-way stage should still be considered a massive underachievement considering their recent time in the Championship. That time in the second-tier should have provided this club with much better resources than ever before to compete around the top of the third-tier but this season may now rank as a rare opportunity at this club missed.

Not only do they have the resources to be doing much better but Gary Johnson is an experienced manager who should have known the pitfalls that relegated clubs can fall into. However, his all-or-nothing style of management, once the reason why Yeovil got to the second-tier in the first place, has now manifested itself into being one of the biggest reason why Yeovil are now underachieving. There has been an extraordinary player turnover at the club already but results have continued to underwhelm.

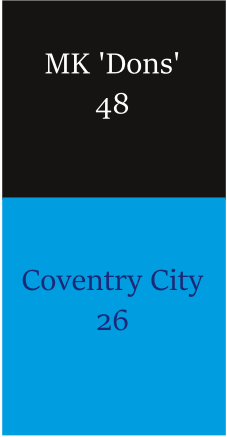
The most recent tranche of loan signings, including a certain Jordan Clarke, looked to have made a difference. Yet the team once again lost form over the Christmas period and now begin the second half of the season bottom of the table. There is clearly the talent in the squad to be doing much better which may lead to the natural conclusion that the manager is the root cause of the problems.

But Yeovil Town are a unique club and it has perhaps been an attempt to act less like a small club punching above its weight and more like any normal club that has been the deeper cause of this season's struggles. Gary Johnson is very much the living embodiment of Yeovil Town and maybe a change of manager would take them yet further away from the qualities that recently took them into the second-tier. A return to some of those old qualities may still save them from the ignominy of double relegation.

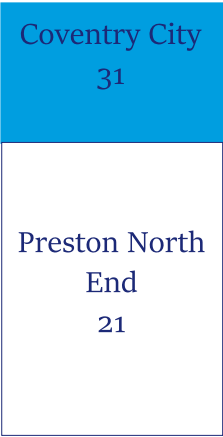


# Some Interesting Stats

Goals Scored



Goals Conceded



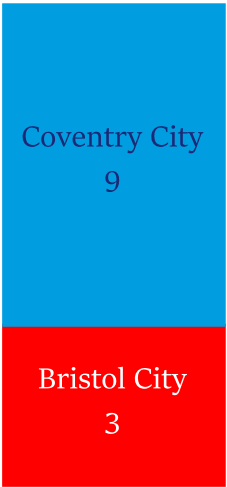
Goal Difference



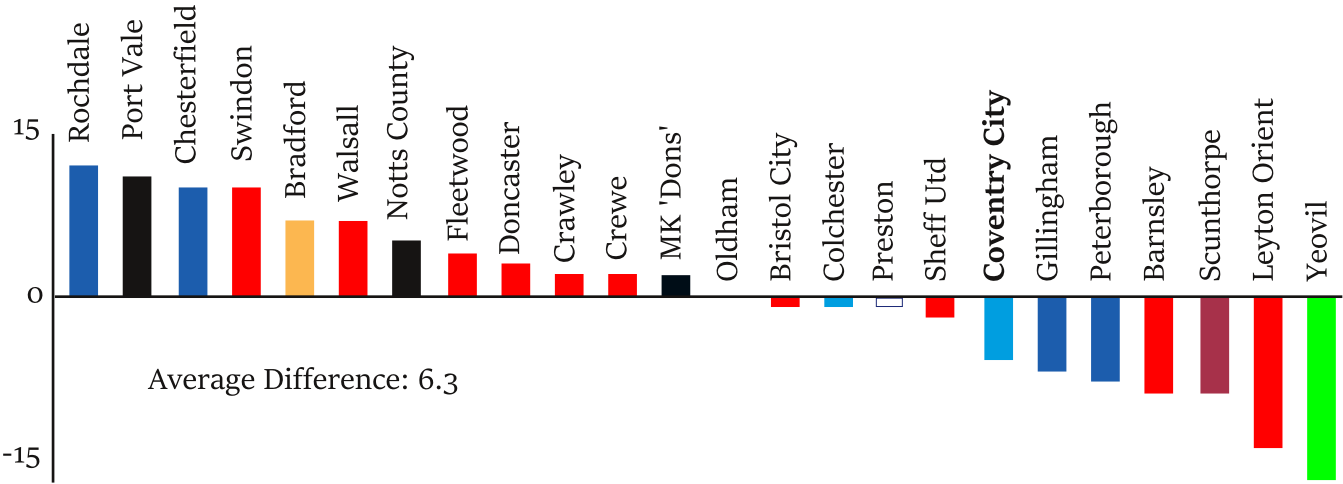
Wins



Defeats



Pre-Season Prediction Accuracy





# The Players

29 different players have thus far been used in the league this season, with 33 being used in all competitions. By contrast, just 23 players were used at this point last season in all competitions, 22 in the league.

There has been little sense of who are strongest team is and who are best players are. Some have not been given a fair chances, others too many, whilst others have shown in flashes what they can give to the team. Perhaps these inconsistencies area as a result of the constant changing of players, tactics and approaches.

This section then is a look at what each member of the first-team squad, as well as several now departed loan players, have offered the team this season.

I have assigned player ratings to each individual player, but it is of course a subjective measure. In

particular, ratings out of 10 in football are no exact science due to the way in what number people believe is a player's starting mark until proven otherwise.

Alongside a brief description of each player's season, the ratings should at least give an indication as to how well individual players have done so far and how they compare to the rest of their teammates.



## Ryan Allsop

**Apps (Goals):** 25(0)

**League:** 22(0)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

Despite performing some promising early displays, Ryan Allsop suffered badly during the team's poorest run of form this season. He was making silly, basic mistakes whilst simultaneously failing to command his penalty area. He may feel that he was not protected adequately by his defence, but he did cost the team some soft goals.

After being dropped at the end of October, the Bournemouth loanee's time at the club looked to have reached an end. He was handed a second chance thanks to some nervy displays from Lee Burge and has looked an entirely different, more confident player who would be welcome at the club longer-term.

Score: 5/10



## Lee Burge

**Apps (Goals):** 6(0)

**League:** 2(0)

**First Appearance:**

Cardiff City 13/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Worcester City 09/11/14

The headline reason why Lee Burge failed to take his chance to become Coventry City's number one keeper was a needless sending-off which led to our cup exit to Worcester City. But he had put in several poor performances where he made different kind of basic errors and played with an incredible amount of nerves.

Perhaps not getting first-team football last season set him back in his development after a decent loan spell with Nuneaton. He has a long contract here and he may well get another chance but it would surely do him well to find regular football somewhere before the end of the season.

Score: 3/10



## Reice Charles-Cook

**Apps (Goals):** 0(0)

**League:** 0(0)

**First Appearance:**

n/a

**Last Appearance:**

n/a

Brought into the club this summer as someone with decent potential who could develop, Reice Charles-Cook has got some all-important playing time this season whilst at Nuneaton. There he demonstrated an agile shot-stopping ability but had to be recalled after Lee Burge's suspension in the Worcester City game.

He may be disappointed not to have been given a chance since then but he has been handed a contract extension which indicates that Pressley sees Charles-Cook as being able to play for this club in the near future. Another loan spell, perhaps to League Two, might be in order to help further his progression.

