

# The Sideways Sammy Season Preview

2015/16



# Foreword

Here we go again, another season, another monster effort to get this season preview looking spick and span before it quickly becomes woefully out of date.

There is a mood of quiet optimism around the club after the first summer in a long time where we haven't been focusing on player sales, rugby teams from London or courtroom antics. Tony Mowbray extended his contract early on in the summer and all the talk around the football club has been about actual football-related matters, which is a welcome change.

If you've been following me on Twitter over the summer, you may have noticed my quietness when it has come to commenting on transfer rumours, pre-season friendlies or any other Coventry City-related minutiae. I have felt kind of jaded in regards to all this side-business to the actual league season, maybe it's just me getting older or I'm just turning into a curmudgeon but the passion that I usually have for these kind of things has been subdued. Part of me was wondering how this would affect the passion I would approach this season preview but the wonderful thing about putting this together has been being able to re-focus on things I truly love about football and hopefully offering up something different to the standard preview fare you would otherwise get.

This preview is still pretty much the same format for these 'e-zines' that I produce though. I will look at each League One club and assess how they're shaping up ahead of the season, I will also pick out a few players to keep an eye out for this season and add some hopefully interesting stats to the mix. Then it's on to player-by-player profiles for every Coventry City player, those who left the club this summer and some bright prospects emerging from the youth-team.

I have also written eight articles on different aspects of what may come to define our season. I have put this preview into this format because it saves from writing article after article every few days during pre-season, which can be pretty tedious as often in pre-season there is very little to go on. Basically I have been holding my tongue (or hands rather) on certain things that I have found frustrating during this long summer.

I wrap up this preview with a few predictions where you can at the end of the season figure out just how poor I actually am at predicting things. The peaches of last season's preview was predicting a 10th place finish for us with Shaun Miller ending up as our top scorer. I may have predicted both Preston and Bristol City for promotion but I also tipped Leyton Orient and Yeovil (both relegated) to challenge for the play-offs and I had written Rochdale (finished 8th) off completely.

Before I go on to repeat the trick of last season, just a final piece of business to add that this preview was published on Monday 3rd August 2015 with all data used accurate of Sunday 2nd August 2015, which means that as the transfer window is still open I would imagine that there are several key transfers waiting to happen that would have affected my pre-season.

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# Introduction

13 long weekends without Coventry City. In the haste to bring a nightmarish last season to a close, we nearly forgot just how tedious these long football-less summers really can be. From the release of the new kit, to the craven desire for any transfer-related news to the pre-season friendlies, it's all an attempt to satiate our hunger for the action to get back under way. We're all addicts who have been forced to go cold turkey, soon enough though, we're about to get our fix again.

There is always that odd feeling when the season kicks off again. The competitive edge that looms anxiously over games feel unfamiliar against that stronger desire just to see football being played again. Those guys in sky blue shirts carry far less significance than they did just over three months ago when things were truly on the line.

It all feels almost arbitrary that the result of 22 guys kicking a ball about on a pitch on a Saturday afternoon should take on the meaning that it eventually does. That if one team is able to score

more goals than the other, they win three points and what even does three points mean in August?

The season always falls into three phases for me. There's the start where everything feels odd and irrelevant, the victories and defeats almost mean nothing. Then there's the phase of the season between September and February where everything feels normal as the season gets into a rhythm. You settle into your seat at the home games and you can enjoy the away trips as outings, points suddenly mean progress in the league but what that progress is towards is still ill-defined. Mainly this phase is more about entertainment than achievement.

By the end of February, the football loses all pretence about being a form of entertainment, you spend more time figuring out the ramifications of results than you do looking forward to watching games. If you want to know the exact point when this happens, it is when everyone starts talking about 'winnable games'



as being ones against teams 'with nothing to play for'. It's when you feel betrayed by those teams 'with nothing to play for' either winning or losing unexpectedly, depending on which result you needed to happen. It's when you actually want to see the end of the season to hurry up and deliver its decisive conclusions amidst the chaos.

The unit of measurement that I use to ascertain which phase of the season is is what it viscerally feels like when to see a goal go in. In the first phase of the season there is always that momentary delay between seeing the net ripple and actually clocking that a goal has been scored. It seems like everyone in the stadium has to check with each other to confirm that it is in fact a goal and it means something. More often than not, it is confirmed by the players' celebrations with than the fans'.

The next phase starts when you can feel the goals hit you in the gut. It's that ecstatic feeling when your team has scored. It is also that jolt in your stomach that you feel when the opposition score and you turn to see the opposition fans swelling in their ecstasy. It's when you feel that opposing teams celebrations are egregiously long and your own team's don't last long enough. It's a gradual sensation that heightens over the course of the season.

The final phase is when we become more inured to the visceral sensations that goals bring on. It's when goals feel less like a stabbing with a knife and more like a bottle of champagne being uncorked. We had spent the week trying to figure out the ramifications of certain results, this was one of the scenarios in our head playing out. It's when the celebrations are shortened by the urgency of one of the teams to score a goal of their own and also by the supporters trying to figure out where everything stands.

The cyclical nature of football means that we are forever doomed to repeat these cycles. As fans of the game, we are trapped in it. Whilst it means that success can never be maintained it also means that failure isn't permanent, something that we forget at times as fans of Coventry City.

Heading into a season where for the first time in around six seasons there isn't this sense of scaling back or any off-the-field drama, there is more of a focus on the actual playing of football games than there has been for a long while. This club is settling back into a cycle of normality now that we are back at the Ricoh Arena and with an experienced manager in Tony Mowbray in charge, we have the hope that we can stop being a club that other fans feel sorry for and one that they envy.

This season will be defined by what happens on the pitch, the meaning that those goals will come to have. This is a season that many Sky Blues fans have been looking forward to for a long while. But still, there is chaos in the unknown. We hope that we won't settle into that usual pattern of underachievement, apathy and abandonment that this club has regularly fallen into. At this stage though, there is no guarantee that everything that has been put in place will make any palpable difference.

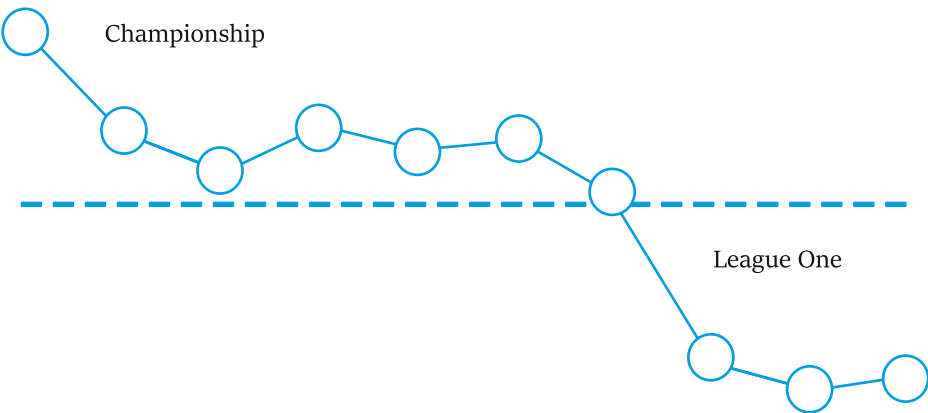
Whether it takes patience, belief or simply having a good team, few Coventry City fans actually know what it would take to be successful over the course of a full league season. We have been waiting for the cycle to end and every season that it fails to do so feels fatalistic. We are quick to jump aboard any hint of optimism but that fear of returning to abject failure makes us even quicker to jump away from it all.

You would reasonably expect that this constant cycle which has seen us go from Premier League strugglers to Championship mid-table to Championship strugglers to League One mid-table to League One strugglers has to be reaching a nadir at some point. You only have to look at clubs like Swansea, Hull and Brighton to know that when a team is in a similar-sized city to Coventry, they eventually bottom out and get things right. It will eventually happen, it's just a case of when.

For now, the greater meaning of the goals and the fate of Coventry City is close to irrelevant for me. More than anything, I'm looking forward to watching football again.

# Past 10 Seasons

League Finishes



FA Cup

2005-06	4th Round
2006-07	3rd Round
2007-08	5th Round
2008-09	6th Round
2009-10	3rd Round
2010-11	4th Round
2011-12	3rd Round
2012-13	3rd Round
2013-14	4th Round
2014-15	1st Round

League Cup

2005-06	2nd Round
2006-07	1st Round
2007-08	4th Round
2008-09	2nd Round
2009-10	1st Round
2010-11	1st Round
2011-12	1st Round
2012-13	3rd Round
2013-14	1st Round
2014-15	1st Round

Managers

	P	W	D	L	Win%
Micky Adams	99	33	26	40	33.33
Iain Dowie	49	20	8	21	40.82
Chris Coleman	117	34	47	36	29.06
Aidy Boothroyd	39	12	8	19	30.77
Andy Thorn	49	9	15	25	18.37
Mark Robins	33	17	6	10	51.52
Steven Pressley	100	32	30	38	32
Tony Mowbray	13	5	4	4	38.46

Top Scorers

2005-06	Gary McSheffrey	17
2006-07	Dele Adebola	9
2007-08	Michael Mifsud	17
2008-09	Clinton Morrison	12
2009-10	Clinton Morrison	11
2010-11	Marlon King	13
2011-12	Lukas Jutkiewicz	9
2012-13	David McGoldrick	18
2013-14	Callum Wilson	22
2014-15	Frank Nouble	7

Total Goals

For  
**539**  
*54 per season*

Against  
**632**  
*63 per season*

Overall Record

Wins  
**142**  
*14 per season*

Draws  
**130**  
*13 per season*

Defeats  
**188**  
*19 per season*



# Club-By-Club Previews



# Barnsley



**Last Season:** 11th in League One

**Manager:** Lee Johnson

## Star Player

Conor Hourihane - Scored 13 and assisted nearly as many last season. Hourihane is a key creative presence in the centre of the park for Barnsley.

## Key Signing

Ben Pearson - Returns to the club after a successful loan spell last season. Diminutive defensive midfielder capable of the odd mazy dribble.

## Major Departure

Luke Berry - Looked to be developing well after a decent first season for the club but was sold back to his old club Cambridge United.

Only one season removed from playing at Championship level and having fallen short of making the play-offs last season, Barnsley have all the characteristics of a club ready to push for promotion this time around. The high earners and hangers-on from Barnsley's glum stay in the second-tier have been jettisoned, replaced by a younger, hungrier group who have now had a year to bond together.

Midfielder Conor Hourihane who was responsible for around 25 league goals last season leads in the way in what looks to be a dynamic unit in the centre of the park for Barnsley. Manchester United youngster Ben Pearson impressed whilst on loan last season and has been lured back. In defence, the impressive ex-Brentford defender Alfie Mawson

has been brought in having stood-out in League Two with Wycombe last season.

Manager Lee Johnson also fits into that 'young and hungry' profile that Barnsley are looking to build but with youthful vibrancy comes inconsistency. That's exactly what we saw as the Tykes raced to six straight wins in his first four league games in charge before running out of steam and won just one more game in the final month of last season. Barnsley have few experienced leaders in their team which could make for a rollercoaster ride of a season but looking in an average-looking rest of the division, spells of brilliance might be enough.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Adam Davies  
Christian Dibble

### Defenders

Alfie Mawson  
George Smith  
George Williams  
Jack Cowgill  
James Bree  
Lewin Nyatanga  
Marc Roberts  
Mason Holgate

### Midfielders

Ben Pearson (Loan)  
Conor Hourihane  
Dan Crowley (Loan)  
Joe Rothwell (Loan)  
Josh Scowen  
Marley Watkins  
Paul Digby  
Ryan Williams

### Forwards

Conor Wilkinson (Loan)  
George Maris  
Mike Phenix  
Sam Winnall

# Blackpool



**Last Season:** 24th in Championship  
**Manager:** Neil McDonald

## Star Player

Andrea Orlandi - One of few players still around from last season, talented playmaker, should be a cut above in League One.

## Key Signing

Colin Doyle - Has spent a long time as a back-up keeper at Birmingham City but has the pedigree to excel in this league.

## Major Departure

Peter Clarke - The kind of experienced head in defence that Blackpool will probably need this season.

A relatively productive summer in footballing terms for Blackpool has not prevented those matters operating as merely a side issue in the war between Karl Oyston and Blackpool fans. The chairman who has hoovered up millions of pounds from the Blackpool's recent spell in the Premier League as he continued to operate the club on a shoestring has been tenacious in his battle against a disaffected fan-base. The poisonous atmosphere remains around the club and home attendances are likely to be sub-5,000.

New manager Neil McDonald has pedigree at this level having led Carlisle to a top-half finish in his one full season as a manager seven years ago. Once again though with Blackpool, they have built almost an entirely new team this summer. On the plus side, they have brought in

the reliable Colin Doyle in goal along with two rising talents in midfielder Brad Potts and striker Jack Redshaw. On the down side, the squad overall looks very young, imbalanced and lacking in key areas. It won't take a lot for things to go horribly wrong.

Many are predicting that Blackpool are on a course towards double relegation, and oblivion thereafter. There is just about enough quality about the squad to avoid that fate, however the toxic situation around the club hardly provides the backdrop for success. Expect Blackpool to struggle but they may just keep their heads above water, for now.

## Prediction

*Lower Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Colin Doyle  
Kyle Letheren  
Miles Boney

### Defenders

Charles Dunne  
Clark Robertson  
David Ferguson  
Lloyd Jones (Loan)  
Tom Aldred

### Midfielders

Andrea Orlandi  
Brad Potts  
Bright Osayi-Samuel  
Connor Oliver  
Henry Cameron  
Jarrett Rivers  
Jim McAlister  
John Herron  
José Miguel Cubero

### Forwards

Jack Redshaw  
Kwame Thomas (Loan)  
Mark Cullen  
Nile Ranger

# Bradford City



**Last Season:** 7th in League One

**Manager:** Phil Parkinson

## Star Player

James Hanson - Big target-man style centre forward, dominates in the air, an unstoppable force on his day and central to Phil Parkinson's game plan.

## Key Signing

Paul Anderson - Hard-working and direct winger who was a useful squad member during Ipswich's recent run to the Championship play-offs.

## Major Departure

Andrew Davies - Has long been a classy presence at the back but injuries have held him back, heads up north to Ross County.

Bradford have provided a template that those in charge of other clubs at this level would do well to follow. The club's renaissance over recent years has been built around fan-friendly ticketing initiatives and this season has seen Bradford slash season ticket prices to £149. Uptake of the offer has been phenomenal with around 18,000 sold which promises a raucous and intense atmosphere at Valley Parade this season.

That wealth of support puts pressure on Phil Parkinson to deliver a promotion season, having fallen short of the play-offs the last two times around. Bradford's squad is small but densely packed with quality. Last season's flair players Billy Clarke and Billy Knott remain around, offering variation to Phil Parkinson's style of

football. New signings Steven Davies and wingers Paul Anderson and Mark Marshall further the approaches that Parkinson can take should the James Hanson option fall short.

A strong start for Bradford could really turn them into a force in a weaker division this season. There is a wave of optimism behind the club that is backed up by having a manager in place who the fans believe in and the spine of a good time already in situ. With some question marks against the current leading contenders, Sheffield United and Wigan, Bradford look to be the best of the rest to put the two favourites under pressure.

## Prediction

*Automatic Promotion Outsiders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Ben Williams

### Defenders

Alan Sheehan  
Christopher Routis  
James Meredith  
Nathan Clarke  
Rory McArdle  
Stephen Darby  
Tony McMahon

### Midfielders

Billy Knott  
Filipe Morais  
Gary Liddle  
Josh Morris  
Mark Marshall  
Paul Anderson

### Forwards

Billy Clarke  
James Hanson  
Luke James (Loan)  
Steven Davies



# Burton Albion



**Last Season:** 1st in League Two  
**Manager:** Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink

## Star Player

John Mousinho - Midfielder converted to central defender last season who helped Burton keep it tight at the back with his leadership and consistency.

## Key Signing

Callum Reilly - Creative and dynamic central midfielder, who looked bright for a time whilst with Birmingham in the league above.

## Major Departure

Adam McGurk - The type of player who can produce a moment of genius from nowhere but prone to inconsistency.

Under Gary Rowett, Burton gathered momentum as they pushed towards promotion from League Two. After Rowett left for Birmingham City early last season, ex-Chelsea striker Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink was a surprise choice to lead a club that has spent much of their history in non-league. The Dutchman proved to be a safe pair of hands, getting Burton over the line for promotion whilst adding a few minor tweaks of his own.

Burton have got to where they are by being well-run and making sensible, considered decisions, which has been the tone of the summer. The transfer activity has been swift, decisive and understated but midfielders Calum Butcher and Callum Reilly look to be very good signings. Overall, faith is being put in much of the squad

being able to make the step up a level. Defenders Phil Edwards and John Mousinho may not catch the eye but their form could prove to be the difference between a struggle and comfort this season.

Burton are seen in some quarters as potential surprise packages this season but they appear to be short of a presence in the penalty area to truly trouble the best in this league. That lack of a goalscorer could be a real Achilles heel for Burton but the strength and solidity elsewhere in the team should counter-act that issue. A solid mid-table finish beckons.

## Prediction

*Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Dean Lyness  
Jon McLaughlin  
Remi Matthews (Loan)

### Defenders

Anthony O'Connor  
Damien McCrory  
Darius Charles  
Jerome Binnom-Williams (Loan)  
Kelvin Maynard  
Liam Slade  
Phil Edwards  
Shane Cansdell-Sheriff  
Tom Naylor

### Midfielders

Callum Reilly  
Calum Butcher  
John Mousinho  
Marcus Harness  
Mark Duffy (Loan)  
Matt Palmer  
Robbie Weir  
Zeli Ismail (Loan)

### Forwards

Abdenasser El Khayati  
Dominic Knowles  
Lucas Akins  
Stuart Beavon  
Timmy Thiele

# Bury



**Last Season:** 3rd in League Two  
**Manager:** David Flitcroft

## Star Player

Nathan Cameron - Much improved ex-Sky Blue centre-back who led a tightened Bury defence to promotion last season.

