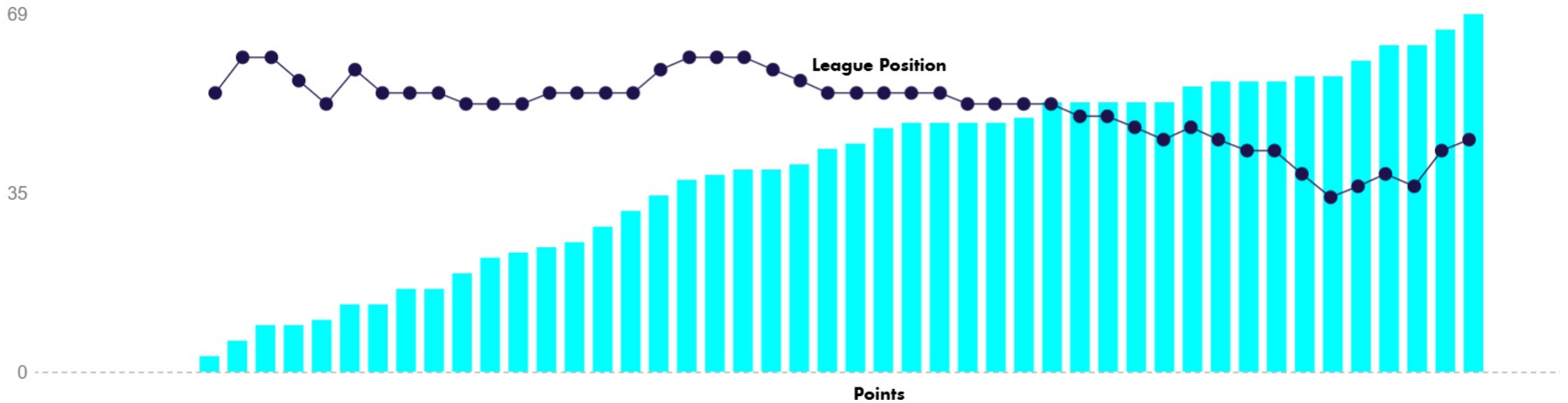
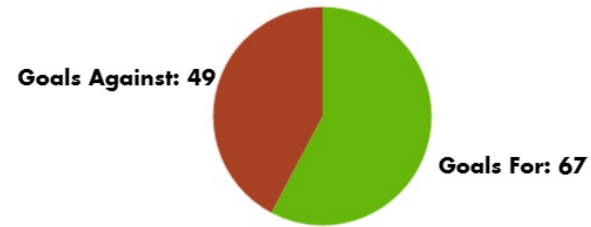
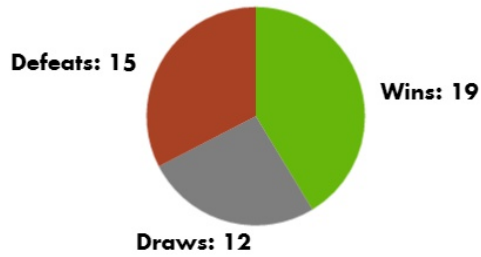


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League Progress





Introduction

A positive end to the season but I don't think anyone can really deny that it was a failure not to achieve at least a top six finish given the position we were in for much of the season and the squad we had. It's important to hold the team to a high set of standards because we are a club who shouldn't really be in this division and should be striving to get out of it. However, it's also fair to say that this season has been a vast improvement over what we've seen from Coventry City sides in the recent past.

For once, we've seen a Coventry City side not completely pack it in once it became apparent that there was nothing to play for. As it transpired, we were only two wins away from making the play-offs and as bad as we were during a dismal period of the season, those two extra wins could easily have been squeezed out somewhere over the 46 games. But still, it was encouraging to see the players want to give back something to the fans when it would have been easy to let those final games pass them by.