Score: n/a



## Jordan Clarke

**Apps (Goals):** 14(1)

**League:** 11(1)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Bristol City 18/10/14

After being ever-present last season, mostly at centre-back, Jordan Clarke was surprisingly used at right wing-back earlier on in the season and did not appear to be fully comfortable in that role. Clarke has since been loaned out to Yeovil Town to allow Pressley to bring Aaron Martin to the club and has been a stand-out performer at Huish Park.

His performances there have even led to rumours that a Championship side may come in for him in January. It will be sad to see him leave in this manner. There are though other home-grown right-backs coming through and it might just be time for him to leave.

Score: 5/10





## Ryan Haynes

**Apps (Goals):** 23(1)

**League:** 18(1)

**First Appearance:**

Cardiff City 13/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

The emergence of Ryan Haynes this season has been one of the few reasons to get excited about this club. The youngster looks unrecognisable from the kid who was sick on the pitch on his debut two years ago. After grabbing an assist in his first appearance of the season, Haynes has more-or-less been first-choice.

He was probably aided in those early weeks by the switch to 5-3-2 which meant that he was less defensively responsible and could focus on getting forward and delivering the accurate crosses that are the hall-mark of his game. He still has plenty to learn in both the attacking and defensive aspects of his game but he is improving.

Score: 6/10



## Seb Hines

**Apps (Goals):** 9(0)

**League:** 9(0)

**First Appearance:**

Gillingham 05/09/14

**Last Appearance:**

Peterborough United 25/10/14

The story we will always tell is that Seb Hines was signed from under the noses of Birmingham City. That may not be the case but is probably the only exciting thing that Hines' loan spell brought to the club. He was though solid and quite classy during the times that he was not injured or second-choice.

His only run in the team coincided with a complete loss of form due to the absence of Reda Johnson in the side. Hines was clearly a very talented footballer but simply not what the team needed to help them through a sticky patch. Injuries ended his loan early and unfortunately, he is unlikely to be missed or remembered at the club.

Score: 4/10



## Reda Johnson

**Apps (Goals):** 15(5)

**League:** 13(4)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Port Vale 13/12/14

Hailed as a hero by some, an accident waiting to happen by others but the stats speak for themselves and the team has failed to win a league game without Reda Johnson in the team. Head-strong, physically dominant, Reda Johnson is probably the only player in the squad able to force himself on to a game.

He looked a class apart for this level of football in his early appearances but we have since learned the hard way that he is a player who cannot be depended upon. His red card against Scunthorpe completely derailed our season and was exacerbated by an injury. He does add a missing dimension to our game but he is League One for a reason.

Score: 6/10



## Aaron Martin

**Apps (Goals):** 9(0)

**League:** 8(0)

**First Appearance:**

Leyton Orient 01/11/14

**Last Appearance:**

Chesterfield 28/12/14

Steven Pressley finally signed Aaron Martin at the third time of trying in October, in a loan swap deal for Jordan Clarke. Whilst he was struggling to make an impression at Yeovil, he has been nothing other than solid and assured during his first few months here.

All signs are that Martin will soon be a permanent member of the Coventry City squad and he might be a rare case of a good Steven Pressley signing. His partnership with Andy Webster has helped the Scot play his best football for the club and going forward gives us something to build the team upon heading into the rest of the season.

Score: 6/10



## Matthew Pennington

**Apps (Goals):** 7(0)  
**League:** 6(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Walsall 29/11/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

Matthew Pennington arrived at the club as loan cover due to injuries to Aaron Phillips and Jordan Willis and has generally been a solid performer. His early showings delivered plenty of promise but nothing more to convince fans that his place would not be better used in the long-term by home-grown players.

His performance alongside Jordan Willis in central defence in the recent away win against Walsall, demonstrated that he may have a useful role still to play at the club. We should already have the players to cope without Pennington but he has come in and displayed an attitude that few Premier League loan players seem to have.

Score: 5/10



## Aaron Phillips

**Apps (Goals):** 12(2)  
**League:** 9(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Swindon Town 30/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

The departure of Cyrus Christie in the summer should have opened the door for Aaron Phillips to cement a first-team spot. Determined in the tackle and confident in both the attacking and defensive aspects of full-back player, Aaron Phillips is surely only a run of 5-10 games away from establishing himself as first-choice at the club.

Injuries are starting to seem a problem for Phillips, he should already be on twice the appearances for the club that he is right now and you wonder how long that can be put down to bad luck. Young defenders need games to improve and Phillips needs a run of fitness to prove he is worth backing for the long-term.

Score: 5/10



## Danny Pugh

**Apps (Goals):** 7(0)  
**League:** 5(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Bradford City 09/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Bristol City 18/10/14

The signing of Danny Pugh in the summer was a gamble following the decision to release the well-liked Blair Adams. Pugh has spent most of his time at the club on the treatment table which has meant that Ryan Haynes has had to be first-team ready from nearly the start of the season. Fortunately for Pressley in particular, Haynes' displays has meant the gamble has paid off.

Pugh produced two assists on his debut which seemed very promising but he has looked solid but unadventurous in subsequent appearances. Injuries have prevented him from competing for a first-team spot with Ryan Haynes but he is decent back-up if fit.

Score: 4/10



## Andy Webster

**Apps (Goals):** 25(0)  
**League:** 21(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Bradford City 09/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Chesterfield 28/12/14

Whilst he has had his days, Andy Webster has been something of a disappointment in his 18 months at the club. He arrived as an experienced central defender and a Scotland international to boot but has not offered the leadership that many expected of him.

Webster started the season solidly enough in a back three but looked exposed in a back four later on. He has benefited from the arrival of Aaron Martin which has taken the pressure off him to lead the back-line. If he can keep up his current form, then we have a very talented and reliable defender on our hands. 32 is not a bad age for a defender and he may still have some years left to offer.

Score: 6/10





## Jordan Willis

**Apps (Goals):** 25(0)  
**League:** 19(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Bradford City 09/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

For much of his Coventry City career, Jordan Willis has been on an upward trajectory. A solid and versatile defender, Willis started the first 22 games of the season and was even named captain against Crewe in October. That run of games though saw Willis experience his first genuine dip in form as a first-team player and he became a target for opposing teams.

An injury left him out of the firing line for a few weeks and that spell out may do him the world of good at this stage in his development. A strong showing from the start in an inexperienced back-line against Walsall is perhaps a sign that he can continue back on that earlier trajectory.

Score: 5/10



## Adam Barton

**Apps (Goals):** 13(0)  
**League:** 10(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Bristol City 18/10/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

Last season ended for Adam Barton with a game-less loan spell with Fleetwood Town and he returned with his exit from the club looking inevitable. However, the lanky midfielder was eventually recalled after impressing in the under-21 team and has played a key role for the team ever since returning for the Bristol City game in October.

He looks a much calmer and assured presence than the nervy, brittle player that he has been for most of his spell with the club. Perhaps being faced with the prospect of falling out of professional football entirely has provided him with a much-needed wake-up call. His ability to retain possession gives the team a platform to build from.

Score: 5/10



## Mohamed Coulibaly

**Apps (Goals):** 6(0)  
**League:** 4(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Wycombe Wanderers 02/09/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Bristol City 18/10/14

The one pacey wide player in the squad, Mohamed Coulibaly was a victim in the early weeks of the season of Pressley's move to a 5-3-2 system. When he finally did get the chance, he showed some promise with his excellent dribbling ability that offered more variation to the team's style of play.

It soon became apparent though that Coulibaly had little idea what to do with the ball once he got it. The promise of those early displays soon became frustrating when no end product was apparent. Whilst the team has been in need of a pacey winger, Coulibaly's return to his parent club in November was not too much of a loss.