## Key Signing

Leon Clarke - The early summer signing of Clarke was a statement of intent that Bury will be one of the big spenders this season.

## Major Departure

Nicky Adams - Attacking midfielder with past pedigree at this level, a surprise decision to offload him to Northampton this summer.

Having outspent every team in League Two last season, Bury are attempting the same dynamite approach to mounting an assault in League One this season. Given the club's recent financial struggles and reports that the current spending is being maintained by a series of high interest loans against the club's ground, it seems very much like we are witnessing Bury in the boom part of a boom and bust cycle.

Manager David Flitcroft brought in strikers Leon Clarke and Tom Pope as his big-name summer signings. The ex-Barnsley manager now has to find a way to play two back-to-goal strikers in the same team. Winger Danny Mayor provides the creativity out wide in what is otherwise a physically robust team. Nathan Cameron and Peter Clarke in central defence with Tom Soares

and Kelvin Etuhu ahead of them in central midfield give Bury an imposing physicality about them.

Bury have certainly laid down a marker with their transfer activity early on this summer and they look like being one of the most physically strong teams in the division this season. They may lack an element of pace and craft about them but this is a division where the blunt approach often is successful. No-one is going to enjoy playing Bury this season and they should challenge for the top six.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Christian Walton (Loan)  
Rob Lainton

### Defenders

Chris Hussey  
Craig Jones  
Danny Pugh  
Joe Riley  
Keil O'Brien  
Nathan Cameron  
Peter Clarke

### Midfielders

Andrew Tutte  
Danny Mayor  
Jacob Mellis  
Kelvin Etuhu  
Tom Soares

### Forwards

Daniel Nardiello  
Danny Rose  
Hallam Hope  
Leon Clarke  
Ryan Lowe  
Tom Pope

# Chesterfield



**Last Season:** 6th in League One

**Manager:** Dean Saunders

## Star Player

Sam Morsy - Creative midfielder whose range of passing can dominate midfields, offers star quality for Chesterfield.

## Key Signing

Sylvan Ebanks-Blake - Once fired Wolves into the Premier League but has struggled with injuries and form in recent years.

## Major Departure

Gary Roberts - Key player of Chesterfield's revival under Cook, no surprise that he left to rejoin his former boss at Portsmouth.

Within minutes of losing in the play-off semi-final to Preston, Chesterfield started to unravel. The charismatic Paul Cook quickly left the club to join Portsmouth in League Two, taking the influential midfielder Gary Roberts with him. Almost every other key player has departed too with Jimmy Ryan heading to Fleetwood, Sam Clucas to Hull, Tendayi Darikwa to Burnley and rumours suggesting Sam Morsy could soon be leaving too.

There were howls of derision as serial relegator Dean Saunders was announced as Paul Cook's replacement. The ex-Crawley and Doncaster boss certainly represents a sea change from Cook's positive, open style of football, Saunders' teams generally are robust and look to take advantage of set-pieces and counter attacks.

Incoming transfer activity has been slow but the one major signing Sylvan Ebanks-Blake offers hope of possibly something better.

There are certainly the ingredients for a disastrous season in place at Chesterfield having lost so many key players and having yet to replace them adequately. Despite the mirthful laughter of many Football League fans, Dean Saunders' basic style of football could provide a template for something of a surprise season. There is an air of negativity and decline around the club which is likely to make this a difficult season, particularly if Chesterfield start slowly.

## Prediction

*Relegation Strugglers*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Aaron Chapman  
Alex Cairns  
Tommy Lee

### Defenders

Charlie Raglan  
Daniel Jones  
Drew Talbot  
Ian Evatt  
Ritchie Humphreys  
Sam Hird

### Midfielders

Dan Gardner  
Gboly Ariyibi  
Jay O'Shea  
Michael Onovwigun  
Ollie Banks  
Sam Morsy

### Forwards

Armand Gnanduillet  
Byron Harrison  
Emmanuel Dieseruvwe  
Rai Simmons  
Sylvan Ebanks-Blake



# Colchester United



**Last Season:** 19th in League One

**Manager:** Tony Humes

## Star Player

Chris Porter - Key target man striker who offers experience and provides the focal point for Colchester's young midfielders to play around.

## Key Signing

George Elokobi - Returns to the club after 7 years away. Provides experience and combativeness to a youthful Colchester team.

## Major Departure

David Fox - Experienced central midfielder who was vital during last season's survival bid. Bitter blow to lose him to potential rivals Crewe.

Colchester looked dead and buried for much of last season with few expecting them to beat Preston on the final day to retain their League One status. The U's though demonstrated their resilience and got the win when it really counted. Having pulled off similar survival acts in the past three seasons, Colchester can only be lucky for so long. If they don't learn to stay clear of the bottom four longer than the final weeks of the season, they will eventually be relegated.

Last season's dramatic survival act was based on the form of loanees Bongani Khumalo and Jacob Murphy, as well as experienced midfielder David Fox. All three are no longer with the club and the brief for manager Tony Humes has been to source replacements, especially to address the deficit of experience at the club. The returning

George Elokobi will provide character to the defence, although he does represent a downgrade on Bongani Khumalo. Former Yeovil captain Joe Edwards is a strong addition to the squad and adds a defensive-midfield blockade they have lacked in recent times.

Overall though, there is no veritable feeling that Colchester have improved their squad from the end of last season. The main hope lays with young players such as Tom Lapslie, Sammie Szmodics and Alex Gilbey continuing to improve. Colchester have been playing a dangerous game in recent seasons, this could well be the one time they fail to pull off a miraculous survival act.

## Prediction

*Relegation Battlers*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Chris Lewington  
Elliot Parish  
Sam Walker

### Defenders

Alex Wynter  
Frankie Kent  
George Elokobi  
Jamie Harney  
Matthew Briggs  
Michael O'Donoghue  
Richard Brindley  
Tom Eastman  
Tosin Olufemi

### Midfielders

Alex Gilbey  
Byron Lawrence  
Dion Sembie-Ferris  
Drey Wright  
George Moncur  
Joe Edwards  
Sammie Szmodics  
Tom Lapslie

### Forwards

Chris Porter  
Dan Holman  
Gavin Massey  
Macauley Bonne

# Crewe Alexandra



**Last Season:** 20th in League One

**Manager:** Steve Davis

## Star Player

Marcus Haber - Niggly, target-man type striker, inconsistent but can trouble even the best centre-backs at this level on his day.

## Key Signing

David Fox - One of Colchester's key players last season. Provides experience, character and ball retention to Crewe's young midfield unit.

## Major Departure

Anthony Grant - Nasty and competitive midfielder who played a key role in helping Crewe bite, kick and cheat their way to key wins last season.

Crewe will count themselves as very fortunate to have stayed up last season. After spending much of the season either above or in the bottom four, Crewe managed to stay above the dotted line when the music stopped last time out. After another summer of player losses and low calibre replacements, there is little hope at Gresty Road that things are getting any better.

The key to Crewe's survival last season was the ability to put in defensively organised performances where they niggled and frustrated opponents before stinging them on the counter-attack. Their key player in their nuisance factor last season was midfielder Anthony Grant who kicked, dived and sometimes even passed his way to midfield domination, he has now left for local rivals Port Vale. Ex-Colchester midfielder

David Fox could prove to be a strong addition as Grant's replacement but the experienced playmaker is surrounded by perhaps too many fresh-faced youngsters to make Crewe a threat.

Crewe look to be the weakest team in the division on paper and look set to finally make the drop to League Two that they have threatened for a few seasons now. The only cause for optimism is that they were in the same boat 12 months ago and eventually found a way to make themselves a nuisance for those ready to underestimate them. Looking at it logically though, Crewe just don't seem to have enough about them to upset the odds.

## Prediction

*Relegation Battlers*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Ben Garratt  
Dave Richards

### Defenders

George Ray  
Harry Davis  
James Baillie  
Jon Guthrie  
Oliver Turton  
Perry Ng

### Midfielders

Adam King (Loan)  
Billy Bingham  
Bradden Inman  
Chris Atkinson  
David Fox  
James Jones

### Forwards

Callum Saunders  
George Cooper  
Lauri Dalla Valle  
Marcus Haber

# Doncaster Rovers



**Last Season:** 13th in League One

**Manager:** Paul Dickov

## Star Player

Harry Forrester - Creative midfielder who has established himself as one of few flair players accommodated in Paul Dickov's tactics.

## Key Signing

Andy Williams - Came in from the cold to score 22 goals last season for Swindon, a pacey forward and a great finisher but relies heavily on confidence.

## Major Departure

Kyle Bennett - Pacey winger who gave Donny a counter-attacking threat, left for bigger wages at Portsmouth in League Two.

It was a frustrating last season for Doncaster fans as they saw their team flirt with the play-offs without ever really looking set to make that final leap. Poor form at the Keepmoat Stadium put paid to any hopes of a return to the Championship with there being a strong suspicion that the defensive tactics of manager Paul Dickov held the team back.

Last season his excuse was that Doncaster had endured a tumultuous summer leading into the campaign following a failed takeover and a slashing of the playing budget. That excuse no longer exists with Dickov being backed in the transfer market and making a number of high-calibre signings for this level of football. Striker Andy Williams, midfielder Richard Chaplow and defender Gary MacKenzie add experience and

quality to a squad that already boasted the likes of Harry Forrester, Richie Wellens and James Coppinger.

There really is pressure now on Paul Dickov to deliver in producing a promotion-winning side. Looking at the other possible contenders, Doncaster are on paper one of the strongest sides in the division outside of Sheffield United and Wigan. They should really be backing themselves to capitalise on any weaknesses from the likely top two but the primary focus this season will be Paul Dickov finding a way for his team to win games on the front foot.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Marko Maroš  
Thorsten Stuckmann

### Defenders

Aaron Taylor-Sinclair  
Andy Butler  
Cedric Evina  
Gary MacKenzie  
Luke McCullough  
Mitchell Lund  
Rob Jones

### Midfielders

Billy Whitehouse  
Harry Forrester  
Harry Middleton  
James Coppinger  
Paul Keegan  
Richard Chaplow  
Richie Wellens

### Forwards

Andy Williams  
Curtis Main  
Dany N'Guessan  
Jack McKay  
Nathan Tyson



# Fleetwood Town



**Last Season:** 10th in League One

**Manager:** Graham Alexander

## Star Player

Chris Maxwell - Goalkeeper with a growing reputation in the game who has been key in keeping Fleetwood's defence tight over the past few seasons.

## Key Signing

Jimmy Ryan - Strong both physically and technically as a central midfielder with the odd long-range spectacular in his locker.

## Major Departure

Mark Roberts - Captain of Fleetwood's miserly defence, he may have lost some pace but was key in their rise to the top-half of League One.

Although they spent much of last season near the play-offs, Fleetwood seemed fairly content with a competitive top-half finish in their first ever League One campaign. Thanks to Financial Fair Play restrictions, Fleetwood have had to reign some of the big spending in recent years back and there has been a rather high player turnover this summer. Manager Graham Alexander is still expected to improve on last season's league position but this could be a difficult second season for the Cod Army.

The new emphasis at Fleetwood appears to be on developing younger players with ex-Birmingham youth-teamer Amari'i Bell brought in after a decent few loan spells last season alongside Scottish forward Declan McManus who scored over 20 goals in the Scottish third-tier at Morton

last season. Ex-Chesterfield midfielder Jimmy Ryan is the big name signing but he is more of a robust kind of player than a genuinely eye-catching addition that Fleetwood have often made during their rise up the footballing pyramid.

The big problem last season for Fleetwood was scoring goals with Graham Alexander's tactics seemingly based around simply avoiding defeat. Without a proven goalscorer being added to a workmanlike squad, that struggle looks set to continue into a campaign where opponents will know what to expect from them. Fleetwood look to be gearing up for a bit of a slog this time out.

## Prediction

*Lower Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Brendan Moore  
Chris Maxwell

### Defenders

Amari'i Bell  
Conor McLaughlin  
Danny Andrew  
Nathan Pond  
Stephen Jordan

### Midfielders

Antoni Sarcevic  
Eggert Jonsson  
Jimmy Ryan  
Keith Southern  
Lyle Della-Verde  
Nick Haughton  
Tyler Hornby-Forbes

### Forwards

Ashley Hunter  
Bobby Grant  
Declan McManus  
Jamie Proctor  
Jamilie Matt

# Gillingham



**Last Season:** 12th in League One

**Manager:** Justin Edinburgh

## Star Player

Cody McDonald - Reliable goalscorer at this level. His goals turn Gillingham from a solid team into a threatening one.

## Key Signing

Bradley Garmston - Exceptionally quick full-back who impressed during a brief loan spell from West Brom last season.

## Major Departure

Joe Martin - Dependable left-back who suffered injury problems last season and was subsequently seen as surplus to requirements.

Having looked set for a slide into League Two last season before the sacking of Peter Taylor, Gillingham have successfully reinvented themselves as a club on the up since the turn of the year. Ex-Newport manager Justin Edinburgh steered Gillingham into comfortable mid-table territory, putting together some notable results along the way. With a younger, more dynamic team in place, Gillingham could be really upset the apple-cart this season.

Summer transfer activity has seen fast, young players added to the squad with ex-West Brom full-back Bradley Garmston a potential star in the making in this division and centre-back Max Ehmer returning to the club after a successful loan spell from QPR last season. Keeping star defender John Egan around the club this summer

adds to the sense of excitement and optimism around Gillingham heading into this season.

The biggest worry that Gillingham fans will have is whether the emphasis on youth has gone slightly too far. There are few experienced players around the squad at the moment which makes it seem likely that Gillingham will be inconsistent. For the challenge of League One this season, inconsistency may be less of an issue for many teams and the brilliant spells that Gillingham can muster may well put them in contention for the top six.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Glenn Morris  
Stuart Nelson

### Defenders

Adedeji Oshilaja (Loan)  
Bradley Garmston  
Callum Davies  
John Egan  
Josh Hare  
Max Ehmer  
Ryan Jackson

### Midfielders

Aaron Morris  
Bradley Dack  
Doug Loft  
Jake Hessenthaler  
Jermaine McGlashan  
Jordan Houghton (Loan)  
Josh Pritchard

### Forwards

Ben Williamson  
Brennan Dickenson  
Cody McDonald  
Luke Norris  
Rory Donnelly

# Millwall



**Last Season:** 22nd in Championship  
**Manager:** Neil Harris

## Star Player

Nadjim Abdou - Tough defensive midfielder and something of a hero at Millwall. Will be the leader of a young team.

## Key Signing

Tony Craig - Experienced and versatile left-sided defender who returns to the club and will play a key role as an older head and captain.

## Major Departure

Nicky Bailey - The kind of midfielder who exudes dominance, wage demands seem likely to be behind his departure.

After a few years of struggling at the wrong end of the Championship against clubs with much bigger resources, it was no surprise to see Millwall finally slip back into League One last season. The squad, assembled by various short-term managers, was bloated and full of the type of journeymen players that few other clubs wanted. As expected, this summer has seen a major squad cull at Millwall and a re-focus on the core values of the club.

The emphasis this summer for new manager and club legend Neil Harris has been on allowing some of the club's exciting young talents opportunities in the first-team. Young players including defender Sid Nelson, midfielder Fred Onyedinma and forwards Aiden O'Brien and John Marquis offer Harris the core of a new

generation at the Den. They will be shepherded on by a core of experienced campaigners retained from last season with captain Jimmy Abdou in midfield and the returning Tony Craig in defence looking particularly important.

If Millwall are to follow the path of other long-term relegation strugglers in the Championship dropping into League One, then they should be expecting a difficult start to the season, possibly a change of manager, and a surge towards mid-table safety. There is enough quality around the squad at the moment to challenge for the top six but as we so often see with relegated clubs, the first season at a lower level is always tough.

## Prediction

*Upper Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

David Forde  
Jordan Archer

### Defenders

Byron Webster  
Joe Martin  
Mark Beevers  
Shaun Cummings  
Sid Nelson  
Tony Craig

### Midfielders

Ed Upson  
Fred Onyedinma  
Jack Powell  
Lee Martin  
Nadjim Abdou  
Paris Cowan-Hall  
Shaun Williams

### Forwards

Aiden O'Brien  
Alfie Pavey  
Jamie Philpot  
John Marquis  
Lee Gregory

# Oldham Athletic



**Last Season:** 15th in League One

**Manager:** Darren Kelly

## Star Player

Liam Kelly - Creative lynchpin of the team who keeps things ticking over nicely in the centre of the park with his excellent range of passing.

## Key Signing

George Green - Attacking midfielder who reportedly cost Everton nearly £2m as a 16 year-old, impressed in patches with Tranmere last season.

## Major Departure

George Elokobi - Charismatic presence in defence, injury-prone and left after turning down a reduced contract at the club.

Last season petered out for Oldham after back-to-back defeats to Yeovil and MK 'Dons' in early December by an aggregate score of 11-0. The Latics avoided a full-on capitulation, à la Notts County, but it precipitated an unwinding that saw manager Lee Johnson leave and caretaker boss Dean Holden hold the fort until the end of the campaign. Oldham have finally found a replacement for Johnson in ex-Sunderland youth-team coach Darren Kelly who enters into his first season as a manager.

Kelly's appointment gives Oldham the air of the unknown about them. On paper, the squad is no better or worse than last season. Pacey forwards Jonathan Forte and Dominic Poleon, the classy Liam Kelly, Carl Winchester and Mike Jones in midfield and the impressive James Wilson in

defence are still around. The veteran David Dunn is an interesting signing but has struggled for fitness over past years. Ex-Everton youngster George Green is potentially someone to watch who could ignite Oldham's season.

Despite the core of a good team already being in place, the rookie manager factor could derail what might otherwise be a promising-looking season. Darren Kelly is looking to play a possession-oriented style of football but that may be far too ambitious in his first managerial stint. A bad start for Oldham seems likely and it could become something of a nightmare campaign thereafter.