As meaningless as it was, those final few games showed that Tony Mowbray has implemented some positive changes to the atmosphere at the

club. In the past, it's felt like we've had players who've looked upon the club as little more than their source of income and possibly a stepping stone for greater things. We've seen over the course of the season that we've got players who relish playing with each other, for this club and with this manager in charge.

Although the level of performance dipped immensely between January and March, I don't think it's entirely fair to say that it was down to a lack of commitment from the players. There was a need for a fresh injection of energy and perhaps for Tony Mowbray to find different ways of utilising and motivating the players but it was more down to inexperience, players losing their bottle, rather than downright not trying.

There needs to be a distinction made between players who lack confidence or who are just not very mentally strong and those who simply don't try. It's easy to confuse the two because when you see a player bottle a challenge, it looks like they're not trying rather than they're doubting themselves. On the whole though, there are few, if any, who were used this season who clearly didn't give it the best they could.

It does feel though that this team had more to give than what we ultimately got. We had a bifurcated squad this season, between players starting their careers and those at the end of theirs, between attacking players and defensive players. At its best, we got the best of both worlds from those contrasts but ultimately, the cracks in the squad were eventually borne out over the course of the season.

It's easy to isolate just one element of the club to explain why it didn't work out, whether that's the manager, the players or the owners, but everyone could probably have given just a little more for us to get those two extra wins that proved to be the difference between 8th and the play-offs. We had the means to make the play-offs at the very least but there was a weakness running through the core of the club that meant that it isn't entirely surprising that we dropped off so badly.

To have finished in our highest position in a division since relegation from the Premier League and our highest points tally since three points for a win was introduced, we do have to accept that progress has been made in a sense. First of all, it goes to show just how bad we've been over a long period of time that such an ultimately disappointing counts as a step forward. But it does go to show that if you can do at least some things right, you're going to be able to do a lot better than most other recent Coventry City sides.

Progress is great but it counts for nothing if we either do the same or worse next season. We need to get out of this division because this is a big club that has accepted that it isn't for far too long, the longer we stay here, the more entrenched that feeling becomes. But I don't think we should downright dismiss what have been some wonderful highs this season that have been experienced along the way.

This season review is a chance to look back on what went well this season, to try and pinpoint what exactly went wrong, and whether we should be looking towards next season with any kind of positive feeling. This season deserves

remembering for the good moments that did come along but we do need to move forward from the ultimate failure of it all as quickly as we can.

Onto the next 80+ pages!

The image features five vertical blue bars of varying heights and widths, arranged from left to right. The first bar is the tallest and widest. The second bar is shorter and narrower. The third bar is shorter still and narrower. The fourth bar is shorter and narrower. The fifth bar is the shortest and narrowest. A white rectangular box with a thin blue border is centered horizontally across the middle of the bars, containing the text "Club-By-Club Reviews" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

Club-By-Club Reviews

Barnsley

Final Position (Prediction): 6th (4th)

Record: W - 22, D - 8, L - 16

Top Scorer: Sam Winnall (21)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Winners



Manager:

Paul Heckingbottom (Interim) - Took over mid-season following Lee Johnson's departure to Bristol City. Didn't change much but managed to win the Johnstone's Paint Trophy and secure a top six finish with a considered approach.

Star Player:

Adam Hammill - Signed in November on a free transfer with his arrival coinciding with a swift turnaround in form following seven consecutive league defeats. Direct and with excellent delivery, Hammill perhaps gave the several Championship clubs who turned him down last summer food for thought.

Overview:

Barnsley were unexpectedly awful in the first half of the season, finding themselves mired in a relegation scrap following seven consecutive league defeats. The board showed admirable patience in sticking by the beleaguered manager Lee Johnson, only for the former Oldham boss to jump ship at the first available opportunity once the team's form improved.

Those in charge decided that continuity was the best approach in maintaining the momentum built in Lee Johnson's final month in charge and allowed caretaker boss Paul Heckingbottom to see out the season. By changing very little, Heckingbottom

maintained the club's play-off charge and won the Johnstone's Paint Trophy to boot. The red-hot form of the first few months of 2016 tailed off slightly in the final month of the season which saw Barnsley's fight for a play-off spot go down to the final day, when it should probably have been settled earlier.