Score: 4/10



## Billy Daniels

**Apps (Goals):** 4(0)  
**League:** 2(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Cardiff City 13/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Wycombe Wanderers 02/09/14

It is fair to say that Billy Daniels' Coventry City career has not gone the way that many thought it would after scoring that brace against Bristol City on the first game at Sixfields. His career has been doubly hindered by not establishing him in a specific position as well as persistent injury problems.

He has made only four appearances this season, with his last being made in early September. Whilst reportedly he has been impressing in central midfield for the under-21 side, there is currently little the team lacks that Billy Daniels can offer. It is not over yet for him but he needs first-team football either here or elsewhere.

Score: 4/10





## Jack Finch

**Apps (Goals):** 16(0)  
**League:** 11(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Cardiff City 13/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

After being almost a complete unknown to most Coventry City fans at the start of the season, Jack Finch has established himself as a useful member of the first-team squad. Capable of playing at both centre-back and central midfield, Finch's tall frame and assured technique on the ball suggest a bright future ahead for the youngster.

He is though very young still and there are times where he has played safety-first as a result. His technical ability and versatility should mean that there is a role in the team for him in both the present and the future but he could do with adding a toughness to his game, which he has at times shown.

Score: 5/10



## John Fleck

**Apps (Goals):** 27(0)  
**League:** 23(0)

**First Appearance:**  
Bradford City 09/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

At his peak last year, John Fleck had everything, energy, the ability to dribble past players but also able to read the game and intercept passes. Fleck's defining ability though is his passing range, he can dictate the tempo with short passes but can open games up with long-range passes.

Fleck though is a shadow of the player he was before the departure of Leon Clarke. Whereas before he was part of a seamless transition from defence to midfield, he has been found wanting when needed to bear more of the team's creative responsibility. There have been times this season where he has shown flashes of being the player he once was, but it has not been often enough.

Score: 5/10



## James Maddison

**Apps (Goals):** 11(1)  
**League:** 5(1)

**First Appearance:**  
Cardiff City 13/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Doncaster Rovers 26/12/14

Maddison looks to be a once-in-a-generation talent at Coventry City. His technical ability is absurd and means that his height is not a problem as opposing defenders are unable to get close to him. Maddison has already shown the ability to unlock some experienced defences at his young age.

There have been a couple of signs that he is not quite ready mentally to bear the pressure of regular first-team football. He has twice been booked for diving and subsequently faded out of the game. As talented as he is, it would be nice if we had senior creative players not being shown up by Maddison as much as they currently are.

Score: 6/10



## Jim O'Brien

**Apps (Goals):** 28(4)  
**League:** 24(4)

**First Appearance:**  
Bradford City 09/08/14  
**Last Appearance:**  
Walsall 03/01/15

Brought in to symbolise everything that Steven Pressley wanted to see in a footballer, hard-working, committed to the cause and a born winner. Jim O'Brien has thus far given pretty much everything he could give to the team on those measures.

There has been a dip in form of late and perhaps it has not been coincidental that it has occurred after assuming the captaincy. He has a tendency to take on too much responsibility rather than focus on his specific role in the team. Overall though he has really shone through as a cut above and he certainly has the ability to really give the team an edge.

Score: 6/10



## Danny Swanson

**Apps (Goals):** 16(0)

**League:** 13(0)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

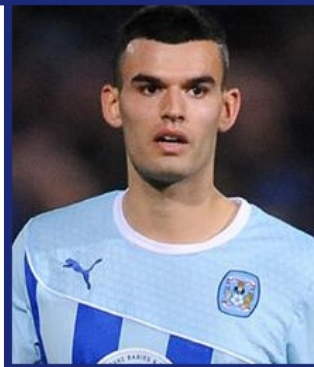
**Last Appearance:**

Fleetwood Town 20/12/14

Swanson appeared to be a direct replacement for Franck Moussa in the side this summer. Unfortunately for us that has meant that we have seen only flashes of ability mixed in with periods of absolute anonymity. At his best, he gives the team a cutting edge in the final third but that has not been on view often enough.

This has been the story of Swanson's career at other clubs and Pressley must believe that eventually Swanson's ability will shine through. At the moment, he has made little impression on the first-team and he could struggle to get into the side if two or three January signings are made.

Score: 4/10



## Conor Thomas

**Apps (Goals):** 17(0)

**League:** 14(0)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

Conor Thomas has had a strange season thus far at Coventry City. After starting the opening game of the season, Thomas was dropped and then back in the team by the time of the return to Coventry. He played an important role in the Peterborough comeback, Thomas barely played before being recalled at the end of December.

The disappointment for many with Conor Thomas is that he has never fulfilled the potential that once made Liverpool take a look at him. Many either want their midfielders either making telling passes or crunching tackles but Thomas is more of a decent all-rounder. He does offer variation to our current crop of midfielders.

Score: 5/10



## Simeon Jackson

**Apps (Goals):** 20(3)

**League:** 18(3)

**First Appearance:**

Barnsley 19/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

Billed as the proven, pacey goal-scorer who was going to replace Callum Wilson in the team, Simeon Jackson's goal return is a disappointment thus far. After struggling for fitness early on and used as a late substitute, Jackson has only really shown flashes of being the player that he once was.

Jackson has not been helped by playing in a team that struggling to create chances. The goals he has scored have been well taken and Jackson is also surprisingly good at linking the play which makes him a good strike partner. If he can build a partnership with Gary Madine, the two together should be too good for this league.

Score: 5/10



## Gary Madine

**Apps (Goals):** 10(3)

**League:** 8(2)

**First Appearance:**

Leyton Orient 01/11/14

**Last Appearance:**

Chesterfield 28/12/14

Gary Madine is the closest Pressley has come to replacing Leon Clarke in the side. Despite his frame, Madine is more of a penalty area striker who just so happens to be very tall rather than being an out-and-out target-man. He has given the team a definite focal point since joining on loan which the team had lacked.

His permanent signing, or loan extension, is a high priority this January and clinching that deal could define the rest of the season. Despite his skill-set and stature, Madine is a striker that needs support from the rest of the team. He should prove to be too good for this league but that should not be an excuse for others not stepping up.

Score: 6/10





## Josh McQuoid

**Apps (Goals):** 19(5)

**League:** 14(3)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Fleetwood Town 20/12/14

McQuoid was always going to have a hard job winning over Coventry City fans after taking a few weeks to decide on joining the club despite a shocking recent record for a striker. Whilst he left the club as the joint top-scorer, he was often a back-up player for the team and is unlikely to be missed.

He often looked lost on the pitch, unsure of quite what he should be offering to the team. McQuoid is a solid footballer technically and also worked hard for the cause. He is though a footballer lacking in the intelligence required to make use of his skill-set.

Score: 5/10



## Shaun Miller

**Apps (Goals):** 11(2)

**League:** 10(1)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Oldham Athletic 21/10/14

One of the oddities this season has been the lack of chances Shaun Miller has been handed by Steven Pressley. Both of his goals for the club were classic goal-poacher efforts displaying his intelligence as a striker. Not only that but he often added urgency to the team's play whenever he was introduced.

It seems that something about Shaun Miller has not taken to Pressley and that has seen him sent out on loan to Crawley. Miller's lack of goals in Sussex will have done nothing to convince Pressley that his decision to freeze him out of matters was unfair. It seems like his Coventry City career is over before it really started.