## Prediction

*Relegation Battlers*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

David Cornell  
Joel Coleman

### Defenders

Brian Wilson  
Connor Brown  
Jack Truelove  
James Wilson  
Joseph Mills  
Timothée Dieng

### Midfielders

Carl Winchester  
David Dunn  
George Green  
Lee Croft  
Liam Kelly  
Mike Jones

### Forwards

Danny Philliskirk  
Devante Jacobs  
Dominic Poleon  
Jake Cassidy  
Jonathan Forte  
Jordan Bove  
Rhys Murphy  
Rhys Turner



# Peterborough United



**Last Season:** 9th in League One

**Manager:** Dave Robertson

## Star Player

Ben Alnwick - Oddly for Peterborough, the goalkeeper was the best player last season. A reliable goalkeeper at this level.

## Key Signing

Joe Gormley - Northern Irish goal machine making his first move to English shores. His form could help solve last season's goalscoring problems.

## Major Departure

Christian Burgess - Tall ball-playing centre-back prone to the odd error but probably deserved more patience than he was given.

Peterborough chairman Darragh MacAnthony had made it quite clear that Darren Ferguson's permanent replacement would be somebody other than Dave Robertson. Having failed to identify a suitable full-time manager, MacAnthony then completed a U-turn on his declaration and handed Robertson the job after all.

Robertson's style of football marked a departure on the open, attacking style of play that Peterborough have previously been associated with. That may have been pragmatic given Peterborough's lack of quality in attack last season. This season, the onus relies on winger Marcus Maddison to find some consistency to his game and new Northern Irish signing Joe 'The Goal' Gormley to replicate his astonishing form

in front of goal in his home country. Otherwise, this remains a very obdurate and unexciting Peterborough team that may continue to pale in comparison to its recent predecessors.

From an outsider's perspective there is a feeling of stagnation around the club with the momentum from recent stays at Championship level and exciting attacking football now in the rear-view mirror. There is little reason to believe that things are changing for the better at London Road after the full-time appointment of Dave Robertson. This season could be a real slog at London Road.

## Prediction

*Lower Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Ben Alnwick  
Dion Henry

### Defenders

Andrew Fox  
Gabriel Zakuani  
Jack Baldwin  
Kgosi Ntlhe  
Michael Smith  
Ricardo Santos  
Shaun Brisley

### Midfielders

Erhun Öztümer  
Harry Anderson  
Harry Beautyman  
Jack Collison  
Jack Payne  
Jermaine Anderson  
Joe Newell  
Jon Taylor  
Kieran Sadlier  
Marcus Maddison  
Michael Bostwick

### Forwards

Conor Washington  
Joe Gormley  
Jonathan Edwards  
Kyle Vassell  
Lee Angol  
Leonardo Da Silva Lopes  
Souleymane Coulibaly

# Port Vale



**Last Season:** 18th in League One

**Manager:** Rob Page

## Star Player

Michael O'Connor - Provides both character and the ability to create in the centre of the park with some sensational long-range efforts thrown in.

## Key Signing

Ryan Inniss - Young centre-back who returns after a strong loan spell last season where he played a key role in a play-off near-miss.

## Major Departure

Mark Marshall - Surprise star of last season with his pace and two-footedness, left for Bradford after protracted contract negotiations.

Port Vale have been attempting to become a club that develops young talent, whilst cutting costs, ever since last season's departure of Micky Adams. His replacement Rob Page has experienced both the highs and lows of football management with Vale coming close to both the play-offs and relegation in the final month of last season.

The summer has seen several key experienced pros leave, striker Tom Pope, pacey winger Mark Marshall and robust centre-back Chris Robertson have all moved on. Vale have targeted mostly inexperienced replacements in their stead with winger Sam Kelly, centre-back Remie Streete and forward Uche Ikpeazu much fresher-faced than their predecessors. There has still been room for some key, experienced additions with

ex-Crewe midfielder Anthony Grant and ex-Walsall right-back Ben Purkiss ensuring that Port Vale haven't lurched from one extreme to another.

Port Vale haven't been as weakened as they looked like being earlier on in the summer and the change in emphasis at the club may well prove to be prudent. Vale do lack strength in depth with most areas of the team being one injury away from putting either an inexperienced youngster or a League Two journeyman in the firing line. With question marks surrounding the ability of manager Rob Page, Port Vale could well be fighting the drop.

## Prediction

*Relegation Battlers*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Chris Neal  
Ryan Boot  
Sam Johnson

### Defenders

Aziz Deen-Conteh  
Ben Purkiss  
Remie Streete  
Ryan McGivern  
Ryan Inniss  
Adam Yates  
Carl Dickinson  
Richard Duffy

### Midfielders

Ryan Lloyd  
Sam Kelly  
Byron Moore  
Anthony Grant  
Sam Foley  
Chris Birchall  
Colin Daniel  
Michael Brown  
Michael O'Connor

### Forwards

Ebo Andoh  
Achille Campion  
AJ Leitch-Smith  
Uche Ikpeazu (Loan)  
Louis Dodds

# Rochdale



**Last Season:** 8th in League One

**Manager:** Keith Hill

## Star Player

Ian Henderson - One of League One's top scorers and creators last season, skilfull forward who probably belongs in a higher division.

## Key Signing

Jim McNulty - An elegant and versatile defender/midfield anchor who always seems to excel when managed by Keith Hill.

## Major Departure

Stephen Dawson - His energy and determination made Rochdale tough to play against, leaves a massive hole in Dale's midfield.

Rochdale confounded pre-season expectations last season that they would be amongst the weakest sides in the league, ending the campaign in 8th place. Dale showed the value of going for wins last season rather than settling for draws, they actually lost more games than the Sky Blues did last time out but finished just two wins off the top six. With manager Keith Hill still in situ, Rochdale look set to continue to punch above their weight.

The departure of Stephen Dawson in midfield is the major worry heading into the new campaign. The former Barnsley man was a warrior in the centre of the park, providing an otherwise young and timid Rochdale side an edge of nastiness. However new signings Jim McNulty and Lewis Alessandra are the type of unheralded players

that Keith Hill tends to get the best out of. With last season's top-scorer Ian Henderson still around alongside promising midfielders Jamie Allen and Callum Camps, Rochdale still pack a punch.

Whereas with most teams who have massively overachieved on limited resources would be expected to struggle the following season, Keith Hill's management of Rochdale fosters belief that they might be able to achieve something similar this season. The loss of that surprise factor may make it harder to hit the heights of the previous campaign but Rochdale should at least be able to record a comfortable mid-table finish.

## Prediction

*Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Johny Diba Musangu  
Josh Lillis  
Steve Collis

### Defenders

Ashley Eastham  
Jimmy McNulty  
Joe Rafferty  
Michael Rose  
Oliver Lancashire  
Rhys Bennett  
Scott Tanser  
Tom Kennedy

### Midfielders

Andy Cannon  
Brian Barry-Murphy  
Callum Camps  
Donal McDermott  
Jamie Allen  
Matty Lund  
Peter Vincenti  
Reuben Noble-Lazarus

### Forwards

Calvin Andrew  
Ian Henderson  
Joe Bunney  
Lewis Alessandra  
Nyal Bell

# Scunthorpe United



**Last Season:** 16th in League One

**Manager:** Mark Robins

## Star Player

Paddy Madden - Proven goalscorer at this level, excellent penalty-box striker who is strangely often used as a winger by Mark Robins.

## Key Signing

Stephen Dawson - One of the best midfielders at League One level last season. A harrying, box-to-box player who adds character to the squad.

## Major Departure

Sam Slocombe - Well-regarded goalkeeper at the club who Mark Robins didn't particularly rate, drops into League Two with Oxford United.

Scunthorpe have been one of this summer's biggest movers in the League One transfer market. Manager Mark Robins, frustrated by a sluggish end to last season, has freshened his playing resources at Glanford Park. The former Sky Blues manager has not been without blame from Iron fans for that poor end of season form and having been backed in the transfer market, has to prove to fans that it was a limited playing squad rather than his own management that was responsible for a relegation close shave last season.

Ex-Rochdale star Stephen Dawson is the most important summer signing that Robins has made, Dawson should add drive, character and energy to Scunthorpe's robust midfield. A number of former Preston players have also

been added which should further boost Scunthorpe's robustness as a team unit. Forwards Darius Henderson, Luke Williams and Tom Hopper are expected to support Paddy Madden and Kevin van Veen in adding a final third presence to the solidity of the side.

The target for Scunthorpe this season must surely be to record a top-six finish. With Mark Robins having come in for criticism from fans towards the end of last season, a strong start is required to generate a positive atmosphere around Glanford Park. Scunthorpe's squad is looking strong, it's all about whether the manager can get them to punch their weight.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Joe Anyon  
Luke Daniels

### Defenders

Andrew Boyce  
David Mirfin  
Jordan Clarke  
Niall Canavan  
Scott Laird  
Scott Wiseman

### Midfielders

David Syers  
Gary McSheffrey  
Hakeeb Adelakun  
Jack King  
Jamie Ness  
Neal Bishop  
Sean McAllister  
Stephen Dawson  
Terry Hawkridge

### Forwards

Darius Henderson  
Kevin van Veen  
Kyle Wootton  
Luke Williams  
Paddy Madden  
Tom Hopper

# Sheffield United



**Last Season:** 5th in League One

**Manager:** Nigel Adkins

## Star Player

Jamie Murphy - Pacey and dynamic forward player who can operate any position behind the striker. Guarantees goals and assists at this level.

## Key Signing

Billy Sharp - Returns to Bramall Lane for a third spell at his boyhood club. Surely too good for this level but has been a while since his last good season.

## Major Departure

Michael Doyle - Combative central midfielder all Sky Blues fans will know about. Offered something different in a team of small, technical players.

Nigel Clough's sacking over the summer seemed harsh from an outsider's perspective. A manager who had taken the club to the FA and League Cup semi-finals and mustered a trip to the play-offs within less than two years would at most other League One clubs have granted Clough near-legend status. But Sheffield United are not like any other clubs, their continued presence in League One represents a state of underachievement that has gone on too long.

Adkins has inherited a bloated Blades squad that is somehow was still lacking in key areas such as central defence, central midfield and a recognised goalscorer. Billy Sharp returns to Bramall Lane for the third time looking to address that lack of a goalscorer. Exciting forward Jamie Murphy will be key in providing

attacking flair for Sheffield United and he could be set for a big season. An injury to key right-back John Brayford for half the season is a big blow heading into the campaign.

Making the best of the massively unbalanced squad left to him by Nigel Clough is the task for Nigel Adkins this season. In a division lacking an outstanding team, Sheffield United's resources, past experience of the division and the retaining of a squad that impressed in patches last season puts them above Wigan as favourites in my book. Sheffield United have consistently been chokers over the past few seasons but now looks like the time to set the record straight.

## Prediction

*League Champions*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

George Long  
George Willis  
Mark Howard

### Defenders

Bob Harris  
Craig Alcock  
Harrison McGahey  
Jay McEveley  
John Brayford  
Kieron Freeman  
Neill Collins  
Terry Kennedy

### Midfielders

Callum McFadzean  
Chris Basham  
Florent Cuvelier  
Jamal Campbell-Ryce  
James Wallace  
Kieran Wallace  
Louis Reed  
Martyn Woolford  
Paul Coutts  
Ryan Flynn  
Stefan Scougall

### Forwards

Billy Sharp  
Che Adams  
Conor Sammon (Loan)  
Diego De Girolamo  
Jamie Murphy  
Jose Baxter  
Marc McNulty  
Matt Done  
Michael Higdon



# Shrewsbury Town



**Last Season:** 2nd in League Two

**Manager:** Micky Mellon

## Star Player

James Collins - Returned to Shrewsbury last season and continued his predatory form in attack from his previous spell.

## Key Signing

Matt Tootle - Dependable ex-Crewe right-back once expected of very big things but injuries have held his career back thus far.

## Major Departure

Aaron Wildig - Drops back into League Two with Morecambe having never quite fulfilled his potential at Shrewsbury.

Shrewsbury entirely rebuilt themselves following relegation from this level two seasons ago and with a new manager and an almost entirely new team, the Shrews stormed to promotion from League Two last season. Micky Mellon's side were particularly formidable at home, taking 55 from an available 69 points at Greenhous Meadow. Mellon formed a side capable of mixing physicality with spells of genuinely positive, attacking football.

The core of last season's squad that brushed aside the challenge of League Two remains. Midfielder Ryan Woods and defenders Jermaine Grandison and Connor Goldson were impressive to the extent of interesting Championship clubs but all three remain. Top scorer James Collins has previous experience at this level which

should give Shrewsbury confidence that they can make the transition to League One fairly comfortably.

Transfer activity over the summer has been frankly scatter-gun, leaving Shrewsbury with what looks to be an unbalanced squad although ex-Crewe defender Matt Tootle looks like a decent signing amongst a mixed crop. Shrewsbury have several ingredients to be a surprise package this season, defensive robustness, strong home form and the ability to score from set-pieces. Shrewsbury should at the very least be able to avoid a relegation scrap and record a mid-table finish.

## Prediction

*Lower Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Callum Burton  
Jayson Leutwiler  
Mark Halstead

### Defenders

Connor Goldson  
Dominic Smith  
Jermaine Grandison  
Mark Ellis  
Mat Sadler  
Matt Tootle  
Mickey Demetriou  
Nathaniel Knight-Percival

### Midfielders

Abu Ogogo  
Darren McKnight  
James Caton  
James Wesolowski  
Jordan Clark  
Junior Brown  
Liam Lawrence  
Martin Woods  
Ryan Woods  
Shaun Whalley

### Forwards

James Collins  
Jean-Louis Akpa Akpro  
Liam McAlinden (Loan)  
Scott Vernon  
Tyrone Barnett

# Southend United



**Last Season:** 5th in League Two

**Manager:** Phil Brown

## Star Player

Daniel Bentley - Confident young goalkeeper, similar to Joe Hart, who already looks capable of performing at a higher level than League One.

## Key Signing

David Mooney - Arrives as something of a coup signing for Southend. Proven performer who can both score goals and create with his back to goal.

## Major Departure

Barry Corr - A big and brutish centre-forward who turned down the offer of a new contract to stay in League Two with Cambridge United.

Few expected Phil Brown to be any kind of success upon taking the Southend job from the well-regarded Paul Sturrock just over two years ago. Brown though has proven himself pragmatic enough to adapt to the demands of lower league football, fostering a strong collective identity in his squad on fairly limited resources. Victory in a tense play-off final against Wycombe provided an adequate denouement to two years of graft from a man who arrived at Southend as damaged goods.

That promotion season was built on the back of outstanding goalkeeping from academy product Daniel Bentley, Southend conceded an insanely low nine goals at home in the league. The core of the squad is largely workmanlike with hard-working pros such as John White, Michael

Timlin and Adam Barrett occupying key roles. Phil Brown has added quality in the transfer market in experienced strikers David Mooney and Noel Hunt along with set-piece expert Anthony Wordsworth.

The plan at Roots Hall is likely to be to continue to rely on Daniel Bentley's excellence in goal whilst nicking something at the other end. Southend probably rank amongst the weaker teams in the division but they will pack a punch for those expecting three easy points against them. Expect a few shock results along the way as Southend avoid relegation, things are heavily contingent on keeping Daniel Bentley at the club.

## Prediction

*Lower Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Daniel Bentley  
Paul Smith  
Ted Smith

### Defenders

Adam Barrett  
Adam Thompson  
Ben Coker  
Cian Bolger  
John White  
Luke Prosser

### Midfielders

Anthony Wordsworth  
David Worrall  
Gary Deegan  
Jack Payne  
Kevan Hurst  
Michael Timlin  
Myles Weston  
Ryan Leonard  
Will Atkinson

### Forwards

David Mooney  
Jason Williams  
Noel Hunt

# Swindon Town



**Last Season:** 4th in League One

**Manager:** Mark Cooper

## Star Player

Yaser Kasim - Iraqi international deep-lying playmaker who remains at the club despite interest from elsewhere.

## Key Signing

Fabien Robert - Attacking midfielder once of Doncaster who has impressed on trial at the club, offering guile in the final third.

## Major Departure

Massimo Luongo - Key player for the Australian national team who blossomed at Swindon but by the end was far too good for this level.

Having been utterly shellacked by a rampant Preston North End side at Wembley in May, Swindon have to start from pretty much square one this season. Midfielders Ben Gladwin and Massimo Luongo were sold to QPR for a reported £4 million whilst star keeper Wes Foderingham and top scorer Andy Williams departed on frees alongside a host of loan players returning to their parent clubs. At the start of pre-season manager Mark Cooper had just 11 players to work with.

A new crop of loan players and no-name trialists have been assembled to form a new Swindon Town side but if their previous track record in turning the likes of Yaser Kasim and Massimo Luongo into internationals is anything to go by, Swindon should not be written off. Kasim

remains around despite heavy interest from Championship sides, as does the marauding wing-back Nathan Byrne. Of the new signings, midfielders Fabien Robert and Jordan Williams are both ones to watch.

This season will be the true test of Swindon's methodology in the transfer market. The general feeling is that chairman Lee Power knows what he's doing when it comes to signing young, unproven players. The heavy player turnover doesn't help but a strong mid-table finish as Swindon figure out the strengths of a new set of players would represent a productive season that threatens potential disaster.

## Prediction

*Mid-Table*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Tyrell Belford

### Defenders

Brandon Ormonde-Ottewill  
Kevin Stewart (Loan)  
Nathan Byrne  
Nathan Thompson  
Raphael Rossi Branco

### Midfielders

Anton Rodgers  
Drissa Traore  
Jordan Williams (Loan)  
Lee Marshall  
Will Randall  
Yaser Kasim  
Fabien Robert

### Forwards

Jermaine Hylton  
Jonathan Obika  
Michael Smith  
Miles Storey

# Walsall



**Last Season:** 14th in League One  
**Manager:** Dean Smith

## Star Player

Tom Bradshaw - Livewire forward who makes Walsall tick, not just by scoring goals but his involvement in creating them too.