The Tykes will be frustrated that they struggled so badly at the start of the season, otherwise they would have comfortably secured a top six finish and would probably have been challenging for automatic promotion. A horrendous run of injuries to key players in October and November played a big role, as did a lack of genuine leaders in what is an inexperienced team.

The hope is that this season's experience will stand Barnsley's young squad in good stead for next time out. With the likes of Conor Hourihane, Alfie Mawson and Sam Winnall forming the spine of a talented young side, Barnsley are well set for either a promotion push or a decent season in the Championship next time out.

Target For Next Season:

Develop Some Consistency - Whatever division Barnsley find themselves in next time out, they're going to have to be more consistent if they want to challenge for promotion from League One or survive in the Championship.

Blackpool

Final Position (Prediction): 22nd (19th)

Record: W - 12, D - 20, L - 24

Top Scorer: Danny Philliskirk (10)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern QF



Manager:

Neil McDonald - Attempted to build a well-organised, defensively strong side amidst the madness of Blackpool. Too often his side lacked ideas as they struggled badly for the majority of the campaign.

Star Player:

Brad Potts - It was a surprise to see a player of Potts' potential move to Blackpool and he has proven just why he had been so highly-rated at Carlisle with some strong performances in an otherwise uninspiring Blackpool side.

Overview:

Another season, another needless relegation for Blackpool. It wasn't like there was a lack of investment this season - with Blackpool amongst the highest spenders on transfer fees in the division this season - but a negative atmosphere around the club combined with manager Neil McDonald's negative mentality to leave Blackpool looking desperately short in many areas to compete in this division.

Manager Neil McDonald has to shoulder a lot of the blame for a terrible season but another chaotic pre-season did little to help his cause. Although money was spent, it was another complete overhaul of the squad with many arriving late in the transfer window which left Blackpool playing catch-up from

very early on in the campaign.

A terrible losing run at the start of the season gave way to an improvement in September-October but proved to be short-lived. Neil McDonald sought to make Blackpool a ruggedly organised, competitive team unit who would frustrate opponents before sneaking their way to wins. A lack of quality in defence and up front made it tough for Blackpool to actually find success with this formula and perhaps a more proactive approach would have made a difference.

When it came down to the crunch at the end of the season, Blackpool just didn't have the wherewithal to go out and win games when they needed to, a 5-1 loss on the final day of the season summed it all up. Blackpool slip down through another division thanks to a lack of leadership at the very top that has made success seemingly impossible to achieve in the club's current guise. That golden year in the Premier League seems so long ago now.

Target For Next Season:

Get Rid of the Oystons - Seemingly retaining ownership simply to antagonise the fans further, the Oystons are using Blackpool as a vehicle to prove a point rather than make a success of it. Until they leave, things will continue to get worse.

Bradford City



Final Position (Prediction): 5th (3rd)
Record: W - 23, D - 11, L - 12
Top Scorer: James Hanson (11)
League Cup: First Round
FA Cup: Third Round
Football League Trophy: Northern R2

Manager:

Phil Parkinson - For the first-half of the season, it looked like Parkinson's style of football was wearing thin for many Bradford fans when expectations had been so high. Re-organised things in January as the Bantams improved as the season progressed.

Star Player:

Reece Burke - The West Ham loanee looks to have a sparkling future in the game. Still under 20, the youngster led an experienced Bradford defence by example with a series of composed performances at centre-back.

Overview:

This season looked to be something of a damp squib for Bradford after a well-received season ticket sales drive in the summer which guaranteed 18,000 bums on seats for each game this season at Valley Parade. Phil Parkinson's side struggled badly for goals for much of the season with target-man James Hanson cutting an isolated figure. However, the Bantams improved in the final months of the season, finding an extra bit of quality in the final third which made a big difference.