Score: 5/10



## Frank Nouble

**Apps (Goals):** 15(4)

**League:** 12(3)

**First Appearance:**

Gillingham 05/09/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

Frank Nouble will always be remembered for his debut goal in that Ricoh Arena return game and has been something of a cult hero ever since. He is an absolute menace for opposing teams when he is on form, quick, strong and a good dribbler of the ball, Nouble has the skill-set to be a 'complete' centre-forward.

He is however also frustratingly inconsistent and is selfish in his play in often a quite counter-productive way. Nouble creates havoc though and even if he is not playing well, he is in the thoughts of opposing defences. Nouble has the talent to be far too good for this level, like others in the squad, it is about finding a level of consistency.

Score: 5/10



## Marcus Tudgay

**Apps (Goals):** 11(1)

**League:** 10(1)

**First Appearance:**

Bradford City 09/08/14

**Last Appearance:**

Walsall 03/01/15

Marcus Tudgay has essentially been a walking joke for much of his Coventry City career. Just days after being made available for transfer though, Tudgay put in a strong showing against Walsall, getting onto the score-sheet in the process.

It seems though that despite that scoring his first goal for the club, Tudgay will have no further role to play this season. He is perhaps a victim of the return to the Ricoh Arena as his work-rate and experience would have been invaluable at Sixfields. Compared to other options in the team, particularly if Madine can be kept, Tudgay should not prove to be any loss.

Score: 4/10



# Key Stats

## Appearances



	Overall	League
Jim O'Brien	28	24
John Fleck	27	23
Ryan Allsop	25	22

## Goals



	Overall	League
Reda Johnson	5	4
Josh McQuoid	5	3
Jim O'Brien	4	4
Frank Nouble	4	3

## Assists



	Overall	League
Jim O'Brien	4	3
Ryan Haynes	3	2
John Fleck	2	2
Gary Madine	2	2

# Most Used Team



Based on appearances in all competitions



# The Manager

A calendar year can be something of an arbitrary measure of a football team's progress but Steven Pressley will be thankful that it is after a poor 2014. 11 league wins, 15 draws and 20 defeats would result in 48 points over the course of a league season and would only have been enough to ensure survival by one point based on last season's league table.

This time last year he had one of the most potent, attacking teams that Coventry City has had since relegation from the Premier League, and also quite some time before then. Just three players who formed the basis of last season's brilliant team remain at the club in the form of John Fleck, Andy Webster and Conor Thomas. It took 46 games after the first half of last season to match the wins and goals achieved in that brilliant period.

There are mitigating circumstances that Pressley

can point towards in the case of his defence. Leon Clarke, perhaps not enthralled by the prospect of playing in Northampton, sulked his way into a move to Wolves leaving the team without its most pivotal player. Whilst most teams at this level would have struggled to replace a striker of that calibre, it was a near possible task whilst at Sixfields.

The team was left seriously weakened and by the end was playing simply to survive. It is a dreaded thought to consider what would have happened had Callum Wilson and Joe Murphy not been keeping the team together for those final months. The contrast between the performances in the first and second half of last season masked what a remarkable achievement survival still was in the circumstances Pressley faced.

Pressley learned during those gruelling final months of last season that he could not build a



team to play with his preferred set-up with the resources left available to him. To compensate for the goals lost at one end of the pitch, the team had to concede fewer at the other. A defensive set-up just about got us through the season and as we remained at Sixfields over the summer, further weakened by the losses of Callum Wilson, Carl Baker, Franck Moussa and Joe Murphy.

That first 'home' game of the season demonstrated to me that Pressley had developed a plan that would work well with more limited but harder-working players. That win over Sheffield United was hard fought with workers like Jim O'Brien, Marcus Tudgay and Josh McQuoid putting in some real shifts.

That plan may have kept us out of danger this season, although a lack of goals would have been a concern. Everything had to be up-rootsed though due to the return to Coventry. Over-night, expectations shifted from survival to a play-off push and there would be pressure for the team to start winning from the off.

Although those opening two wins against Gillingham and Yeovil were fairly comfortably won, they were achieved though by creating fairly minimal chances. Pressley's hope must have been that with greater confidence, we would improve from the platform of a solid defence. Reda Johnson's red card against Scunthorpe and subsequent injury absence transpired to be pivotal to a gelling side's sense of identity and confidence.

Without Johnson we became a side that could be bullied in defence and unable to create chances at the other end of the pitch to make it a more even game. It took seven winless league games for Pressley to finally accept that his pre-season plans had been rendered inadequate by this season's sudden change in circumstance.

The 3-2 victory over Peterborough United looked to have been a sign that lessons had immediately been learned by the manager and that we could move forward as a team. The win was followed up by the loan signings of Gary Madine and Aaron Martin as Pressley looked to have found

some decisiveness. A 2-2 draw away to Leyton Orient was followed by an embarrassing cup exit to non-league Worcester City in farcical circumstances.

The impassioned press conference that followed that defeat demonstrated the pressure Pressley was under. His initial plan for the season had been shattered and he was struggling to balance finding a new one whilst continuing to get results. The players were blamed but when a manager has been in situ for as long as Pressley had been at that point, the buck should have stopped at him.

What has followed that Worcester City defeat has been a slow process of recovery. Whilst explosive changes to the squad were promised, it seems that Pressley has U-turned into realising that there is already more than enough quality within the squad already. In that regard, it is probably a blessing in disguise that January was still some distance away from when he embarked upon that post-Worcester rant.

There has been quite a big turnover in both players and tactics this season but it appears that Pressley is slowly finding what works. In the main, the defensive record of the side has improved and they now seem to be starting to grow in confidence at the other end of the pitch.

The recent home form is still a concern for Pressley and that needs addressing quickly as there are a number of Coventry City fans who are either losing or have already lost faith in him. It feels that if he can improve the team's home form, there will be a lot more patience for his reign at the club.

Pressley needs to use January and the next month or so to both finalise his approach going forwards and demonstrate that it can be successful when fully utilised. He has had mitigating circumstances for not being able to put across his ideals of the game over the past 12 months, but the excuses have now been taken away one-by-one.

There is a feeling now that it is time to finally get

back into the business of football at Coventry City and that makes Pressley's job easier. The way he built that first great team in a catastrophic summer or the way he handled the homecoming game, demonstrate that perhaps Pressley is actually the character he can give this club an identity and a sense of forward momentum that it has long lacked.

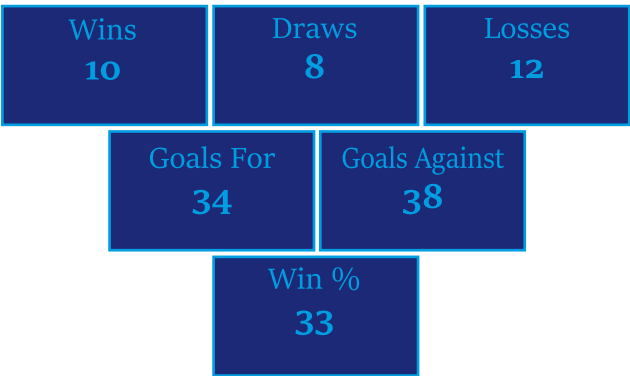
Like many Coventry City fans, I am desperate to see Pressley be a success at this football club. Another manager may have handled the circumstances that were thrown his way over the

past year better. But we have changed manager way too often as a football club and rarely for the long-term good.