## Key Signing

Jason Demetriou - Cyprus international Right-back/midfielder who impressed previously at this level with Leyton Orient a few years ago.

## Major Departure

Richard O'Donnell - The key player in Walsall's tight defence last season, excellent shot-stopper and organiser who has joined Wigan.

Last season for Walsall was defined by periods with and without star striker Tom Bradshaw. Had the forward been available for maybe 10 more games than he was last time out, Walsall would probably have been in contention for the play-offs. During his regular spells out with injury though, Walsall struggled. That contrast was exemplified in the final month of the season where Walsall shifted comfortably into mid-table after beginning it in the relegation picture.

Those injury issues for Bradshaw has meant that Walsall have been able to retain their star striker after a breakthrough season. Not content to merely rely on Bradshaw to produce the goods, manager Dean Smith has strengthened the squad with the signings of Cypriot international full-back Jason Demetriou and attacking midfielder

Milan Lalkovic who impressed in patches during a loan spell two season ago. The loss of keeper Richard O'Donnell to Wigan is a blow but with midfielder Sam Mantom returning to fitness after a troubled last season, Walsall may well have the quality elsewhere to compensate.

For the first time in his four-and-a-half seasons in charge at Walsall, Dean Smith is heading into a season defined by strengthening the team rather than finding replacements for several key players. Whereas before it has felt like Walsall were one bad summer in the transfer market away from relegation, Saddlers fans should be looking forward to the season with optimism.

## Prediction

*Play-Off Outsiders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Craig MacGillivray  
Liam Roberts  
Neil Etheridge

### Defenders

Andy Taylor  
James O'Connor  
Jason Demetriou  
Paul Downing  
Rico Henry

### Midfielders

Adam Chambers  
Anthony Forde  
James Baxendale  
Kieron Morris  
Liam Kinsella  
Milan Lalkovic  
Reece Flanagan  
Romaine Sawyers  
Sam Mantom

### Forwards

Amadou Bakayoko  
Jordan Cook  
Jordan Murphy  
Tom Bradshaw

# Wigan Athletic



**Last Season:** 23rd in Championship

**Manager:** Gary Caldwell

## Star Player

Chris McCann - Should be a dominant presence in the centre of the park at this level, his experience will be key for Wigan.

## Key Signing

Will Grigg - Penalty-area striker with a proven record at this level with Walsall and MK 'Dons'. His partnership with Craig Davies will be key.

## Major Departure

Martyn Waghorn - Hard-working forward who would have been an asset for Wigan this season in the third-tier but was sold seemingly willingly.

A disastrous last season for Wigan on all fronts saw a former Premier League staple tumble into League One just two seasons after winning the FA Cup. There has been an attempt to wipe the slate clean at the club with young manager Gary Caldwell and Chairman Dave Sharpe promising a vibrant new era at the club. With Premier League money still sloshing around Wigan's coffers, that rebuilding process will be accelerated.

Caldwell and Sharpe have been hasty in attempting to usher in a new era at the club and might perhaps have been more prudent to build the team from a core of a squad that was last season many people's tips for at least a Championship play-off spot. The decisions to let players like James Perch, Martyn Waghorn and

James Tavernier go may prove to be unwise. Particularly so when there has been a mixture of journeymen, fresh-faced youngsters and punts on players with decent past records in this league.

There is the real danger here for the season to go completely off the rails given the amount of change that has happened. Wigan's saving grace is probably that there is a lack of genuine contenders from the rest of the pack this season. They will probably be able to get away with a slow start, a managerial sacking and mid-season shuffle and still at least be in contention for a Championship return in May.

## Prediction

*Automatic Promotion Contenders*

## Current Squad

### Goalkeepers

Lee Nicholls  
Richard O'Donnell

### Defenders

Andrew Taylor  
Craig Morgan  
Donervon Daniels  
Jason Pearce  
Jonjoe Kenny  
Juan Carlos García \*  
Leon Barnett  
Reece James

### Midfielders

Chris McCann  
David Perkins  
Don Cowie  
Emyr Huws  
Francisco Junior  
Jordan Flores  
Max Power  
Michael Jacobs  
Tim Chow

### Forwards

Billy McKay  
Craig Davies  
Grant Holt  
Ryan Jennings  
Sanmi Odelusi  
Will Grigg

\*Unavailable On Medical Grounds



# Stats

## Squad Average Age

1st	Bradford City	27.5	22nd	Colchester United	22.6
2nd	Doncaster Rovers	27.1	23rd	Swindon Town	22.5
3rd	Southend United	26.8	24th	Barnsley	21.7
17th Coventry City 23.9					

## Total Squad Appearances Last Season

1st	Sheffield United	771	22nd	Crewe Alexandra	398
2nd	Shrewsbury Town	705	23rd	Blackpool	345
3rd	Peterborough United	636	24th	Swindon Town	307
17th Coventry City 454					

## Total Squad Goals Last Season

1st	Peterborough United	124	21st	Port Vale	34
2nd	Sheffield United	80	22nd	Coventry City/Chesterfield	28
3rd	Scunthorpe United	76	24th	Crewe Alexandra	25

## Squad Size

1st	Sheffield United	31	21st	Fleetwood Town	19
2nd	Peterborough United	27	22nd	Crewe Alexandra/Bradford City	18
3rd	Shrewsbury Town	26	24th	Swindon Town	17
17th Coventry City 20					

## Player Turnover

1st	Blackpool	33	22nd	Rochdale	9
2nd	Wigan Athletic	28	23rd	Southend United	8
3rd	Fleetwood Town/Scunthorpe United	22	24th	Sheffield United	6
15th Coventry City 15					



# Ones To Watch

## Daniel Bentley



*Club: Southend (Academy Product)*  
*Position: Goalkeeper*  
*Last Season Apps (Goals): 42(0)*

A product of Southend's youth system, Daniel Bentley established himself as first-choice keeper, ahead of the experienced Paul Smith, since around the start of Phil Brown's reign at Roots Hall. A confident and commanding presence between the sticks, Bentley was pivotal in turning a fairly workmanlike Southend United side into one capable of winning promotion. Appropriately after two excellent years in goal for the Shrimpers, Bentley saved the winning penalty in a shoot-out victory over Wycombe Wanderers at Wembley to secure Southend's return to League One. With a number of illustrious suitors from the Championship and above, Bentley's days at Southend looks numbered but he should at least stick around for one more season.

## Nathan Cameron

Last seen at the Ricoh Arena struggling to head the ball in a forwards direction, Nathan Cameron dropped down to League Two with Bury and has played much more like the commanding centre-back he looked at Coventry City when Aidy Boothroyd first handed him his debut. Bury's final push towards promotion was built upon defensive solidity and it was captain Nathan Cameron at the back who provided the forceful presence at the back required to squeeze out results. Cameron deserves another chance to play at League One level and his experience of success at Bury and the jitters whilst at Coventry City will serve him for the good. Bookmakers have already suspended betting on him scoring at the Ricoh Arena this season.



*Club: Bury (Since Summer 2013)*  
*Position: Central Defence*  
*Last Season Apps (Goals): 46(2)*

## John Egan



*Club: Gillingham (Since Summer 2014)*  
*Position: Central Defence*  
*Last Season Apps (Goals): 45(4)*

Former Sunderland centre-back who first caught the eye whilst on loan at Southend back in the 2013/14 season. Some impressive performances with the Shrimpers raised interest from several League One sides but Gillingham were able to secure his signature last summer. Egan has delivered on his potential during his short time with Gillingham thus far with a series of commanding and assured performances in central defence that were pivotal in first keeping the Gills in League One and then as they push towards mid-table in the final months of the season. Having impressed so much last season, Gillingham have done well to keep Egan at the club and his continued excellence will be the platform for any success at Priestfield.

## Alfie Mawson

Having stood-out as a class apart in League Two last season whilst at loan with Wycombe, Alfie Mawson rejected the offer of a new contract at parent club Brentford in order to develop his career. Mawson spent the early part of his summer touring ambitious League One clubs in order to carefully pick his next move. The classy centre-back in the end chose Barnsley to confirm the Yorkshire side's position as one of the leading third-tier sides for developing young talents. Mawson is likely to benefit from regular first-team football at Oakwell and it is now a case of finding out whether he can continue his trajectory after a productive time last season with Wycombe. If he can, Barnsley will have one of the best young centre-backs outside the top two divisions.



*Club: Barnsley (Since Summer 2015)*  
*Position: Central Defence*  
*Last Season Apps (Goals): 45(6)*

## Callum Reilly



Club: Peterborough (Since Summer 2015)  
Position: Central Midfield  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 19(1)

Callum Reilly first emerged with Birmingham City during a difficult season at St Andrews where youngsters like himself, Nathan Redmond and Jack Butland were thrust into first-team responsibilities at Championship level. A dynamic, creative midfielder, in those early appearances many expected Reilly to eventually establish himself in the Blues' line-up. Reilly struggled to develop at the rate many expected him to and he found himself released in the summer after falling out of favour. Still young, Reilly offers creativity to a hard-running Burton midfield. That early experience of Championship-level football will help Callum Reilly as he looks to lead the way out potentially one of the division's surprise packages.

## Ryan Woods

Ryan Woods first broke into the team at Shrewsbury Town during their relegation from League One two seasons ago. Back then he was a raw talent being played slightly out of position at right-back and acquitted himself admirably. Woods spent last season in his preferred position of central midfield and played a key role in Shrewsbury's promotion from League Two. A technically strong midfielder with a ruggedness to his game, Woods has long been attracting attention from a higher level. There will be keen eyes on whether Woods can make a bigger impression on League One than he did last time, the young midfielder forms a crucial part of a Shrewsbury side who look set to knock a few noses out of joint this season.



Club: Shrewsbury (Academy Product)  
Position: Central Midfield/Right-Back  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 43(0)

## Emyr Huws



Club: Wigan (Since Summer 2014)  
Position: Central Midfield  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 16(0)

The technically skilful Welsh midfielder first made a splash in the Football League with a sensational goal against Burnley whilst on loan at Birmingham two years ago. Former Wigan boss Uwe Rosler was quick to snap up Emyr Huws last summer although the youngster endured a frustrating season, seeing Wigan relegated from the Championship and missing the second half of the season via injury. Now back to full fitness, Huws looks set to be an instrumental part of the positive, passing style of football that manager Gary Caldwell is looking to implement. Huws has the ability to dictate games with his range of passing and is a goal threat too, he should shine at this level, provided Wigan don't sell him amidst Championship interest.

## Sam Morsy

Sam Morsy was one of the integral players in Chesterfield's run from League Two to the League One play-offs under Paul Cook over the previous two seasons. A metronomic passing midfielder who set the tone in Chesterfield's possession-oriented style of play under Cook. This season provides different challenges for Morsy, with Cook replaced by Dean Saunders who prefers counter-attacking football, Morsy's passing range will be key in springing pacey forwards behind defences. Rumours are circling that he is set to join the exodus but he will be key if he stays. With other senior figures in the squad having departed over the summer, there is more pressure on Sam Morsy to guide Chesterfield through what could be a difficult season.



Club: Chesterfield (Since Summer 2013)  
Position: Central Midfield  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 37(2)



## Billy Clarke



Club: Bradford City (Since Summer 2014)  
Position: Attacking Midfield/Striker  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 36(13)

Crawley must be rueing the day they allowed ex-manager John Gregory to release the gifted Billy Clarke last summer. Bradford picked up the skilful forward on a free transfer and Clarke helped re-ignite a Bantams side whose momentum from dual Wembley appearances in 2012/13 had dissipated. Not only did Billy Clarke score 13 goals but his elusive play around the penalty area helped created many more too, especially with opposing defences already occupied by the brutish James Hanson. With big crowds expected at Valley Parade this season and some decent activity in the summer transfer market, Clarke's form this time round could light the blue touch paper for a promotion-challenging campaign.

## Joe Gormley

Following in a proud Peterborough tradition, the Posh have gone out and signed an obscure goal machine in Joe Gormley. The Northern Irishman scored 31 league goals for Cliftonville last season, earning the straightforward nickname of Joe 'The Goal'. Often though, prolific goalscorers from elsewhere in the British Isles struggle to replicate that form in the English leagues, the challenge for Joe Gormley is to prove that he is no 'flat-track bully'. Gormley has looked sharp both in and around the box in pre-season friendlies for Peterborough and the club are hopeful that he can provide the answer to last season's uncharacteristic goal-scoring woes at London Road. Peterborough have a knack for picking diamonds out of the rough.



Club: Peterborough United (Since Summer 2015)  
Position: Striker  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 37(31)

## Jamie Murphy



Club: Sheffield United (Since January 2013)  
Position: Attacking Midfield/Striker  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 43(11)

Jamie Murphy initially struggled to adapt to English football after signing for Sheffield United towards the end of Danny Wilson's reign at the club. Murphy sparked into life during that memorable run of form under Nigel Clough where the Blades went from relegation contenders to 7th place whilst making the FA Cup semi-final. A forward capable of playing anywhere across the front line or in a deeper-lying position, Jamie Murphy can tear past players at this level whilst scoring and creating goals. With new manager Nigel Adkins promising a more open and attacking style of football at Bramall Lane, Murphy should be able to flourish as Sheffield United push towards automatic promotion.

## Tom Bradshaw

It was a truly remarkable last season for Tom Bradshaw after joining Walsall in the summer. The forward had shown promise intermittently for Shrewsbury in five years with the club but very little to suggest just how important he would become at the Bescot Stadium. For a striker who once went nearly two years without scoring a goal, a return of 17 in 29 was extraordinary. For a striker who is not exactly physically prepossessing, his importance not just in scoring goals but creating them too was extraordinary. It was some achievement for Walsall to keep hold of him over the summer, although perhaps a patchy injury record helped them there. Injuries aside, Walsall will fancy a possible top six finish with him in the side.



Club: Walsall (Since Summer 2014)  
Position: Striker  
Last Season Apps (Goals): 29(17)



A decorative graphic consisting of 12 vertical blue bars of varying heights. The bars are arranged in two rows of six. The top row has bars of different heights, while the bottom row has bars of uniform height. The bars are set against a white background.

# **The Squad**

## Lee Burge

Position: GK      Age: 22      14/15 Apps(Goals): 18(0)

Enjoyed an important breakthrough towards the end of last season Lee Burge should now be looking to establish himself as unassailable first-choice this time out. Commands his penalty area expertly, especially for a player of his experience and can produce some wonderful reaction saves. His kicking can be erratic and he can be slow to release the ball. These seem like areas that will improve with experience. If he can overcome a few of his flaws, Burge should develop into an excellent keeper for at least this level of football.



## Reice Charles-Cook

Position: GK      Age: 21      14/15 Apps(Goals): 17(0)

Yet to make his first-team debut but Reice Charles-Cook enjoyed a productive previous campaign with a loan spell at Nuneaton as well as under-21 football. A popular member of the squad as a personality and reportedly also a talented footballer outside of the goal. Lee Burge's emergence as a viable option in goal has probably put paid to any hopes that Charles-Cook can establish himself as number one but there are possible opportunities this season in cup competitions or should Burge fall into a bad spell of form.

## Ryan Haynes

Position: LB      Age: 19      14/15 Apps(Goals): 26(1)

Broke into the first-team memorably at the start of last season, providing the assist for the winning goal during the homecoming game. Haynes' form tailed off towards the middle of the season as opposing defences identified him as a threat and doubled-up on him, seemingly affected badly by an erroneous diving call against Fleetwood during a characteristic surge down the left last December. The signing of Chris Stokes offers both the opportunity and challenge for him to win back his first-team place. Potentially a star player for the club in the making.



## Aaron Martin

Position: CB      Age: 25      14/15 Apps(Goals): 39(3)

Endured a sticky spell towards the end of last season where a few errors crept into his game and his lack of composure on the ball really stuck out. Aaron Martin has the capability to be a resolute defender at this level but he requires the utmost concentration to be able to do so. With a year left on his contract, he should be given chances to demonstrate the more positive aspects of his game. However he begins the season far from being first-choice and will need to impress in the short spells of minutes that he will be handed to give himself any chance of staking a claim for a starting spot.

## Reda Johnson

Position: CB/LB    Age: 27    14/15 Apps(Goals): 20(5)

With injuries curtailing his presence in the team to a few short bursts of appearances, it can be hard to form a non-extreme view of his abilities as a footballer. There have been several performances where he has been an absolutely dominant presence at the back with the odd forceful surge forward to help the team play out of defence. In between the heroic performances and the injuries there have also been a number of errors, usually based around a lack of pace or overzealousness in his play. It will be interesting to see if a more definitive opinion is possible to be formed this season.



## Aaron Phillips

Position: RB    Age: 21    14/15 Apps(Goals): 19(0)

After some very promising early appearances in his Coventry City career, Aaron Phillips has struggled to nail down a starting spot, mainly due to a constant stream of niggling injuries. At his best, Phillips is a high energy full-back who can expertly time his diving tackles and can support the attack intelligently. There have been mistakes made, a usual part of a young defender's development, but nothing too serious to suggest that regular football would not be a benefit for him. If his minor injury issues can be resolved, Phillips should be able to make the right-back spot his own.



## Sam Ricketts

Position: FB/CB    Age: 33    14/15 Apps(Goals): 13(1)

The key leadership figure in the squad this season, Sam Ricketts also offers versatility to a relatively young-looking backline. The former Wolves captain is primarily a full-back but has transitioned towards centre-back as his career has progressed. Whatever position he does play in this season, a lack of pace will be an issue, especially as Tony Mowbray likes his teams to play an open style of football. How that balances against the leadership qualities he will offer the defence is the key issue behind this signing. Ricketts will either be just what we need or it will be one season too many for him.



## Chris Stokes

Position: LB    Age: 24    14/15 Apps(Goals): 34(2)

Having arrived as an emergency loan signing and expected to make the transition up two divisions from his very first day at the club, Chris Stokes acquitted himself to the task better than many expected. After some early jitters where his lack of fitness and experience at League One levels led to some understandable errors, Stokes reached a level of solidity both defensively and going forward. Now a permanent member of the squad, Stokes has to prove that he can continue to prove with the pacier and more attacking Ryan Haynes breathing down his neck at left-back.