Bradford's defence was amongst the best in the division this season, bolstered by the loan signing of West Ham starlet Reece Burke and the improved form of Ben Williams in goal. It was Burke's arrival that helped Bradford and Parkinson navigate a difficult

start to the campaign, after some poor early form in front the enlarged Valley Parade crowds. Burke's composed performances in defence calmed things down and helped improve the performances of the defensive colleagues alongside him.

It was a rudimentary but an effective style of play from Bradford this season, with Kyel Reid returning to add pace out wide and a big man up top. The sale of Devante Cole mid-season was a surprise after the forward started the season in excellent form but the deal used to bring in Jamie Proctor - a more mobile target-man than Hanson - lifted the Bantams towards an improved run in the spring.

Bradford under Phil Parkinson have a habit of improving as the season progresses and did so again this year to catapult themselves into the play-offs. Had they started anywhere near as well as they finished, they would have been in the hunt for automatic promotion but it was another season of progress at Valley Parade.

Target For Next Season:

Score More Goals - Whether it's surviving in the Championship or pushing for promotion in League One, scoring goals on a more regular basis is going to be the difference between success and failure for Bradford.

Burton Albion



Final Position (Prediction): 2nd (14th)

Record: W - 25, D - 10, L - 11

Top Scorer: Lucas Akins (12)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1

Manager:

Nigel Clough - A cautious manager who benefited from the cautious template at Burton set by Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink. Tried to evolve the side ever so slightly but maintained enough of the old ways at Burton to secure promotion.

Star Player:

Mark Duffy - His directness and accurate delivery on the wing added intent to Burton's rock-solid defence, hurting teams with grander ideas with pin-point counter-attacks. One of few Burton players who look ready-made for a step up a level.

Overview:

Burton's season very nearly came unstuck in the final weeks with Walsall breathing heavily down their necks. The loss of the influential manager Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink began to tell as his replacement Nigel Clough struggled to add another dimension to the squad that he inherited. In the end though, Burton did just enough to ensure they took advantage of the head-start they had gained over the rest of the division.

Burton's success this season had been based on work-rate, organisation and the unerring belief in a game-plan. It allowed limited League Two journeymen like John Mousinho, Phil Edwards and Stuart Beavon to become integral members of a side pushing for

promotion to the Championship. Wingers Nasser El-Khayati - who followed Hasselbaink to QPR - and Mark Duffy added an extra dimension in the final third to make that solidity count. It has to be said too that Burton benefited from a paucity of teams of genuine consistent quality this season.

The main changes that Clough made were to bring in the impressive Leicester loanee Hamza Choudhury to play the anchor role in midfield and give the midfielders more attacking responsibilities. Burton's form tailed off towards the end of the season due to a lack of a reliable goalscorer despite the Brewers generally being on top in games.

A 0-0 draw on the final day of the season against an effectively-relegated Doncaster side summed up Burton's final few months of the campaign, they didn't quite hit their earlier heights but did enough to secure promotion. It's going to be tough for them in the Championship but they've got a strong core to build from.

Target For Next Season:

Find A Goalscorer - Although there are questions against how many of this Burton side will be able to step up to Championship football, finding a reliable goalscorer is going to make a massive difference in a division where they're likely to be outclassed most weeks.

Bury

Final Position (Prediction): 14th (6th)

Record: W - 16, D - 12, L - 18

Top Scorer: Leon Clarke (12)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Fourth Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R2



Manager:

David Flitcroft - Floundered badly during a terrible run of form in the middle of the season and looked to be out of ideas. Despite assembling a strong squad, he has made several poor personnel decisions that left Bury lacking in key areas for long periods of the season.

Star Player:

Leon Clarke - Started the season in his usual unerring form in front of goal at this level. The goals dried up over the course of the campaign, summing up Bury's season in microcosm.

Overview:

After making a number of eye-catching summer signings, Bury were expected by many to challenge for at least the play-offs. With a squad strong with experience and physicality, the Shakers looked like just the side set up to succeed at this level. To have been so dismal for long spells of the season, poses some serious question marks against David Flitcroft's previously bright managerial reputation.