Not only do we need to end a cycle of chopping-and-changing managers but Pressley appears to be doing a job at all levels at this club that will only be realised in the long-term. I fully believe that if Pressley is around in year four of the four-year deal he signed in September, we will be a much better club as a result.

# Record

This Season



Overall



# Half-Way Score

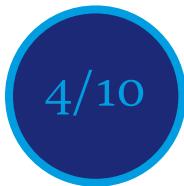
Signings



Player Development



Tactical Nious



Overall





# Who To Keep

The first half of the season has been defined by plenty of changes in the first-team. The only time there has been a settled line-up this season came in the opening month. Since then, it has been a near constant search for that right combination of players.

The doubts raised against this squad have, in the main, not been centred around a lack of ability but about having the right character. So often this season it has appeared that the players have surrendered in games where they have fallen behind, yet the Peterborough game is perfect example of a game being turned on its head through force of character.

The obvious temptation with an under-performing team is to completely tear it apart and start again. Yet as the Mark Robins era showed, players who once looked like all-round bad players can improve with confidence and

stability around them.

A lack of consistency in team selection must have played a role in our general lack of consistency. It takes away the reference point that each player has for their own performance. It has also meant that the team has constantly had to adapt to new players and new tactical systems which takes time to do.

This section then is focuses on which players in the squad can potentially form a winning team, more specifically, which players fit into Steven Pressley's ideals as a manager. It is from there that it can be assessed what is missing from the squad that could be found in the January transfer window.



# Goalkeepers

If it is a choice between Ryan Allsop and Lee Burge, the former has undoubtedly proven himself as much the better keeper than the latter. There have been persistent rumours that more experienced alternatives are being considered for Ryan Allsop which would be disappointing considering just how much his game has improved since being recalled to the team in November.

Lee Burge might benefit now from a loan spell away from the club. Pressley may now reflect upon not allowing Burge any first-team football at all last season as a mistake, although the club's financial situation probably made bringing in another back-up not a viable option.

If Burge is kept as number two, then Reice Charles-Cook deserves a chance for more first-

team football in a loan spell away from the club so that he can build on that good spell with Nuneaton.

Ryan Allsop has continued to impress since his recall to the team and his loan extension would surely be justified. The one reason why Pressley may be reticent to do so could be if there is a possibility of signing a longer-term keeper permanently. It may be worth first trying to keep Allsop on a permanent contract.



# Defenders

With Seb Hines having already left the club, it leaves four players competing for two centre-back spots. Reda Johnson, Jordan Willis, Andy Webster and Aaron Martin would all be first-choice at most other League One sides, with Matthew Pennington and Jack Finch both having proven to be able deputies. It may be a case of finding the two that work best together than simply the most talented duo.



Reda Johnson has shown at times that he can be a dominant force at centre-back which can be a platform for the rest of the side to build confidence. That

decision to take the penalty against Worcester City demonstrated the best and worst of Reda Johnson, taking the lead but letting the heart take heed over the head. Since then, Johnson has been

used at left-back where his impulsiveness is less of a liability for the team, but will still lead to mistakes against sides with pace in wide areas. Now that the team has won in the league without him, he may now be a less essential member of the squad.

Jordan Willis started the season as one of the first names on the team-sheet but probably suffered the worst whilst the team completely lost any kind of form. With Andy Webster and Aaron Martin forming such a solid partnership, and Martin looking certain to make his loan move permanent, Jordan Willis may now have to be patient in waiting for his first-team chance. A strong showing in the recent win at Walsall shows though that Pressley may still have a big decision to make over who forms our centre-back pairing in the final few months of the season.

Whilst Matthew Pennington seems only to be here on a short-term basis due to injuries to

homegrown options at right-back, some strong showings at both right and centre-back shows that he could be a useful option for the rest of the season. Whilst Phillips should probably already be first-choice, his issues with injuries never quite seem to leave him behind which could further cement the desire to keep Pennington for a longer-term loan basis

Counting against Phillips again is Pressley's stated desire to have height in his defence. With Ryan Haynes having pretty much established himself on the left-side, Pressley may worry that playing Phillips would take away some physicality to the defence. In that regard, Jordan Willis, or even Jordan Clarke should he stick around, could move ahead of Phillips in the right-back slot in this team.

The left-back scenario is far less complicated, Ryan Haynes or Reda Johnson with Danny Pugh

## Midfielders

It feels like a real much of a muchness in the centre of the park. There are so many players in our midfield that like to wait for the game to come to them rather than making things happen themselves. There is a need to add variation to our midfield which means that one or two talented players will surely now have to accept a role as an unlucky loser in this scenario.

The most talented of them all and someone who we should in theory be building our team around is John Fleck. At his best last season, he could do everything you could want from a midfielder, except score. His shortcomings as a creative midfielder have been more apparent since the departure of Leon Clarke and the promise he offers the team is beginning to become a source of frustration rather than hope. With his contract up in the summer, there is an argument now to move on from John Fleck. If he wants to stay here, or at least guarantee a decent move away, he now needs to offer the team something tangible.

available as an emergency measure. Whilst Johnson and Haynes seem to complement each other when used in tandem, the preference must surely be for Haynes to become unassailable first-choice by the end of the season, particularly as Johnson is out of contract at the end of the campaign.



Adam Barton's return to the team has come with a defined role for a player who previously did not appear to know what he is trying to achieve on the football pitch. As a deep-lying midfielder standing at 6 ft 2, he offers protection to the defence and his metronomic passing gives the team a platform to build from. Furthermore, he has demonstrated at times that when he finds confidence he potentially has more to offer with his long-range shooting than John Fleck.



With a midfield of Adam Barton and John Fleck surely too lacking in urgency to be effectual, there is a need to add someone who offers something different in the central area. Jack Finch has shown some promising signs of being a decent box-to-box player but is in the early stages of his development still. Conor Thomas is the most different midfielder we have and it would

be a massive bonus if he could return to last season's form, especially if John Fleck joins him in doing so.

Jim O'Brien and Danny Swanson both in theory can play in the middle but have played their best football for the team out wide. Jim O'Brien is perhaps our only goal-scoring midfielder and has scored all of his goals this season as a wide-midfielder, keep him there where some of his technical shortcomings are less apparent. Swanson has been very good on occasion but too often anonymous, he needs a few big performances in a row before the end of the

## Strikers

For much of this season we have had six first-team strikers which is clearly way too many. Joint top-scorer Josh McQuoid has returned to Bournemouth and will not be too badly missed due to the other options available in the squad. Shaun Miller probably deserved more of a chance than he was given but we can afford to let him go without losing too much from our attacking options.



A lot of hope this season has been based around securing Gary Madine on a permanent basis. The deal seems to depend upon other clubs not making an offer before fringe players can be offloaded. Madine is probably the closest Pressley has come to

replacing Leon Clarke and it feels like Madine could really thrive as a central figure at our club. There are some attitude issues and the team can become slightly one-dimensional when he plays but his ability and the promise of an improving team should overcome those two doubts.

Simeon Jackson has demonstrated on occasion that he can be a top performer at this level of football, as his reputation prior to joining the club suggested. He has formed useful strike

season but is still worth having some faith in.

Finally, it would be nice to see more of James Maddison this season. He looks to be a real once-in-a-generation talent with a jaw-dropping level of technical ability. On talent alone he is good enough for the first-team but has plenty to learn before too much responsibility can be placed upon him.