## Jordan Willis

Position: CB/RB    Age: 20    14/15 Apps(Goals): 34(o)

Pretty much a first-choice player for much of last season, Jordan Willis made his way through a season of highs and lows. Probably played his best football on the right-side of the three-man defence at the start of last season but could probably have done with a break in the side after his form deteriorated around October. A return to a four-man defence saw Willis played at right-back instead of his preferred centre-back spot. Lacks the ability to get forward to excel at full-back and will probably be hoping for more opportunities in central defence this season.



## Jack Finch

Position: CM/CB    Age: 19    14/15 Apps(Goals): 16(o)

Looked quietly impressive in his early appearances for the club, Jack Finch was probably over-played towards the middle of last season. A very solid player technically and with the physical frame to assert himself on midfields at this level, there is an excellent central midfielder waiting to get out in Jack Finch. Unfortunately it appears a section of supporters have already labelled him as a dreaded 'sideways passing' midfielder whilst he is still learning to assert himself at first-team level. Competition in central midfield looks to be tough, time is on Finch's side ahead of a season of development.

## John Fleck

Position: CM    Age: 23    14/15 Apps(Goals): 44(o)

John Fleck frustrates, as soon as you think you have his qualities as a footballer pegged down, he'll completely turn those expectations on your head. At times he looks disinterested in games, happy to go through the motions knowing that he has just about enough talent to see him through. Out of nowhere though, Fleck shows himself capable of all the qualities you would want from a central midfielder, both creatively and even physically. His importance in the team has stemmed from being better than everyone else but he has never been consistent carry the team forward.



## Ruben Lameiras

Position: LM    Age: 20    14/15 Apps(Goals): 11(o)

Arrives at the club as an almost complete unknown having progressed through the Tottenham academy and experienced first-team football in a brief spell in the Swedish leagues with Åtvidabergs. Has looked one of our sharper creative players in pre-season on either the left of midfield or playing just behind the striker. His slight frame and lack of first-team experience raise concerns that he may struggle to adapt to the demands of a full League One campaign but it seems he deserves a chance to impress after a successful trial.

## Ivor Lawton

Position: CM      Age: 19      14/15 Apps(Goals): 0(0)

A former youth-team captain and a passionate supporter of the club, Ivor Lawton seems to be a fans' favourite in waiting. His style of play is described as being a tough-tackling, energetic midfielder, it seems Lawton is the kind of tigerish central midfielder that this club has lacked for some time. At just 19 years old, he should not be too disheartened by his current lack of appearances although his use as a centre-back at under-21 level cannot be helping his cause. Hopefully this season will finally be the first chance to see Ivor Lawton in action.



## James Maddison

Position: CM/ST      Age: 18      14/15 Apps(Goals): 12(2)

The boy wonder, James Maddison very quickly became an important player for the first-team towards the end of the season. His level of technical skill, tactical awareness and the confidence he has in his own ability made him the creative spark that the team looked toward when he was introduced from the bench in the final games of last season. It seems liked Maddison is fated for much bigger things that League One with Coventry City, Premier League suitors are already circling above him. One of the themes of this season looks set to be the further development of an exciting talent.



## Jim O'Brien

Position: RM/CM      Age: 27      14/15 Apps(Goals): 44(6)

There were spells last season where Jim O'Brien looked to be top-class player for this level that we thought we had signed, unfortunately it was balanced out by spells where he looked to be part of some of the major problems in the squad. Jim O'Brien is at his best when the game is being played at pace and does not have too much time to deliberate on what he is going to do on the ball. An uplift in form, along with several important goals, showed that O'Brien in a cohesive team set-up is a good player and we should be looking forward to more of the best from him this time out.



## Danny Swanson

Position: CM/LM      Age: 28      14/15 Apps(Goals): 26(2)

Was never really handed a consistent enough run of games last season to form a true judgement on and after a decent loan spell with St Johnstone in the Scottish top-flight it would seem crazy not to give Danny Swanson a chance to impress this season. At his very best, he is a live-wire, capable of drifting past players at ease in midfield and attempting audacious long-range efforts. At Coventry City though, his best has been all too rare and even when it has come, it hasn't resulted in goals. There is a good player there but the challenge is finding him a place on the pitch to excel.

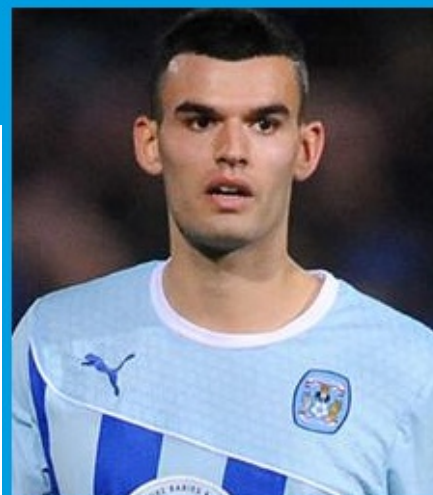




## Conor Thomas

Position: CM      Age: 21      14/15 Apps(Goals): 16(0)

It was a strange last season for Conor Thomas, when he was at his worst run of form he was a fixture in the starting line-up but when his performances actually improved, he could not get into the team. At his best, Conor Thomas is a dynamic box-to-box midfielder who can mix the technical elements of the game with the physical. Has impressed Tony Mowbray in pre-season training thus far but with John Fleck and Romain Vincelot looking like first-choice, he will have to dislodge two excellent central midfielders who have a more clear role in the team.



## Romain Vincelot

Position: CM      Age: 29      14/15 Apps(Goals): 27(2)

Combative defensive midfield player of the like we haven't seen for a long time at the club. His role in the team will be to provide the character and bite that we have been badly lacking at the club in recent times whilst also freeing up our more attack-minded players to express themselves. Has been consistently a stand-out performer in this level and offers an aerial threat from set-pieces, surprisingly so for his modest stature. Recovering from a knee injury that curtailed a difficult last season but arrives with as close to a guarantee of form as we were likely to find.



## Adam Armstrong

Position: ST      Age: 18      14/15 Apps(Goals): 11(0)

Young forward with a burgeoning reputation at parent Newcastle United. Offers explosive pace to what is otherwise a one-paced looking attack. Issues surround his lack of experience of lower league football and the fact that he is only here on a half-season loan and it seems like it will go one of two ways. He'll either be a raging success in his short spell with the club and earn a recall to Newcastle or loan at a Championship club or he'll still be developing and have to put this loan down to learning experience.



## George Thomas

Position: AM/ST      Age: 18      14/15 Apps(Goals): 6(0)

In the brief appearances he was given last season, George Thomas demonstrated that he is a young player with massive potential. Either as an out-and-out striker or a deeper-lying forward, Thomas excels in making brief interchanges of possession with his teammates and getting into dangerous areas. Yet to score his first league goal for the club but a spectacular finish against Portsmouth in pre-season suggests that the event is surely an inevitability. Not quite regular first-team ready but getting very close.



# Marcus Tudgay

Position: ST      Age: 32      14/15 Apps(Goals): 22(4)

For the first half of last season, Marcus Tudgay looked set to join the list of dud signings that Steven Pressley had made at this football club. After being given a rare opportunity at the start of January against Walsall, Tudgay started to show what he really offered this team. A hard-working and very competitive presence in attack, Tudgay offered the ability to make balls forward stick more than they had been doing. His job this time round will be much the same, either bringing the midfield into play as a starter or helping to run down the clock as a substitute.



# Stats

Player Name	Date of Birth	Age	Coventry City		14/15		Career		Joined From
			Apps	Goals	Apps	Goals	Apps	Goals	
Lee Burge	09/01/1993	22.6	18	0	18	0	35	0	Academy
Reice Charles-Cook	08/04/1994	21.3	0	0	17	0	22	0	Bury
Ryan Haynes	27/09/1995	19.9	29	1	26	1	29	1	Academy
Reda Johnson	21/03/1988	27.4	20	5	20	5	144	24	Sheff Wed
Aaron Martin	29/09/1989	25.9	39	0	39	3	97	5	Yeovil
Aaron Phillips	20/11/1993	21.7	30	1	19	0	47	2	Academy
Sam Ricketts	11/10/1981	33.8	0	0	13	1	452	12	Wolves
Chris Stokes	08/03/1991	24.4	16	1	34	2	151	8	Forest Green
Jordan Willis	24/08/1994	21.0	66	0	34	0	66	0	Academy
Jack Finch	06/08/1996	19.0	16	0	16	0	16	0	Academy
John Fleck	24/08/1991	24.0	122	6	44	0	170	6	Rangers
Jim O'Brien	28/09/1987	27.9	44	6	44	6	232	17	Barnsley
Danny Swanson	28/12/1986	28.6	15	0	26	2	238	22	Peterborough
Conor Thomas	29/10/1993	21.8	97	1	16	0	97	1	Academy
Romain Vincelot	29/10/1985	29.8	0	0	27	2	231	19	L. Orient
James Maddison	23/11/1996	18.7	12	2	12	2	12	2	Academy
Ruben Lameiras	22/12/1994	20.6	0	0	11	0	11	0	Åtvidabergs
George Thomas	24/03/1997	18.4	7	0	6	0	7	0	Academy
Marcus Tudgay	03/02/1983	32.5	22	4	22	4	386	87	Nottm Forest
Adam Armstrong	10/02/1997	18.5	0	0	11	0	15	0	Newcastle

## Oldest Player



**Sam Ricketts**  
33.8 Years Old

## Most Experienced Player



**Sam Ricketts**  
452 Career Apps

## Top Career Goalscorer



**Marcus Tudgay**  
87 Career Goals

## Most Club Appearances



**John Fleck**  
122 Club Appearances

## Top Club Goalscorer



**Jim O'Brien**  
7 Club Goals

## Academy Products In First Team



**8 Players**  
40% of Squad



# **The Departed**



## Adam Barton

Position: CM      Age: 24      14/15 Apps(Goals): 27(0)

Never really showed more than glimpses of promise during his time here, Adam Barton's languid presence in midfield does not seem like it will be any great loss heading into this season. Deserves praise for the way he fought his way back into the team after being completely frozen out at the start of the season and he looked surprisingly effective on the right of midfield towards the end of last season. Ultimately, Adam Barton was the kind of decent technical player with a streak of mental weakness that has seen this club sink towards the bottom of League One, he had to go.



## Al Bangura

Position: CM      Age: 27      14/15 Apps(Goals): 0(0)

The signing of Al Bangura was a strange one and seemed to suggest that Tony Mowbray did not realise how good Conor Thomas and Jack Finch were. A tough-tackling midfielder, Bangura was rarely handed even a spot on the bench. It would have been interesting to see how good he really was but it seems like he just was not quite good enough for the club.

## Andy Webster

Position: CB      Age: 33      14/15 Apps(Goals): 30(0)

Signed to be the leader of the defence at the start of our time at Sixfields, Andy Webster never really provided that commanding presence that you would expect from the phrase 'defensive leader'. Webster did have a few spells whilst with the club where he looked a classy presence at the back, particularly when the team deployed a deeper defensive line and his lack of pace was less exposed. After falling out of favour completely in his final months at the club and younger, more mobile centre-backs coming through, there was little in use in keeping him around for this season.



## Blair Turgott

Position: RM      Age: 21      14/15 Apps(Goals): 3(1)

Handed few chances after signing for the club at the end of the January transfer window, Blair Turgott will be feeling that he was never really handed a fair chance at the club. The longest that was ever seen of him in a Coventry City shirt came in the away game against Peterborough where he scored the vital winning goal. A pacey and energetic player, there were times when the team could have done with his talents, especially as loanee Sanmi Odelusi, a similar type of player, lost form in the final month of the season.



## Danny Pugh

Position: LM/LB    Age: 32    14/15 Apps(Goals): 5(0)

It is unfair somewhat to blame a player for being injured, especially when injuries have not been a problem for them during their career but we could have done with more from Danny Pugh than we ended up getting from him. Two assists on his debut against Bradford provided the peak of his Coventry City career but Ryan Haynes' early season form and the start of his injury problems prematurely ended his time at the club. By all reports, he was was a consummate professional despite being out for most of the campaign, it was a real shame not to have had him available for longer.



## Frank Nouble

Position: ST    Age: 23    14/15 Apps(Goals): 31(6)

Frank Nouble should be one of the best strikers at League One level, at the very least. Not only is he physically strong but he is blessed with pace which makes him unstoppable on his day. However, those days did not come enough and instead we saw him too often fail to make any impact on games when we needed him to. When Frank Nouble is bad it can be akin to playing with 10 men or handing the opposition another player, he seems uncomfortable with being the powerful target man style striker that he should be. One day, Frank Nouble will put it all together consistently, it will not be at this club.



## Shaun Miller

Position: ST    Age: 27    14/15 Apps(Goals): 23(1)

Despite some impressive early appearances for the club, Shaun Miller was strangely not afforded the opportunities that others in the squad were handed. A nippy striker who played with purpose and energy when introduced, there seems to be something about Shaun Miller that managers and not fans see that has seen him handed so few opportunities. His subsequent poor record whilst out on loan though suggests that perhaps Miller's lack of chances in the team was more justified than it seemed at first.



## Simeon Jackson

Position: ST    Age: 28    14/15 Apps(Goals): 28(3)

In contrast to Shaun Miller, Simeon Jackson was given more than enough chances to impress in the starting line-up and just did not seem to take them. A shadow of the pacey and threatening striker he was earlier in his career with Gillingham and Norwich, Jackson was slow, easy to deal with and took the amount of touches in the box a striker playing without confidences takes. There was some promise in his early appearances, particularly when he formed a strike partnership with Frank Nouble but it seems the club was prudent in only handing Jackson a year-long contract last summer.





# Youth Prospects

## Cian Harries

Position: CB/LB

Age: 18

A youth international with Wales, Cian Harries was successfully converted into a ball-playing centre-back at youth-team level last season. Upon seeing him play with the under-21s, Tony Mowbray was glowing in his praise for Cian Harries and it seems like the youngster is not that far away from first-team football. His style of play is reported to be high-risk with the kind of raking passes he makes out of defence but it seems like he is extremely comfortable at centre-back and that we will get our first glimpses of him in the near future.



## Devon Kelly-Evans

Position: LM/LB

Age: 18

A versatile player who can operate anywhere down the left flank or in central midfield, Devon Kelly-Evans along with his twin brother Dion have become a fixture covering either flank for the youth teams with their high energy style of play. Devon Kelly-Evans was the first of the twins to be handed experience with the first-team by way of a pre-season friendly last summer where he created a goal away to Stevenage. Still seems some distance away from first-team football but Devon Kelly-Evans looks to be one of a number of promising youngsters coming through at academy level currently.

## Dion Kelly-Evans

Position: RB

Age: 18

His brother Devon may have been first to pick up involvement at first-team level but Dion Kelly-Evans now appears the closest of the two to actually making an appearance for Coventry City in the near future. More defensively minded than his twin brother, Dion Kelly-Evans has started to nail down the right-back spot as his preferred position, although he is similarly as versatile as his brother. With Aaron Phillips and Jordan Willis far from secure as right-backs at first-team level, Dion Kelly-Evans may well get a chance at some point this season.



## Ben Stevenson

Position: CM

Age: 18

An elegant ball-playing midfielder likened to Michael Carrick by his coaches at youth-team level, Ben Stevenson formed an effective partnership whilst with the under-18s with James Maddison. With the number of central midfielders currently being developed by the club, it seems like this season will be another one of development for Ben Stevenson but the staff at the club already believe that there is a potential star in the making in Ben Stevenson.



# **Pre-Season Round-Up**



## vs Nuneaton (A) 0-0

11th July 2015

The first pre-season friendly was largely a warm-up exercise with Tony Mowbray selecting two different line-ups in each half at Liberty Way. The first-half line-up, much closer to a full-strength one, put Nuneaton under pressure in the opening exchanges but lacked the killer instinct to put our seventh-tier neighbours to the sword. The second-half team featured a number of youth-team players and were better matched by Nuneaton as the game fizzled out for a goal-less draw. Trialist Ruben Lameiras caught the eye and Reice Charles-Cook made his first senior appearance for the club a year after signing in the only two notable events of the game.



*Line-Up (1st-half, 4-2-3-1):* Charles-Cook; Phillips, Willis, Martin, Haynes; Finch, Fleck; O'Brien, Maddison, Lameiras; Tudgay.

*Line-Up (2nd-half, 4-3-3):* Charles-Cook; De. Kelly-Evans, Ricketts, Harries, Stokes; Vincelot, C. Thomas, Lawton; Swanson, Ngankam, G Thomas.



## vs Portsmouth (N) 1-2

21st July 2015

Typically for pre-season, this was a tie that raised more questions than answers. League Two Portsmouth recorded a fairly comfortable win in Havant, capitalising on two moments of sloppy play from the Sky Blues to secure a fairly easy win. The causes for concern will have been a sloppiness in possession from the Sky Blues and the inability to carve out clear-cut chances. George Thomas scored a magnificent goal to give the team hope in the second-half but the lack of a threat in the opposition half meant that it was merely a false dawn as Tony Mowbray pondered his next moves in the transfer market.

*Line-Up (4-4-2):* Burge; Willis (De. Kelly-Evans), Ricketts (Harries), Johnson (Martin), Di. Kelly-Evans; O'Brien (Lawton), Fleck (Finch), Vincelot (Stevenson) Maddison (Swanson); G. Thomas, Tudgay (Lameiras).

## vs Luton Town (A) 1-1

25th July 2015

Tony Mowbray named a side without a recognised striker for the trip to a physical Luton Town side. A combination of James Maddison and Ruben Lameiras in nominal striker positions gave the team a fluid look as they moved the ball forward although they ultimately lacked the teeth in the final third to put Luton to the sword. James Maddison eventually tucked away a tap-in after Danny Swanson and Ruben Lameiras combined expertly to test Luton's keeper. With Mowbray looking to give the players as many minutes on the pitch as possible, the team tired as the game wore on and conceded a sloppy equaliser in the final minutes of the tie.



*Line-Up (4-4-2):* Charles-Cook; Phillips, Ricketts, Johnson, Haynes; O'Brien (De. Kelly-Evans), Vincelot, Fleck, Swanson (Di. Kelly-Evans); Maddison, Lameiras (G. Thomas).



## vs Cambridge United (A) 0-1

28th July 2015

After a promising performance at Luton Town the Saturday prior, this performance against a strong Cambridge United side appeared to be a step backwards. The Sky Blues lacked both a killer touch in front of goal and the ability to control possession as comfortably as they had done at Kenilworth Road. Cambridge exploited a lack of physicality from the team throughout the 90 minutes, scoring their only goal of the night from a set-piece. It was a reminder to Tony Mowbray, if it was needed, that greater intensity was needed from his team as well as some additions to his attacking ranks. Given that it was pre-season, those concerns were hardly problematic.



*Line-Up (4-4-2):* Burge; Willis (Di. Kelly-Evans), Ricketts, Martin, Stokes; Swanson (O'Brien), Vincelot, Fleck, Lameiras; Maddison, Tudgay (G. Thomas).

Oxford United



## vs Oxford United (N) 0-0

1st August 2015

Despite the addition of a more natural striker to the team in Adam Armstrong, Coventry City were second-best in their final pre-season friendly against Oxford United. A bright start to the game from the Sky Blues was curtailed by the familiar woes in the final third. Oxford United then dominated large portions of the rest of the game and should have won had it not been for the goalkeeping of Lee Burge and a missed penalty from their striker Danny Hylton. Coventry City looked a long distance from the finished article as Tony Mowbray entered the final week of preparations for the new season.

*Line-Up (4-2-3-1):* Burge; Willis (Di. Kelly-Evans), Ricketts, Johnson, Stokes (Haynes); Vincelot (Phillips), Fleck (Finch); Swanson (De. Kelly-Evans), Maddison (Lawton), Lameiras (Tudgay); Armstrong (Stevenson).



# **Articles & Musings**



# Lee Burge And The Homegrown Revulsion

There are jitters amongst the fan-base about the prospect of Lee Burge starting the season as first-choice goalkeeper. Despite some much improved form towards the end of last season, there appears to be a nervousness at the concept of a home-grown player who is still some distance from the finished article occupying a key spot in the first team this season.

Rightly or wrongly, the concern with Lee Burge being a key player next season is mirrored to a less extreme extent with other academy-produced talents such as Jordan Willis, Conor Thomas and Ryan Haynes having either been written off entirely or having severe question marks against them. Part of it is a philosophical issue between producing your own talent or using the transfer market to build the identity of the squad, which is an interesting debate to have at lower league clubs.

The element of the debate around our home-grown that I find the most frustrating is when it gets to the point where it is assumed that there is

a Coventry-ness about the players that makes them inadequate for the first-team. There are exceptions, James Maddison and Callum Wilson, but there is something of an other-ness about these brilliant talents that rules them out of analysing the quotidian Coventry City academy player.

I put this partially down to a lack of self-esteem from the core fan-base of the club. With so few having seen a successful Coventry City team, we assume there is something in the very fabric of the club that sets us up for failure. Additionally, if any of us had genuine footballing talent, we would be Conor Thomas or Jordan Willis or Lee Burge. That thought that if we were on the pitch for Coventry City and we were going to be part of yet another dismal team performance is the stuff of nightmares that we don't want to see.

Bringing in players not produced by the clubs distances ourselves from that anxiety dream of seeing ourselves on the pitch. Players produced from other clubs don't arrive with the baggage of

that Coventry-ness, we can attach the hope that they are going to be everything that we currently don't have, at least we get to see them actually play for us.

Back on to Lee Burge, he is at the stage where if he can learn from the early mistakes that he has made, he will become an asset for the team. Those early nervy performances were enough for many to write him off, and there is a lingering concern about him that any second he is about to revert into the bag of nerves he was when he was dropping clangers against Peterborough and Leyton Orient and kicking simple square passes into the parking spaces at the Arena Tesco.

To have gone through what was a heightened harrowing learning experience, getting sent off against Worcester for petulantly kicking out at a semi-pro player trying to wind him up which led to one of the most embarrassing defeats in the clubs history, and then to have held his nerve in helping the club secure survival deserves credit. In particular, his performance in that win over MK 'Dons' where his hands were magnets for any aerial balls sent into the box shows that he has qualities that many current League One goalkeepers lack.

You only have to look back at the two utterly average third-tier calibre goalkeepers that we signed on loan last season to know that Burge is not noticeably better or worse than a Ryan Allsop or a Jamie Jones. Part of the debate around Burge this season is that his position is too important to allow a youngster still learning the ropes to hold, yet there is reasonable evidence to say that he is at least as good as an average League One keeper less than 20 games into his Coventry City career.

The clearest weakness in his game is his kicking which can be very erratic, especially when he is receiving back-passes under pressure. That is an area though that will improve with further experiences of receiving the ball with players chasing him down in game situations, where he can get used to that pressure, hone his technique and make better decisions. However even if he can't improve his kicking, there are many keepers who play at League One level whose

kicking is similarly poor, Roy Carroll is an example that springs to mind.

A vast majority of the goals we conceded from direct free-kicks last season came when Lee Burge was in goal. Sometimes you have to hold your hand up and admit that the technique of the opposition free-kick taker was supreme. For most of those goals that Burge conceded from free-kicks though, he clearly got his positioning wrong. Again, it's the kind of error that you can only improve on through experience and it's Lee Burge's responsibility to avoid repeating those errors.

Lee Burge improved as the season wore on and the pressure increased, the question that I ask myself with him is what if we had never dallied around with loan goalkeepers for the majority of the season? How much better would Burge have been for the extra games that we could have played him in? Could he avoided getting involved in the red card incident against Worcester?

Perhaps it was all necessary for him to adapt to first-team football. Perhaps if we had had given him the opportunity at the start of last season, we would now be worrying about losing him to a higher level. Perhaps he never gets better than he is now.

We can't change what has happened to get Lee Burge to the stage where he is now as a goalkeeper. He has made mistakes as he has adapted to the step up to first-team football but he has also put in some strong performances along the way. We could bring in a better goalkeeper than he is currently but Lee Burge deserves the opportunity to demonstrate that he can continue to improve and reach a level that surpasses what any potential replacements could reach.

The key stage in a young player's development is how they make the step up between those early learning performances and establishing themselves at first-team level. It takes a strong mentality to believe that you belong as a professional footballer, along with what is required to cope with the pressure of fans whose

focus is solely on their team winning as many games as possible. The pressure is on Lee Burge to prove both to himself and a wary fan-base that he is good enough for the challenge of regular first-team football.

It is by no means guaranteed that Lee Burge will become the goalkeeper that I personally think he is capable of being. Why I am confident that Burge will eventually make the step up is that he has shown a capability to learn from his mistakes. It shows that he is self-analytical to know his strengths and weaknesses and improve upon them. He isn't coming into his season off the back of a sensational run of form, he is on a learning curve and improving along the way. That is why I have faith in Lee Burge.





## James Maddison - Hometown Hero

There is a resistance to building up talented young players at this football club. So often we see young players fall by the wayside almost inexplicably. For every Callum Wilson, there are several Billy Daniels, Shaun Jeffers or Louis Garners that end up falling off the radar completely. Ashley Cain looked like he could really do something with the club, fell into obscurity. Andy Whing looked like a solid Championship full-back, ended up playing most of his career in League Two. Kevin Thornton was a wunderkind, became a non-league journeyman. The failures clearly outnumber the success stories.

That is why there is a nervousness and hesitancy to get overly excited about the talents of James Maddison. He may look like one of the most naturally gifted footballers we have ever produced but is he actually as good as we think he is? If he is already good enough to be a creative presence at first-team level at 18 years-old, is he actually going to continue to get better? If he is really this good, what on earth is he doing

at Coventry City?

Arsenal currently have a Coventry-born player themselves who have been in the same school year as Maddison in Daniel Crowley. Both are creative midfielders, both look to have a bright future ahead of them. Maddison though is on the verge already of becoming a first-team regular, Crowley has joined League One rivals Barnsley on loan this summer. Roughly the same age and playing at the same level this season, it will be interesting to see whether the decision to stick with his local team or pursuing a better footballing education at a big club leads to the better career.

There are benefits and drawbacks of choosing to become the 'Hometown Hero' over testing yourself at a higher level. The pressure of carrying the hopes and dreams of a city on your back will be both exhilarating and a daunting prospect for Maddison. For most Coventry City fans, James Maddison is the great hope heading into this season and a possible revival of the club's fortunes. His performances won't be

judged on the level of a promising young player but as a key first-team player.

Some players clearly thrive on being the big fish in the small pond and picking up first-team experience at the earliest possible opportunity. Most of us who have seen Maddison play will know that his level of technique and tactical understanding of the game is already quite clearly above League One level. The physicality of the division is a concern but Maddison is able to glide past burly defenders without them even getting close enough to sneeze on him.

Providing he does live up to the hype this season and can cement a starting spot in the team, the other aspect of the 'Hometown Hero' debate is whether the player is in a comfort zone rather than continuing to push himself. There is a growing suspicion that Maddison is something of a diver, because he is such a talented player compared to the rest of the squad, he is mostly being defended by fans and the manager who are demanding better protection. If he was less important to the team, the brief would simply be to pick himself up and get on with the game.

In this early phase of his career though, it is entirely unfair on him to criticise his decision to stay at the club he supports. The upshot of his choice for us as Coventry City fans is that we have been given the opportunity to watch a player with a talent that belongs at a higher level than where we currently are develop and blossom.

As last season reached its denouement and James Maddison made his return to the first-team following a back injury, his importance to the team grew and grew. Initially utilised as a wild-card impact sub, giving opposing defences something different to think about, Maddison became a player that others were turning to to change games. There was no-one else in the squad who could drift past players in tight areas like Maddison could and when we were looking for goals, he was the one player who could make an impact in the final third whilst more senior players shrunk in that area of the pitch.

It was a wonderful moment for his development and the club that he managed to get the winning goal against Crawley on the final day of last season. It may have made no tangible difference to our survival hopes but it ended a miserable season on a positive note and gave us a reason to believe heading into a new campaign. It also nipped in the bud some murmurs that he was perhaps all bark and no bite in his promising cameos.

In pre-season Maddison has returned knowing that this season could well be his chance to shine. He has orchestrated our attacking play whilst reinforcements had been slow in coming and it seems like he will be a central influence in a fluid interchange of attacking players this season. Maddison is perhaps lacking just a little cutting edge to his game in the final third but he has already demonstrated that he is a cut above the more experienced creative players in this squad which makes him so important heading into the season.

As it gets closer and closer to the point where we can abandon some of the caution with James Maddison, so too does the day that he moves on to bigger and better things. From my very first glimpse of him, a dreary away defeat at Crewe where his first touch of the ball was a back-heel, my gut feeling was that his days with us were already numbered. His star may prove to be too bright for Coventry City but just to see the early phases of James Maddison's development will be a treat to savour this season.



## Reda Johnson Complex

After making such a big impact at the beginning and end of last season, Reda Johnson defined last season in the hearts and minds of most of the fan-base. A long injury absence at the start of the second-half of last season had us nearly forgetting just what difference Reda Johnson made to the team. His performances in the final games though provided a reminder of just what he was all about.

Reda Johnson arrived at the club in fairly inauspicious circumstances, just one day after the departure of Callum Wilson. An injury in pre-season had many wondering whether his signing was yet another poor judgement call by Steven Pressley in the transfer market. It took a two-goal debut against Bradford on the opening day of the season to begin the cult of Reda Johnson.

Every attacking set-piece felt like a chance to score a goal, every aerial ball from the opposition felt like it would be returned with interest. Reda Johnson captained the club for the big homecoming game against Gillingham and

repelled everything the opposition could throw at us to help secure what was a nervy and narrow victory.

Another goal against Yeovil in the following home game helped ignite the season. The team were ahead on a cold Tuesday night against Scunthorpe, seemingly on their way to an easy win which would have been our third in a row. And then we saw the other side of the on-pitch Reda Johnson, the recklessness.

It may have not been a head-butt by bar-room brawl standards but by moving his head towards Scunthorpe's Lyle Taylor in such an obvious manner, the referee had little choice but to send him off. We probably should have held onto the win regardless but it became quickly apparent that Reda Johnson left such a massive void in the team. For a player with such constant injury problems too, he could have avoided that sending-off and the season might have been different.



That suspension was then extended thanks to his first injury of the season. Seven league games past without Reda Johnson in the team and the team failed to win any of them, slipping into the lower reaches of the table with confidence at rock bottom. His return game against Peterborough provided a reminder of just what we missed in his absence, the team recording a memorable comeback from two goals down to win 3-2.

Yet that we were even two goals down in the first place was partly Johnson's fault. He gave the ball way in the lead up to Peterborough's first goal and then conceded the free-kick which led to the second. It was clear that Reda Johnson's charisma helped inspire a rousing comeback, but it would become typical of the season that his personality helped salvage us from tough situations partially of his own making.

The debate with Reda Johnson will always be where the balance lies between what he adds to the team and what he takes away. In the Colchester home game towards the end of last season, he dominated Chris Porter in the air in a way that no other defender at this level had been capable of doing. It was more a reminder of what could have been had he stayed fit for longer rather than being a genuine sign of encouragement.

For every Colchester performance though he has also had games where we might have done better without him. The brash decision to take the penalty against Worcester was the most memorable occasion where his personality was counter-productive to the team winning the game. But he has also had games where his performances as a defender have not been as all-conquering as we expect them to be, such as in the nightmarish end of season defeat to Crewe at the Ricoh Arena.

The underlying conundrum to all of this is whether we might have actually avoided the last season's struggle had we signed someone else rather than Reda Johnson last summer. The team did eventually show that it was capable of winning without him in the team, perhaps if he

hadn't been a consideration around the squad in the first place, other more suitable characters would have stepped up to the plate. Even if they didn't, perhaps it would have been better to use the money we spent on his wages to bring in a different kind of leader, or at least someone similar to Johnson who was fit for more than half the season.

But then Reda Johnson may just simply be a one-of-a-kind player at this level who delivers the kind of impact when fit that alternatives could not. Some of his on-pitch deficiencies could be explainable by the fact that he struggles to get a run of games together due to injury. Additionally, had there been other leaders in the squad last season, his absences would probably have taken less away from the squad. It is ultimately unfair to blame the poor performances of other players on the absence of one individual, it's not like Johnson gets injured on purpose or by doing anything particularly stupid (urine colour aside).

The risk that Johnson would inspire another side at this level was too great to not at least try and keep him for this season. Tony Mowbray certainly feels like certain things can be done to mitigate the injury issues, such as less intense training for him, a la Ledley King. Additionally, by signing other leadership figures on the squad, the personality of the team should be less reliant on a player who has never played more than 30 games in a league season in his entire career.





# Waiting For John Fleck

Having grown up in an age where part of the consumption of football has heavily involved video games, the concept that a player's progression is linear is deeply-ingrained into my thinking, and I think many other football fans of my age. If a player at 17 years-old is able to hold his own at first-team level, the natural assumption is to believe that he will eventually stand out once he reaches that peak.

A lot of the hype that has surrounded John Fleck throughout his career has been down to this phenomenon of assuming that talented teenagers improve with time. Fleck was a prodigy at 16 years-old for Rangers, playing in the Scottish Cup final whilst still studying for his GCSEs. His league debut just a few months later saw him winning man of the match, such a strong start had many assuming that greatness was only in a matter of time.

Fleck never seemed to really kick on from that great start at Ibrox and probably ended up going backwards towards the end of his time there.

Careers are decided by performances on the pitch and a lack of opportunities must have led to the frustration that his destiny was getting away from him. Still, Andy Thorn signed him for Coventry City not because of his recent performances for his club but rather the promise that John Fleck was a special talent waiting to be unleashed.

For much of Fleck's first season at the club there was a confusion over what exactly he did well and what his best position was. His tag as the 'Scottish Wayne Rooney' led to the assumption that he was an attacking, forward-thinking player. Unlike Rooney though, Fleck's primary attributes were not his mobility and energy on the pitch, emphatically not. It was clear that Fleck was a gifted player, his left foot providing quality every time it met the ball, but attached to the rest of his body, there was no role for him on the pitch.

Fleck quickly became a peripheral player at the club with Robins deciding that he could get better

results in his 4-4-1-1 system with different players. It seemed like it would become a classic tale of promising teen footballer failing to deliver on his talent, Fleck must have been wondering just what he was doing in Coventry.

Steven Pressley's arrival as manager though saw Fleck instantly heralded back as the team's biggest talent. Pressley made Fleck the playmaker of the team, playing him in a deep-lying central midfield role where his brief was to start attacks and orchestrate them from the base of the midfield. His lack of mobility would not be an issue as he had less running to do and could utilise the movement of others with his wonderful range of passing.

During those golden winning months at Sixfields, John Fleck looked like he was comfortably at least one level above opposing players in central midfield in League One. His passing range was as good as many expected it to be but it seemed like a full pre-season under Pressley had seen Fleck become tougher and more mobile too. Not only was he dictating play but he was closing players down, plugging gaps when his team-mates pushed forward and winning the ball back, essentially everything you would want from a central midfielder.

The departure of Leon Clarke delivered a blow to Fleck's performance levels that he has never really recovered from. The axis down the spine of the team of Jordan Clarke playing out from the back, Fleck moving the ball past midfield and Leon Clarke linking play with his back-to-goal was broken. Despite Leon Clarke's importance to the side in a creative sense, it seemed natural that Fleck would be able to make up for this shortfall, particularly with the likes of Cyrus Christie, Carl Baker and Callum Wilson all willing runners for him.

Instead Fleck went backwards from that peak, receding into himself. The conundrum of just what he could offer the team returned. He wasn't a midfielder who created or scored chances, he wasn't tough enough to be ball-winner but worst of all, it seemed like he didn't have the ambition to work on his deficiencies. He could only play

well when the system and the opposition were right for him, he wasn't going to force it.