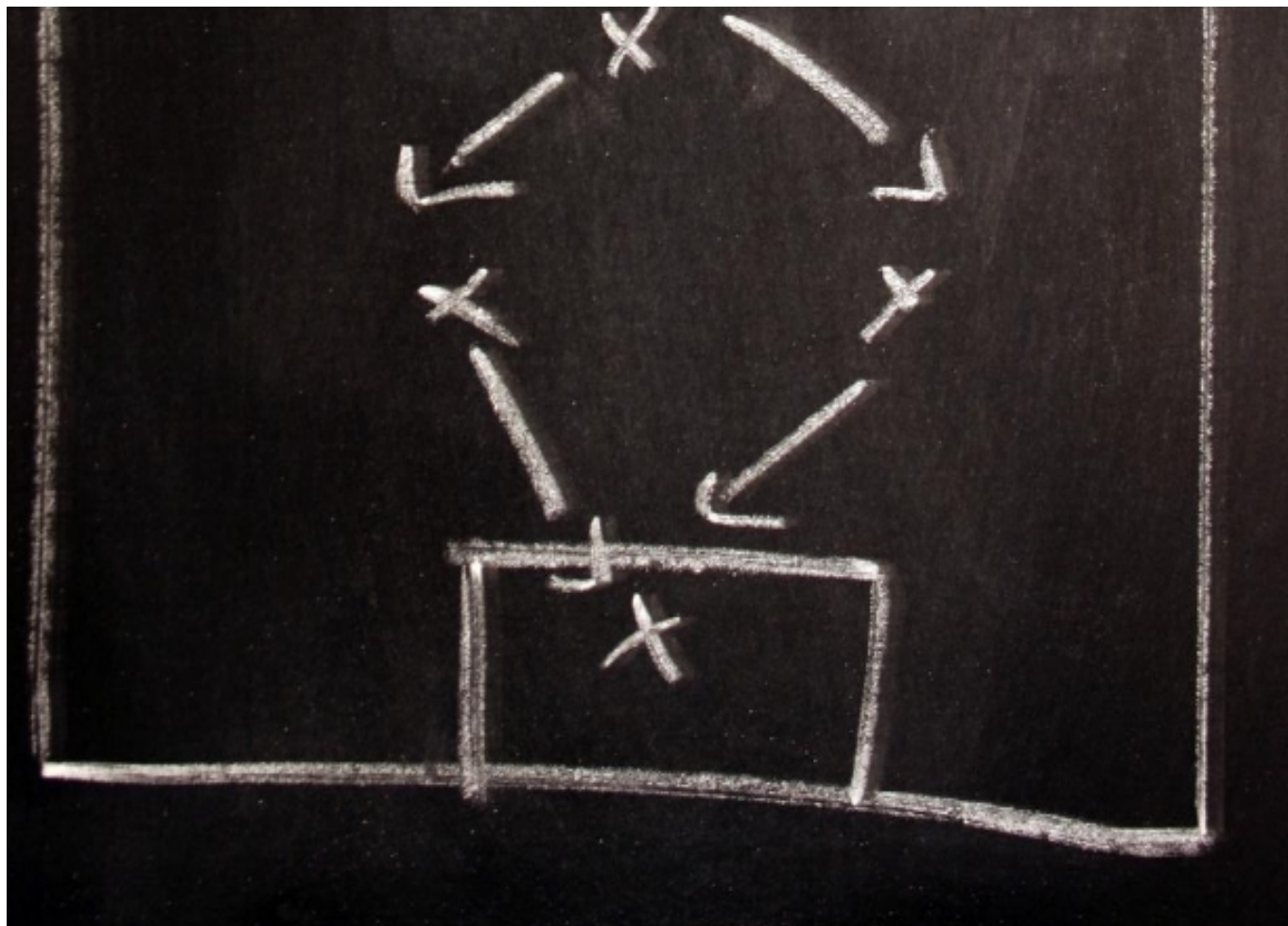


partnerships with Frank Nouble, Josh McQuoid and Gary Madine but has been asked to create his own chances too often and that has kept his goal tally down. That should improve over the course of the rest of the season.

It is a flip of a coin whether Frank Nouble stays any longer at this football club. He has shown he can be far too good for this level of football on his day but that has not been often enough. He has shown versatility and ability in recent weeks as a left-sided midfielder which may improve his prospects of staying here.

Talking of players who have improved their prospects of staying at the club, Marcus Tudgay. His goal against Walsall and all-round good performance may convince Pressley that he has a role to play. If he becomes the difference between keeping Madine or not, there is surely no debate over the choice to keep Tudgay.





## A New Strategy

Taking forward who we want to keep in the squad, the next step should not simply be about signing players who fill gaps left in the squad but finding an overarching strategy that can improve those already here and making sure those that are signed fit in seamlessly. Looking at the top half of this division, most of the teams spent the past 6-12 months establishing a playing style that they have utilised this season.

Barring a decision to bring in an experienced keeper in place of Ryan Allsop, the personnel in defence is unlikely to be altered. There is still a debate to be had it seems over what our best back four looks like, but it seems that whoever plays there has the ability to make an impact on this league.

Midfield is a bigger problem, we certainly have enough players in that area of the pitch but together they do not seem to form the basis of a

cohesive and dynamic unit that can protect the defence and support the attack. We need to find creativity and purpose first and foremost in that area, John Fleck and Conor Thomas are the closest we have to providing that at the moment. A genuine winner in the centre of the park may well prove to be a valuable addition to the overall team dynamic though.

Although his form dipped for quite some time recently, Jim O'Brien is our right midfielder and captain. There appears to be a vacant spot on the left where we could bring in either someone with pure pace or the ability to link with Ryan Haynes. Swanson could offer the link-up play so is worth a bit more patience. Pace then should be a priority in the transfer window but Pressley does seem to prefer intelligent or hard-working players out wide and pacey wingers tend not to be either of those.

The club should be doing everything in its power to secure Gary Madine longer-term. Not only is he a good player for this division but we would be set back the past two months that we have spent trying to find the best way to utilise him. It may not be the disaster everyone is predicting were he to leave, but when you have the opportunity to add a good striker, you should probably take it.

The overarching theme of our performances for most of the season has been a lack of cohesiveness. A lack of a settled team has meant that players have had to adapt their performances constantly depending on who their teammates are.

Our best spells over the past few years have generally come when there have been pre-existing combinations across the team. This was instituted as a strategy first during Mark Robins' reign when we there was clear links between full-back and winger, the two central midfielders and the whole team and the striker. Pressley then built on this last season by continuing those wide partnerships and then having that axis between Jordan Clarke in defence, John Fleck in midfield and Leon Clarke in attack.

It makes the game more simple for players if they know that they have a team-mate that they can use as a reference point on the pitch. Since the departure of Leon Clarke, the same starting line-up has rarely been used in consecutive games, only twice this season. On the most basic level, players want to know where the need to be standing on the pitch and not having a settled line-up may have played a role in incohesive attacks and sloppy defensive errors.

Looking at the possible partnerships that we can have, Webster and Martin in central defence looks like one and Madine and Jackson in attack could potentially be another. It gives us a platform but the next step is to look at partnerships that can link across the team, particularly involving the midfield.

Jim O'Brien tries very hard but is someone who would really benefit from having a partner at

right-back who can reduce O'Brien's desire to try and do everything for the team. Aaron Phillips seems the most natural one for me and it should now be about giving the two as many minutes together as possible.

Ryan Haynes and Reda Johnson do work well together on the left and it would allow our good luck totem, Johnson, to be on the pitch if he cannot fill one of the two centre-back roles. Haynes seems better as an attacking weapon from left-back but he still needs to develop the defensive side of his game. Furthermore, a more attacking left-sided midfielder could also open up more space for Haynes to exploit, Nouble or Swanson could be that player but both are frustratingly inconsistent.

There is more than enough talent already here to build a team that could still achieve something this season. The risk with making yet more signings is that we will have to allow a number of games to pass us by to integrate them into the side.

Given Pressley's poor overall record in the transfer market, the sense of risk of the unknown in making new signings grows. If Pressley wants to stay at this club long-term, he will need to finally prove that he has learned from his prior mistakes. He will no longer have the excuse of not being able to bring in his preferred targets.

Perhaps the best way though of increasing the trust in Pressley's record in the transfer market could be working to improve those he has already brought to the club. Some managers are able to rely purely on being good in the transfer market rather than actually improving players, if Pressley though wants to demonstrate he is a long-term man, the focus should be on making players better than they already are.

Whichever approach he chooses, Pressley has more than enough in place now to be able to institute meaningful change over the next month or so. The priority from this point forward though should not simply be about putting the best team together for the rest of the season but the laying down the foundations for a better side

for seasons beyond.

Players will undoubtedly come and go but everything is now pretty much in place to have a dynamic that can adapt to new players that are either signed in the transfer market or brought through the club. It seems we finally seem to

have a lot of things in place at the club to be able to the foundations of a team that can stand the test of time better. For Pressley, the challenge is demonstrating that he is the man to put those things in place.

# Possible Team Going Forward





# Looking Ahead - League One



## The Race for Promotion

Bristol City's remarkable early season pace was always going to be difficult to keep up and their return to normal form has now given us a race for the division's top two spots. Similarly to last season, an elite pack of teams has broken away from an inconsistent chasing pack meaning that at least two from MK 'Dons', Swindon Town, Preston North End and Bristol City will be playing Championship football next season.

MK 'Dons' currently sit in fourth with a game in hand over most of their rivals. They have been impressively scoring goals throughout the team and racking up some pretty high scores of late. Sometimes scoring loads of goals is not necessarily the sign of a promotion-winning team and questions remain over Karl Robinson's ability to finish the job off.

Despite recently moving top of the division,

Swindon Town might well have similar question marks against them. They have a thin squad that will be tested by the loss of Yaser Kasim and Massimo Luongo in January to Asian Cup duty.

Preston North End have evolved this season into a more patient, passing team. They have weathered the loss of Joe Garner very well but may need to step into a higher gear to move into a top two spot.

Bristol City still seem best placed to last the distance. They have recovered from a two-game losing streak, will surely make a few further additions to an already impressive squad in January and have a manager who has won promotions in the past. League One has often been a league though that has favoured late finishers over early starters.





## The Play-off Battle

Two of the top six places seem to have already been taken by the leading four teams in this division. However, the chase for those final two places is wide open with essentially every team above the bottom five with ambitions of ending the season with a trip to Wembley.

Sheffield United have been inconsistent this season but have possessed enough quality to see them through. If they can find another gear, they should be ensure a third play-off spot in four seasons.

Bradford City currently lead an ever-changing group of overachieving teams and are coming into some impressive form of late. Like many other overachievers, lack of squad depth may prove to be their undoing. Similar things can be said of Notts County, Chesterfield and Rochdale.

Peterborough United are in a decent position right now but similar to Sheffield United, will now be hoping to step into gear in the second-half of the season. Whether they do so or not

seems likely to decide Darren Ferguson's future at the club.

Port Vale, Fleetwood, Walsall, Oldham and Doncaster are in decent mid-table positions and will be feeling that they are only a good run of form from putting themselves into contention.

The Sky Blues sit alongside Leyton Orient, Scunthorpe and Barnsley in hoping that they can do one better than last season's Sheffield United in having a transformative second-half to the campaign. There is definitely the talent in each of those squads to probably be within realistic contention already. Leyton Orient's run of form around Christmas may give them the early edge in this group of teams and they probably also have the best squad on paper. We have seen time and time again in the Football League that these kinds of matters are only over when the maths says so.



## The Relegation Dog Fight

The goal differences of the bottom four, which are all in negative double figures, should be an indicator that the worst four teams in this division may already be in the bottom four predictions. All though possess the quality to turn their fortunes around but it may be a case though of waiting to see which out of form teams drop into dangerous waters in the final months.

Despite sitting in the lowest position, Yeovil Town have the most talented group of players from the bottom four teams. The key for Gary Johnson will be sticking with a side he can trust, then it will be a case of making sure that the season has not slipped away further than it already has.

Both Colchester and Crewe have similarities in the lack of experience in both of their squads. That probably explains why both are so lowly at the minute although both will also feel that they can learn some important lessons from this season to improve in the final months. Crewe have already set about sorting out a dreadful

start but their fate may be decided upon whether they can keep some important loan players for the rest of the season. Colchester will need to build some momentum but have caused problems for some of the best teams in this division at times this season.

Crawley seem probably the worst squad in the division which John Gregory did well to keep out of the relegation zone for so long. The worry is that now that they have dropped into the bottom four that the siege mentality at the club will wear thin. The managerial situation cannot be a help to a club in such a delicate situation.

Gillingham seem most prone to falling into the bottom four from above and they will now have to get their next managerial appointment right.

Most of the teams in mid-table currently will not be feeling safe and the hole division may remain tight if the teams around the bottom can improve as much as they look like doing.



# Looking Ahead - Coventry City



## League Finish

Like many, I believe that our season may be defined by the capture of Gary Madine on a longer-term basis. The forward not only possess a quality that is above and beyond the rest in the team, but he provides a presence and gives the team a fear factor that we might otherwise lack.

Longer-term it demonstrates ambition at this football club. Our relegation from the Championship was as a result of under-investment from SISU who were then only willing to do the bare minimum for this football club. Signing Madine would show that SISU are not just using this football club as a ticket to take various parties to court with.

Should we not get him, many are predicting some pretty grim scenarios but the win over Walsall without Madine, and Reda Johnson, demonstrates there is still enough quality in this

team to be doing more than it currently is. Furthermore, the bottom four or five teams in this division seem to be worse than us by some distance and it would be incredibly lackadaisical to fall into that group of teams, although this is Coventry City.

Realistically, with Madine, I think we have an outside shot at the play-offs, but it would still require a number of players to step up and for the team to have a coherent, dynamic strategy that really works, so a top 8-10 finish seems likely in that scenario.

Without Madine, it makes the changes that Pressley is looking to institute move into the longer-term. The season may then become more focused on building for next year and that could lead to a mid-table finish between 12th and 15th.



## Top Scorer

With our current two top-scorers a loanee no longer at the club and a defender, the race is wide open to become the club's top-scorer. Furthermore, if the team is able to continue to improve, there should be more chances throughout the entire team which will make this race one of the most contested for a quite a while.

The expectation though is that despite his teammates having had half a season's head-start on him, Gary Madine, should he sign, will lead the goal-scoring charts by the end of the season. To be able to do that, he will require better service than he is currently getting. Madine may be a potent weapon but is one that cannot do everything on his own.

Simeon Jackson is someone else with ambitions of taking the club's 'golden' boot award come the end of the season. He has disappointed with his tally thus far but has not really received adequate service. Whether alongside Madine, or another strike partner, Jackson should be in the

conversation for top-scorer come the end of the season.