That has been exactly where he has been over the past 18 months. There have been spells where he has justified the hype that he is one of the team's most important players. Other times have seen him retreat into a shell, not daring to take any responsibility over his or the team's performances, just shifting through the gears.

There have been times where we have thought that we are better off without him, then he will provide a flash of just what a jaw-droppingly talented footballer he can be. Whenever you think you have Fleck pinned down, he does something to completely defy your assumptions of just what he is capable of. Every brilliant thing he does is tempered by the frustration that he is unable to do it on a consistent basis.

The one reason to believe that maybe Fleck can deliver a consistently excellent season is that for most of his Coventry City career, he has been in relatively inexperienced teams. For the most part too, he has had to be conscious about the defensive side of his game in addition to being the playmaker. New signing Romain Vincelot is both experienced and a defensive midfielder, Fleck should be able to play with much more freedom than he has been afforded in his time here.

It would be easy to write that this season is 'make-or-break' for Fleck but it isn't really. He knows that his reputation and the flashes of quality that he offers guarantees make him a decent career around this level or back in Scotland. If Fleck wants to, he could at least be one of the best central midfielders outside the Premier League. Three seasons later, he remains a mysterious player.



# The Choppy Waters Of The Loan Market

Like most lower league clubs, Coventry City have relied heavily over the past few seasons on loans to cover the inadequacies of the squad and this season will be no different. They are an important way in which you can find an advantage over the rest of the division, providing your team with quality that you would otherwise have not been able to bring in. The teams that do well in the loan market in League One tend to finish towards the top, those who don't tend to finish towards the bottom.

There is a difference between using the loan market well and using it badly. When it goes well, the team has brought in a calibre of player that would not have been able to sign in the permanent transfer market. When it doesn't go well, it completely disrupts the unity of the team and the players end up looking like 11 individuals on a pitch together.

It's not just about identifying talented players who can improve the team but finding the environment in which a player can flourish. Last

season we saw Swindon use the loan market particularly well in this division, the whole ethos around the club is geared towards developing young players and playing in a similar style of football to many of the top academies. But also a club like Preston excelled with loan signings because they had a winning mentality around the club which took the pressure of loan players to be an instant success.

Often managers simply use loan signings to make up for the shortfalls in their squad-building and end up relying heavily on individual loan players to make the difference for the team. We saw that with the Gary Madine signing last season where Steven Pressley almost entirely changed the game plan in an attempt to bring Madine into the game as much as possible. It didn't help that Pressley almost entirely misinterpreted Madine's strengths and used him as a target-man rather than a penalty-area striker but even if it had worked better than it did, Madine ended up leaving at the end of January and the game-plan changed to fit in a new batch of loan signings.

The thinking behind bringing in a striker who was demonstrably better than the current options wasn't flawed but the execution was. It's not exactly a controversial view-point to think that loan players should be better than the players you have already and be ready to make an impact in every game that they play. Madine first struggled for fitness and then struggled because the manager had a different impression of the type of player he was than the player did.

Clubs loaning out players will have entirely different motives for doing so compared to the club bringing the player in. When Arsenal loaned us Chuba Akpom, we wanted him to be a first-team ready player who could score the goals to make up for the departure of Leon Clarke. Arsenal wanted Akpom to get a first taste of regular professional football, knowing that he was probably not quite ready for it. After a really indifferent loan spell where he unhelpfully was also still playing for Arsenal's youth team, Akpom has benefited from the experience. We were nearly relegated from League Two partially because Akpom was still learning the ropes.

Given that we are a club that is looking to develop our own talent, I am personally against loaning in another club's youth-team player unless they can significantly improve the team. Bringing a loan player in when you want to develop your own talent can act as a form of protection for the youngsters. However there comes a point where you are denying players important minutes in games which would benefit both themselves and the club in the longer-term.

Matthew Pennington last season won our Young Player of the Year award whilst on loan from Everton. An excellent, mobile defender who demonstrated a strong reading of the game and was able to bring the ball out of defence better than any of our other centre-backs. He was overall, a good signing for us.

Pennington, like any young defender learning the game, made errors which cost us points. It will serve him good in the long run that he made them and was able to play a key role in our survival bid. Given that he is currently back at

Everton and most likely looking to make a move further up the footballing pyramid, where are we now?

Pennington's performances meant that our own academy-produced defender Jordan Willis was denied game-time at centre-back, which most Coventry City fans will agree is his more natural position. If Willis is eventually to become a first-choice centre-back at this club, he will have to play games there and make the kind of errors like Pennington did and learn from them like Pennington did. Willis being shunted to right-back meant that another academy-product Aaron Phillips also missed out on valuable game time.

Injuries were of course a factor in the decision to bring Pennington in and keep him, we would have had to bring in somebody else if it wasn't Pennington. But if we had brought in a more experienced defender at the time who had was likely to make the kind of mistakes that Pennington had to make in order to improve, would we have avoided getting sucked into as bad a relegation scrap as we did?

In the long-run, as good as Pennington was for us overall, we aren't demonstrably better off for having him here as he and Everton are from that loan spell. With more young loan players on their way this season we are in danger of becoming a feeder team for bigger clubs without getting the benefit of transfer fees for developing players.

The loan system is a necessary evil for teams at this level but we should be looking to bring in players who actually improve the team and fit into the collective identity of the squad. In the longer-term, we must be looking to develop our own talents who we can either benefit from a transfer fee or becoming key players for the squad. Over-dependence will only see us repeat the mistakes of last season.





# CAPTAIN

## Oh Captain, My Captain

The captaincy issue in football seems an arbitrary one from a non-player's perspective. There are no additional duties or strategic role that the captain plays on the football pitch. Tangibly, the only difference between the captain and the other ten players on the same team is a band worn around his forearm.

Without ever playing professional football, most of us will never know just how important it is to get the captaincy decision right. It seems to me that the captaincy issue and how it affects the team depends on the group mentality of the squad and just who is chosen to take the armband.

Some captains will look to lead by example, hoping that their ability to play well on the pitch will inspire their team-mates. Another interpretation is that of the on-pitch cheerleader, a player looking to constantly cajole his team-mates into better performances by encouraging them verbally. The other main type is the where the player attempts to play the role of the

manager on the pitch, relying on verbal communication but in a more controlled manner than the on-pitch cheerleader. Even within those three broad archetypes, there are variations in passion levels and how much importance the player places on their role in the side.

Last season we saw Reda Johnson captain the team and then later Jim O'Brien. Reda Johnson was the lead by example type, putting in physically dominant performances in defence which gave the team the confidence that they had security at the back. Johnson's charisma dominated the team, he was the team's voice on the pitch and whatever he said was final.

At its best, Johnson's presence on the pitch on the left of a three-man defence helped usher Ryan Haynes into first-team football by giving him the confidence to go forward. The team were able to defend and attack with greater confidence because they knew that they had someone behind them who was bigger and stronger than most in the division. Johnson clearly had an aura around

him that helped the team believe that they were better than they otherwise were.

At its worst though, his personality spilled over into a kind of recklessness that left the team vulnerable and sitting on the verge of everything going horribly wrong. His decision to take the penalty against Worcester in the FA Cup was the sign that the rest of the team could not compete with the dominance of his personality. Johnson on that day had decided that only he could save the team and given how the rest of the team appeared to shrink from the challenge throughout the 90 minutes, it was clear that Reda Johnson did not trust his team-mates and that had an impact on their performance.

Jim O'Brien's captaincy had a different blend of its strengths and weaknesses. Steven Pressley certainly hoped that by appointing the committed O'Brien as captain, he would instil a work-rate into the team by getting them to follow O'Brien's example. It was hoped that he would be a blend of leading by example and playing the role of manager on the pitch. In the end, it was much closer to the on-pitch cheerleader archetype.

O'Brien was the ball of energy that he was hyped as being, but the added importance of the captaincy seemed to affect his game. His focus wasn't solely on what his role in the team was but he was also attempting to raise his team-mates' games yet without a great idea of what that involved entirely. His form dipped, his constant running became aimless and he would at times appear to argue with the rest of the team in his attempts to inspire them. The team played in a similar rudderless fashion that his own game had become.

Yet O'Brien eventually got better at being the captain of the team. His own form improved from around February onwards and he started to get back to being involved in the creation and scoring of chances. The manic running around on the pitch became more controlled again, he was finding himself in better positions both with and without the ball. There was a better harmony between O'Brien and his team-mates, embodied with the impassioned whole-team celebrations

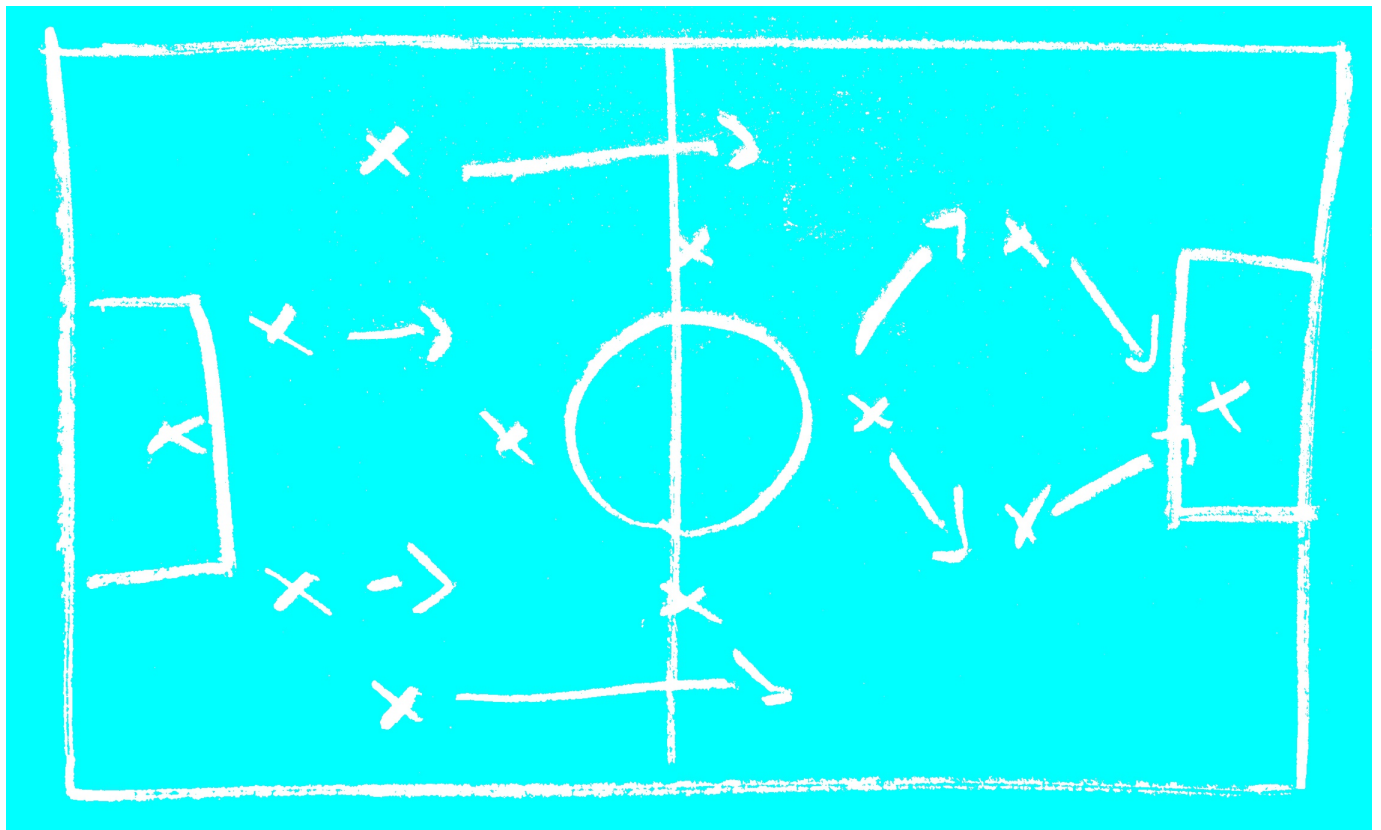
after goals towards the end of the season.

Overall though, neither O'Brien nor Johnson were the kind of captains that it had been hoped that they were. Johnson was too dominant a personality to inspire a team, O'Brien never quite seemed to know what was required of him. Johnson needed taking down a peg or two for the good of the team, O'Brien needed the manager and other players to help him lift the team.

Quite deliberately, Tony Mowbray has added Romain Vincelot and Sam Ricketts as experienced members of the squad who can assist with the leadership of the team. This is still a relatively young squad who showed last season that when the chips are down, there are few willing to step up to the plate as a leadership figure. Having more natural leaders on the pitch can only improve matters.

Last season we varied rapidly between two extremes, as embodied by the ludicrous home defeat to Doncaster last March. When things were going well, it didn't take much for the team to grow cocky and allow complacency to drift into their game. The failure to kill the game off before half-time showed that. When things went against us, it was near impossible to reverse the momentum. As soon as Doncaster scored in that game, the performance lost all cohesion and there was no reply to the opposition's comeback.

How much impact handing that armband had on our last season is questionable, the lack of reliable experience overall combined with the high player turnover was probably a bigger issue. Sam Ricketts was the obvious choice given that he is the most experienced player in the squad but the onus has to be on others in the squad taking better responsibility for their performances.



## How Will We Play?

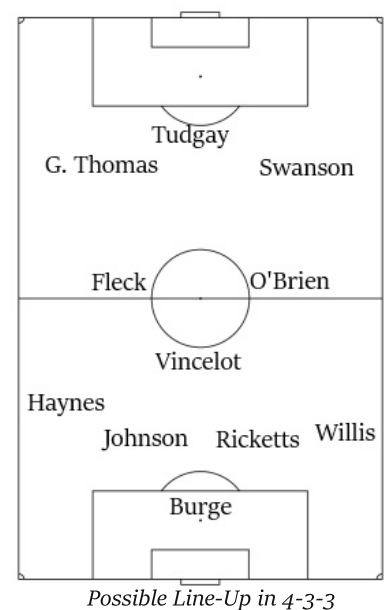
Having had the brief to keep the club in the division for his managerial reign at Coventry City thus far, Tony Mowbray has had little time prior to this pre-season to work on implementing his preferred style of play. There have been brief glimpses of what he wants and can do with this team for periods in games already but with less pressure to get results at the start of this season, it seems likely we will get a better indication of how Mowbray wants the team to play.

Our first look at a Tony Mowbray Coventry City team saw the manager seemingly lay down a marker for how he wants to see his team play. Against Port Vale back in March we played a 4-3-3 formation featuring an attacking trident of Marcus Tudgay, Dominic Samuel and Frank Nouble with the full-backs and central midfielders given the instruction to steam forward whilst the holding midfielder, that day Adam Barton, played as nearly a third centre-back.

Jim O'Brien's goal that day came from having

three centre-forwards pressurising the opposition which penned them back into their own penalty area. O'Brien received a pass from Dominic Samuel on the edge of the area and hammered it home into the far corner. The rest of the first 30 minutes of that game saw a pattern of play where Tudgay, playing the role of central striker, acted as an outlet for the wider strikers Samuel and Nouble to push beyond him, the full-backs to supply the width and the central midfielders to attempt to control possession.

The benefit of the system was that when we had the ball, it was



generally in the opposing half and in dangerous areas which made it easier to create overload situations against their defenders. The drawbacks included the lack of protection for the full-backs offered by the midfield or attacking trident, all three of Port Vale's goals that day came from the full-backs either making mistakes or being left exposed. Additionally, Marcus Tudgay's lack of height made it a struggle for us to clear our lines when under pressure.

With the current squad at his disposal, it may be harder for Tony Mowbray to implement this system than it was then. Sam Ricketts and Reda Johnson's lack of pace in defence would make it hard to replicate the high defensive line we played that day which allowed us to be so threatening in the opening period of that game. We saw as the game wore on that day that the system was far less effective when the defensive line was closer to our own goal, giving the opposition the freedom to play out from the back and through the midfield. We ended up chasing our own shadows for long periods in that game.

Lack of defensive pace is not the only issue, with major question marks against all our full-back options, we would struggle to create the width that would give the strikers and midfielders the onus to make darting runs into the box. Then you have to consider the lack of height in our attacking options, even if players made runs into the box and even if the crossing was high quality, it may still be easy for the opposition to defend. That 4-3-3 system does not currently match the capabilities of our available squad at the moment..

In the final weeks of last season, Tony Mowbray turned to a simple 4-4-2 formation in an attempt to squeeze out those vital final results. In that system we had two holding midfielders which both offered the defence protection and helped retain possession fairly comfortably. There remained the attacking full-backs with the wider midfielders were given the instructions to sit fairly narrow to create overlaps or even to get into the box themselves.

This system found some success at times in both

an attacking and defensive sense. Going forward, the players seemed comfortable in possession and had a good understanding of the various roles so they knew where their team-mates were going to be and what runs they were going to make. In defence, the team was able to revert to a basic two banks of four and funnel opposition attacks to wide areas and then crowd them off the ball.



Where this system didn't work was that we too often looked to the full-backs to create goalscoring chances and neither Chris Stokes nor Jordan Willis were able to get their crosses past the first man often enough. The narrowness of the wide players also meant we often played in front of the opposition rather than getting in behind them. It was a very one-paced style of play and when the obvious routes to goal were blocked off, we grew increasingly desperate and had to throw the kitchen sink (a.k.a. Reda Johnson) at the issue, to varying levels of success.

Were Ryan Haynes to find the form he had at the start of last season, it would offer us a solution to the lack of attacking full-backs available. His defensive nervousness may be less of an issue in this system given how compact we have played in it with two deep-lying midfielders offering a security blanket for Haynes. But it seems more than a little hopeful to be pinning our hopes on a tactical system around a young player who is still recovering from his first drop-off in form.