Frank Nouble will hope to also be part of that conversation. He can create his own chances but it is all about finding consistency for him and it is far from certain that he will stay until the end of the season.

Reda Johnson, the current top-scorer, may still be towards the top of the list given his record as a goal-scoring defender. You would hope though that as more chances are created for attacking players, he will be surpassed by those paid to score the goals.

Jim O'Brien is the only true goal-scoring midfielder at the club but a current tally of four pales in comparison to his predecessors Frank Moussa and Carl Baker. O'Brien will surely have a better chance of adding to his tally should the team improve in the final months, you would hope though that he too would be surpassed by our strikers.





## Player of the Season

Similar to the top-scorer shoot-out, it seems that this end of season title could well be won based on performances in the second-half of the campaign. Anyone really still has the potential to take this award, but currently it seems that Frank Nouble, Reda Johnson, Jim O'Brien and Gary Madine are the primary candidates.

Frank Nouble, if he is kept on, really needs now to find some consistency. He has demonstrated his ability to be a star player at this level of football but he needs to play more to his strengths and involve his team-mates more in his game. Were Madine to leave, Nouble has the opportunity to become a talisman for this club, but he has shown thus far that he cannot be relied upon and would require careful management to play his best for the club.

As for Reda Johnson, the team struggles to win without him and his strength of character improves this team beyond what he provides as a footballer. There is a feeling that his erratic displays and constant injuries are something

Pressley wants to move away from. The recent away win against Walsall without him may hasten the process.

Jim O'Brien has had spells this season where he has looked far too good for this level of football, others where he has looked shockingly poor. As a goal-scoring midfielder and captain, he has a role to play but he needs to maintain a level of consistency to go with the effort he puts into the team.

Gary Madine could very well make this a better season than it currently looks like panning out to be. His physical presence allows the team to get the ball into dangerous positions early on and he is showing signs of providing the link-up play we have lacked. He may need more support from team-mates than he is currently getting but improves our prospects a great deal if he can be kept on.





## Young Player of the Season

This is probably Ryan Haynes' award to lose now after breaking into the team so memorably this season. A constant outlet for the team and has improved his defensive work as the season has progressed. Teams have cottoned on to his threat from full-back and he is making less of an impact and that may well open up the race for young player of the season.

James Maddison is the next likeliest contender. In an ideal world, his minutes would be limited but this is a team that has badly lacked creativity and Maddison offers that in droves. The main question mark will be about his temperament, his sending-off at Doncaster on Boxing Day might now instruct opposing defenders to try to find a way to wind him up.

Jack Finch established himself in the team for a spell not so long ago and is one of the 11 most used players for the first-team this season. His versatility has obviously helped him rack up a few appearances but more importantly his technical ability has been remarkably assured. He

has yet to impose himself on games yet but already appears a useful squad member and seems likely to improve as the season progresses.

An outside bet may well be George Thomas, especially given that Pressley is looking to offload strikers in January. His chance in the first-team last season came too early, especially as he was played as a lone striker in an away game at just 16 years-old. A year on, his performances at youth-level and a decent JPT showing against Exeter could help him force his way into the first-team on merit.

Jordan Willis and Aaron Phillips may now be both at the other end of the spectrum in qualifying for young player of the season but both are just about young enough to fall into contention. They may well be competing for the same position right now but by the end of the season Pressley must surely be hoping that Willis establishes himself at centre-back and Phillips at right-back.



## Closing Thoughts

It has been another past few months for Coventry City. Just when you think things have settled down and we can get on with concentrating on football, new situations arise to throw the equilibrium at the club completely off. With some trepidation in announcing this, it feels though that things are finally starting to settle down.

Returning to Coventry, despite the sale of the Ricoh Arena to Wasps, has helped change the situation at the club immeasurably. Another season at Sixfields would surely have been another step closer to death for the club with more fans losing interest and making the job of manager even harder for Pressley, had he even any reason to stay.

That exile has caused damage to the club that will take longer than four months to recover from. In fact, the very nature of the club has changed as a result of the arrival of Wasps to the mix. We have now been set as the secondary interest in our own city and in the stadium

originally purpose-built for us.

In a sense though, very little has changed materially about our present status. We are still tenants at the Ricoh Arena and at this level of football we should still be one of the bigger teams. What has changed though is that we can no longer live in the hope that someone will see the club's potential and unite Coventry City with its stadium.

How do we reconcile the fact that now that the dream that once existed of the club getting its act together and shooting up the divisions appears to have disappeared entirely? It feels that we can choose to continue to dismay at whole situation and eventually fall into a state of apathy, or we can find a way to move on and continue forwards as a football club.

The situation of Wasps owning the Ricoh Arena is of course ludicrous, especially given the Orwellian levels of hypocrisy the council have displayed about the morals of taking a sporting



club out of its community. It seems though that little could have been done to challenge the sale once the rumours became apparent. Now that we know that little can be done to change the present situation we need to start accepting it for what it is and finding a way to move forward.

I would love it if Wasps were to leave Coventry tomorrow and gift-wrap the Ricoh Arena to the Sky Blues. It is a scenario that simply will not happen and now Wasps are here to stay. Complaining about them being here achieves nothing.

There is a need now to finally live in the present, rather than see it as a place which is not the past or the future. For too long this football club has dwelled over those past successes and failures whilst hoping for a future which is always just out of our reach.

We have often told ourselves, 'this year will be a building year' or should not even try to achieve promotion 'we are not good enough to compete at a higher level'. All it that really does is cognitively re-frame failure as an excuse not to chase success because it would be unlikely or difficult.

Despite an indifferent start, the season is wide open and we should feel that something can still be made of this campaign. The chance of finally making the play-offs is a realistic one at this juncture.

When we returned to Coventry back in August, it felt that there was a finally a sense that this club had finally found a sense of momentum. It raised the level of a fairly limited side in those first two games back. Like many positive feelings at this club though, that soon faded and died.

It felt like quite a number involved with the club simply 'gave up' on the Sky Blues. But do those that did actually have legitimate reasons for doing so? We have owners who have driven this club into the ground and could take it even further down still. As well as some major question marks over the ability of the players and manager.

It feels then that if things are to change around this football club, it must first come from the team itself. That team 12 months ago was good enough to be worth the faith of the ficklest Coventry City fan but was destroyed by that black hole of our time in Northampton.

Steven Pressley's job over these final few months of the season is not necessarily to get the club into the ever play-offs but to restore optimism. Achieving something might just be the kick-start required but some more entertaining experiences of watching Coventry City play and a belief that things are simply getting better would be a good place to build from.

Our old image of the future Coventry City was one playing in front of sell-out crowds at the Ricoh Arena in the Premier League. There was a vague sense of how that might happen, it felt achievable but not in the near future. Wasps buying the Ricoh Arena more-or-less takes that image away.

It is a bitter disappointment but we now enter a whole new realm of possibilities of what this football club could be in the future. One end of the spectrum is that the decline continues unchecked and that we will always feel a sense that we should be doing better. Or there is the other end where the ghosts of the Ricoh Arena (and Highfield Road) have been laid to rest and Coventry City is finally a vibrant, upwardly-mobile club.

Losing the possibility of buying the Ricoh Arena, makes things more straightforward in a sense. There is less waiting for things to sort themselves out, we have been dealt our hand and now it is time to play it.

After the pomp and ceremony of the return, this may prove to be yet another typical season for Coventry City but it may now define our future in ways that we could not have even imagined that evening September 5th 2014.