The final obvious system that Tony Mowbray would look to play would be 4-2-3-1. In many ways, there isn't a great deal of difference between 4-4-2 and 4-2-3-1. It is a system that can often look more like 4-4-1-1 anyway and the biggest difference is that a striker has been





*Possible Line-Up in 4-2-3-1*

sacrificed for an attacking midfielder playing just behind a lone forward with the wide players playing slightly further up the pitch.

Mowbray has regularly turned to this system whilst in charge, particularly when Marcus Tudgay has been available

for selection. Although a striker by trade, Tudgay can be effective dropping deep and playing with his back to goal. The defensive nature of the two central midfielders remains whilst the two wide players have been given more instructions to get forward and roam from their allotted positions.

Heading into this season, it would leave Tudgay and Maddison competing for that central spot where they would hopefully be looking to thread through pacey attacking midfielders and strikers. The biggest drawback of 4-2-3-1 is that attack and defence can become stratified if the system is played too rigidly, to succeed it requires attacking players to track back when needed and defensive players to contribute to attack to allow the team to press further forward.

Given that Mowbray has played most of our pre-season games in something close to this formation, it is fair to assume that this is the system that he is looking to implement in the opening weeks of the season. It would seem to suit most of our squad fairly comfortably and would allow us to play all three of our best central midfield players - Romain Vincelot, John Fleck and Jim O'Brien – whilst still leaving room for pacey attacking players too.

What I found reassuring about the end to last season though was Tony Mowbray's ability to change things up depending on who he had available. When he realised the team could not

play the open, attacking 4-3-3 formation he arrived with, he adapted things to keep things more defensively sound. Although Mowbray is clearly a manager with strong footballing principles, he has shown that he can alter his approach based on what the situation calls for.

What we can expect this season is that we will head closer towards Tony Mowbray's footballing ideals as the campaign progresses. What we can also expect though is that when a few results go against us, we have a manager in charge who will quickly prioritise getting a clean sheet or looking to sneak a result rather than allowing a team low on confidence play with delusions of grandeur. That ability to be flexible is one of the biggest reasons to be optimistic this season.



# Sick And Tired Of Messiahs

12 months ago Steven Pressley was the shining beacon for Coventry City fans to attach their hopes to. Whereas before we had hired managers right from the LMA unemployment list as their careers decline in ever-decreasing circles, Steven Pressley was young, positive and had his best years ahead of him, exactly what the club needed. Skip forward to the present and all talk of Steven Pressley possibly still being on okay manager is deemed sacrilege, Tony Mowbray is the new messiah.

Why wouldn't we believe that this time we have found the true messiah, the one to lead us back into the promised land. Steven Pressley was too young and naive, lacking the experience and nous to get results when the pressure was on, players saw him as at best their equal rather than their mentor. Tony Mowbray is experienced, he has managed at the top level of the game and has invaluable knowledge to impart on our players.

It goes from extreme to extreme, one manager

possesses the exact opposite qualities to his predecessor and is just what we need. There are certainly reasons to believe that Tony Mowbray is in fact the right manager at the right time for this club but I feel that a lot of the reasons why he is perceived as being right are based more on hope than the evidence that we have seen thus far.

There has been a faith in Tony Mowbray this summer that he knows exactly what he is doing in the transfer market and just about every signing that he makes will come off. It is in stark contrast to the Steven Pressley-era where by the end, every signing that was made was tainted by the fact that he was chosen by Pressley. To a certain extent, the faith in Tony Mowbray's judgement in the transfer market has been conditioned by the fact that he isn't that false messiah Steven Pressley.

Looking back at Tony Mowbray's career, he doesn't have an especially amazing record when it comes to signing players. There has been a lot

of attention paid to his spell at West Brom where notably he brought in players such as Jonas Olsson, Chris Brunt and James Morrison who still form the spine of a team that has become regulars in the Premier League.

However, his time at Middlesbrough witnessed a mixed record in the transfer market, with the signings of Grant Leadbitter and George Friend contrasted with those of Bartholomew Ogbeche and Jozsef Varga. His short stint at Celtic was almost single-handedly soured by his failures in the transfer market, his big summer signing at Celtic Park was a Danish forward called Morten Rasmussen who liked to be called Duncan after Duncan Ferguson and played just ten times for the club.

There is the sense that Mowbray's transfer business thus far at Coventry City has been conducted in a sensible and considered manner. The signing of the small and dynamic Grant Ward last season proved to provide the team with extra quality in the middle of the park whilst most were crying out for a Michael Doyle style defensive midfielder. His additions of Sam Ricketts and Romain Vincelot this summer have seemingly added experience and combativeness to a young and easily out-fought team, but until the league season begins, we are in the theoretical phase of those signings.

There has been very little questioning of the wisdom of adding the 33 year-old Sam Ricketts to the defence, particularly as a central defensive partner to Reda Johnson. Ricketts is more naturally a full-back and at his age, a lack of pace is a big issue wherever he plays. Given that Reda Johnson is not exactly fast himself and that we are seemingly planning to play on the front foot in most games, you have to wonder how wise it truly is to play the two together at centre-back.

Moving beyond Mowbray's record in the transfer market, another area that we are being optimistic about his reign is the idea that we will play high-quality, passing, attacking football this season. With results having been the priority thus far, we have only been treated to brief spells in games where this vision has been close to

being realised.

Those spells came against Port Vale (3-2 loss), Doncaster (3-1 loss), Leyton Orient (1-0 loss), Oldham (1-1 draw) and Crewe (3-1 loss). It may be a small sample size to choose from but in all of those games the opposition have been able to ride those spells of good football thanks to a lack of a killer instinct in front of goal and either catch us out on the counter-attack or simply bully their way to goals. When Plan A has failed in those games, the plan has either reverted to sending long balls towards Reda Johnson or it hasn't actually adapted at all.

In Tony Mowbray's defence, he did eventually get the results to keep us up by moving away from an aspirational game-plan and focusing purely on 'back to basics' defending to scrape points. Whilst he may lack the ability to change games as they are happening, his use of substitutions has been rather poor thus far, he has been able to address weaknesses by working with the team on the training ground between games.

Additionally, there is the argument too that Mowbray hasn't been able to work with his preferred players. To have even gotten as close as he did to playing some genuinely dominant, passing football in League One with a fairly limited squad lacking in confidence deserves some credit. If he his summer signings do prove to have improved the teams, maybe those weaknesses in the game plan are less exposed and we can win games more convincingly this season.

There are certainly reasons to get excited about this season and Tony Mowbray bedding in his style into the club. But let's not forget that this kind of excitement is commonplace at the start of any manager's reign. Just as we are currently excited about a Tony Mowbray taking this club by the scruff of the neck and improving things, there was a similar mood around Steven Pressley and Mark Robins, even with Andy Thorn and Aidy Boothroyd. Of course we are excited about things changing around the club, we have only known underachievement for most of our Coventry City supporting lives.

Whether Tony Mowbray is the true messiah this time or not, we will eventually get excited by a new manager after him and another new manager after that. Whilst optimism can improve the atmosphere around a football club, perhaps placing it blindly in places that have little evidence to back them up only serves to make any eventual disappointment much greater. We get so excited by new managers and then eventually find them utterly frustrating and confusing. This time around, I don't want to merely believe that my messiah walks on water, I want to see it happen.





# End of Season Predictions

# League One Prediction

## Predicted Final League Table

1	Sheffield United
2	Wigan Athletic
3	Bradford City
4	Barnsley
5	Doncaster Rovers
6	Bury
7	Gillingham
8	Scunthorpe United
9	Walsall
10	Coventry City
11	Millwall
12	Rochdale
13	Swindon Town
14	Burton Albion
15	Southend United
16	Peterborough United
17	Shrewsbury Town
18	Fleetwood Town
19	Blackpool
20	Port Vale
21	Colchester United
22	Chesterfield
23	Oldham Athletic
24	Crewe Alexandra

There are two clearly outstanding teams in League One that appear to be miles ahead of the rest of the division both financially and in the strength of their respective playing squads. Both Sheffield United and Wigan though appear to possess potentially fatal flaws that could derail their seasons and leave the race for automatic promotion wide open.

Sheffield United's flaw is their consistent choking at the final hurdle, something they have done in nearly every season since relegation to this level five years ago. With Nigel Adkins in charge of the club and having kept what was a strong squad from last season together, Sheffield United look the best set-up of the two outstanding teams to live up to pre-season expectations.

The concerns with Wigan are that young manager Gary Caldwell is attempting to spin too

many plates in his first full season in charge of a manager when he is expected to deliver promotion given the resources at his disposal. Not only is Caldwell attempting to achieve promotion but he is also looking to introduce an attractive playing style and develop young players. It is a cocktail for potential disaster but I think a lack of any convincing alternatives will allow Wigan to secure a promotion spot regardless.

Much of the rest of the division will be feeling quietly bullish about their hopes of at least making the top six. Yorkshire clubs Barnsley, Doncaster and Bradford look the best-placed out of the also-rans to upset Sheffield United and Wigan this season. Barnsley have an exciting young squad but may be prone to inconsistency. Doncaster have more experience on their side but may struggle to break down tough opposition. Bradford are riding a tidal wave of optimism based on a remarkable season ticket sales drive, along with having a manager the fans believe in in Phil Parkinson in place, they look the strongest out of the three.

If my assessment of the division is correct, that will leave just one play-off place up for grabs for the rest of the division. Bury and Scunthorpe have both invested heavily in the transfer market which will surely put them amongst the mix. Behind them, Rochdale, Gillingham and Walsall have the potential to be surprise packages on their relatively modest budgets. Coventry City should also be capable of challenging for the top six alongside this group of teams.

Millwall and Swindon are both looking to rebuild their teams after losing the majority of their respective squads last season. Millwall are likely to provide the classic example of the recently-relegated side taking time to adjust to a lower division before recovering into a safe mid-table position come the end of the season. Swindon have a habit of discovering talent on limited

resources but with a wafer-thin squad it may be difficult to live up to the heights of last season's play-off final defeat.

Aside from the well-financed Bury, the rest of the promoted sides from League Two look to be thoroughly mid-table material. Burton may become a tough side to play against at the Pirelli Stadium but lack the cutting edge up top to be a genuine surprise package. Southend have made some good signings this summer but are overall a workmanlike and unexciting team. Shrewsbury look probably the weakest out of the four promoted sides but still have the potential to hand out some bloody noses, particularly at home.

Peterborough United and Fleetwood Town may inwardly be feeling quietly confident on building on solid mid-table finishes last season but both could well disappoint this time out. Fleetwood look set to continue their struggles in front of goal with Graham Alexander in charge and that could present much more of a problem now that they have lost their surprise factor. Peterborough manager Dave Robertson hardly inspires confidence that he can improve an atmosphere of stagnation at London Road, what odds on a return for Darren Ferguson before the end of the season?

Similar to the above, Blackpool and Port Vale could well be insipid viewing for their fans this season. Port Vale flattered to deceive under Rob Page last season and having lost some key experienced players, may struggle to haul themselves too far away from the relegation zone. There is a palpable swell of toxic negativity around Blackpool currently with home games expected to either witness pitch invasions or shockingly low crowds. It provides new manager Neil McDonald and a young looking team a serious challenge to be competitive this season but they may have just enough about them to keep their heads above water.

My predicted bottom four is Colchester, Chesterfield, Oldham and Crewe. Of the four, Crewe are the most likely to be cut adrift early having failed to improve their squad after a

relegation near-miss last time out. Colchester are in the same boat as Crewe in that regard but have several promising youngsters to give them hope. Chesterfield have lost nearly the entirety of their team from last season and have not sourced adequate replacements, a pretty standard formula for failure. Finally, Oldham's decision to hand managerial rookie Darren Kelly the job could lead to a slow start that they fail to recover from.

# Coventry City Predictions

## Final League Position - 10th

Despite the sense of optimism that has seeped into the pre-season hopes after the extension of Tony Mowbray's contract, we still appear to be short of the required talent to challenge for honours this season. The biggest problem heading into the season is once again a chronic lack of proven goalscorers that we can depend upon.

Tony Mowbray's experience as a manager should mean that we are ultimately a more consistent team this season compared to last. He showed during his brief spell in charge thus far that he has the pragmatism to discard his footballing ideals when the team needs a result. The long winless runs of last season should be less likely to happen this time out.

Ultimately though, this time looks both lightweight and lacking in the killer instinct that successful teams have. Patience will be the watch word this season and we have to hope that fans can remain behind Tony Mowbray should this season start slowly.

## Player of the Season - Romain Vincelot

The Frenchman arrives at Coventry City looking like a cut above the rest of our signings. Still at his peak and having impressed at this level before, Romain Vincelot is likely to win over fans with his committed approach to the game. This season is likely to be a rollercoaster and Romain Vincelot is the kind of personality who can reach his best at either ends of the extremes we will reach.



## Young Player of the Season - James Maddison

There is a tendency as a Coventry City fan to feel uncomfortable around a player being hyped to the extent that James Maddison is. Whilst his return from pre-season has included a rather unbecoming headband, Maddison ended last season as



an increasingly important creative figure on the squad. Maddison's technical skill and positional sense is clearly a cut above this level already, as long as we don't place all the pressure on him, we should expect him to continue his upward trajectory as a footballer.

## Top Goalscorer - *Unknown Loan Signing*

Definitely a cop-out answer, but neither George Thomas nor Marcus Tudgay look capable of reaching double figures this season. Loan signing Adam Armstrong could well prove to be a hit but at his young age and given the length of his loan spell, he cannot be expected to lead the goalscoring charts.

Considering that we don't have a transfer budget to go out and buy a goalscorer, we are then looking at who is available as a free transfer or loan signing. From looking at the potential free transfer options, many are in the Simeon Jackson, falling from grace mould rather than providing the solution to our goalscoring woes. The loan market offers the most hope but we have to ensure that anyone who arrives will stick around for longer than a few months.

Let's hope not to be in the same position next summer.





## Final Thoughts

Despite some fairly poor pre-season results, the overall mood around the club is one of optimism. Now that we have an experienced manager in Tony Mowbray sticking around, there is a growing confidence around our stature in this division. Coventry City in League One should be challenging for promotion rather than constantly being worried about the drop.

The judgement of whether everything that has been done at the club this summer has been successful is of course when we get to the action on the pitch. This attempt to preview our campaign, as well as look at our opposition, will soon be fade into the ephemera as the actual playing of football games gets started again.

I have attempted to apply logic and look at the overall trends of where teams are going but so often strange things happen on the football pitch that completely alter the perceptions of what is and isn't logical. When we get to the end of the season, so often what we thought we knew before it began feels distant and strange.

What's more, teams when faced with the season as it plays out will inevitably make changes in order to react to them. That hopeless manager may be replaced by a more competent one. The top-scorer could be sold mid-season. It is hard to account for these things that more often than not end up having more of an impact on the season than pre-season preparations

Last season I felt that our squad might actually have been stronger as a collective unit despite the loss of key individual talent that summer. Yet when the football was actually played it was obvious to all and sundry that we were much weaker both individually and collectively. The season before that, we were expected to be relegated in an abject manner after a demoralising summer. Once the season started, it was apparent that we had shed the excess baggage around the squad and retained what was an excellent core of talent that attacked the division with panache.

Looking at my predictions for the rest of the

league last season, I predicted that Leyton Orient would challenge for the play-offs whilst Rochdale would struggle to survive. Rochdale proved to be one of the surprise packages last season with their collective strength outweighing any concerns against individual talents. Despite Leyton Orient improving a team that had been a penalty shoot-out away from the Championship, their season fell apart rapidly around them as they tumbled out of the trap door.

What we thought we knew at the start of the season rarely plays out as we expect it to. It kind of makes writing this pre-season preview feel pointless but I still feel it's important to lay out what is assumed to be the common sense at this stage of the season, as an attempt to get a read on where our progress lays against that of other teams. The beautiful thing about football, especially at the lower levels, is that things aren't decided before the game by what should logically happen, it's about who scores the most goals over a period of 90 minutes.

Even the early phases of the league season prove to be false indicators of what is set to play out. The chaos that takes place over 90 minutes of men kicking the ball around on a field of grass can lead to freak series of results taking place. Teams that get off to a good start do not always necessarily keep up that good start and teams that start off badly are often able to recover from not hitting the ground running.

I find that the true test of a team is how they react to that first series of bad results. Last season for us, it was that abject run of form following Reda Johnson's red card against Scunthorpe that defined our season. When last season's champions Bristol City suffered their first league defeat in November, they dusted themselves off and carried on as they were. They had confidence in what they were doing to believe in it when things went wrong, we on the other hand became more and more desperate and changed things hoping that something would eventually work.

We won't know just how good a chance the Sky Blues stand this season until we see them recover

from that first bad spell, whenever it comes. You would hope that the additions of experienced players like Romain Vincelot and Sam Ricketts provide the guarantee that the team will be better able to dig itself out of difficult situations. Yet the thinking last season was that Jim O'Brien, Marcus Tudgay, Danny Pugh and Reda Johnson would be able to do that too and they were all found to be lacking.

The hope that Tony Mowbray might just be the right manager to lead this club out of this mire is built on more than just hope it seems. We have already seen him come into a difficult situation when he arrived and drag us to safety by being pragmatic in the way he set the team up. Had the season began when Mowbray arrived at the club, we would have finished 8th, which would have been one of our best finishes in any division since relegation from the Premier League.

But there is also the issue that our home form has remained terrible under Tony Mowbray and thus far he hasn't really found a solution to that problem. He sets the team up in such an open manner in home games which leaves us susceptible to teams playing on the counter on their big day out at the Ricoh Arena. With a team that is lacking both a cutting edge in attack and pace in defence, you have to wonder how many more times this season will we see the Doncaster, Crewe, Port Vale and Leyton Orient games of last season replay themselves.

There is hope but also the worry that things will once again fall into catastrophe and farce. As a club we are like Charlie Brown attempting to kick that football time and again as Lucy continues to pull it away at the final second. Maybe this time she wants to keep it in place, maybe we'll fall on our arses again. The only thing we can do is to dust ourselves off and charge at that football with everything we have.