Chief among which was the seven different goalkeepers used by Bury, none of whom performed particularly well. The squad was heavily imbalanced towards forwards, despite the defence had been an issue for much of the campaign. It created the strong

impression that Flitcroft lacked the ability to identify where things were going wrong for his team.

After starting well, the team's form collapsed over the winter but they did just enough to avoid getting sucked into a relegation battle in the final few months. For a squad possessing Leon Clarke, Danny Mayor and Tom Pope, it simply wasn't anywhere near good enough, yet there has never really appeared to be that much pressure on Flitcroft's position in the managerial dug-out.

Although Bury looked to be spending big in the summer, the spending slowed down over the course of the season. The club's chairman has stated his ambition to get the club into the Championship and had, until recently, backed that up with funds for the manager. After such a disappointing season after a big summer investment at a small club, Bury will either have to double-down on the spending or trim the squad.

Target For Next Season:

Build A More Balanced Squad - Priority number one in the summer will surely be to bring in a first-choice goalkeeper after using seven this season. Some strikers will have to be offloaded to allow Flitcroft to bring balance to the squad.

Chesterfield

Final Position (Prediction): 18th (22nd)

Record: W - 15, D - 8, L - 23

Top Scorer: Lee Novak (14)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: Second Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1



Manager:

Danny Wilson - Arrived just before Christmas and steered Chesterfield slowly towards safety after a poor first half of the season. Not the most inspiring of managers but a safe pair of hands at this level.

Star Player:

Jay O'Shea - Following the mid-season departure of the influential Sam Morsy, O'Shea's importance as a source of creativity grew. Has great delivery from dead balls and open play which gave Chesterfield an edge in tight games.

Overview:

Although the mirth directed towards Dean Saunders after his appointment at Chesterfield last summer was somewhat over the top, the former Crawley boss just never won over the fans who had seen a side that had won promotion from League Two and then make the play-offs in League One entirely dismantled last summer. Chesterfield looked rudderless for the first half of the campaign and it took the appointment of former player Danny Wilson to bring unity to the club.

Interestingly, Chesterfield's turnaround in form coincided with the departure of star player Sam Morsy in January. It allowed Wilson room to re-jig the squad, bringing in the sturdy Gary Liddle to tighten up the

midfield amongst a number of other sensible additions that freshened the squad up.

Wilson also got the best out of the lanky Lee Novak in attack, who ended as the club's top-scorer after a difficult start to the season, and the pacey Gboly Ariyibi out wide. Jay O'Shea's excellent delivery from set-pieces gave a more resilient Chesterfield side an outlet to make that solidity count as they slowly plotted a course away from danger.

With Wilson in charge, Chesterfield should be looking to stabilise at this level after the two extremes of the past two seasons. The turmoil of having to rebuild an entire squad last summer has been managed and if Wilson can continue to make some decent signings in the transfer window to add just an extra bit of quality to the squad, Chesterfield should be targeting a mid-table finish at the very least.

Target For Next Season:

Avoid Danger Entirely - This season was a mitigated struggle after losing so many key players in the summer. The likes of Gary Liddle, Jay O'Shea and Tommy Lee form the basis of a solid side at this level. Securing a permanent deal for Lee Novak will help matters but Chesterfield should be looking to avoid a relegation battle entirely next season.

Colchester United



Final Position (Prediction): 23rd (21st)

Record: W - 9, D - 13, L - 24

Top Scorer: George Moncur (12)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: Fourth Round

Football League Trophy: Southern R1

Manager:

John McGreal - The former Ipswich defender is the latest in a string of internal appointments at Colchester United that has taken a play-off chasing side in League One into League Two.

Star Player:

George Moncur - Slightly edges it past the impressive Alex Gilbey simply because of his extraordinary goal return for a midfielder in a side fighting relegation. Has been linked with a move away for quite a while now and will surely be on his way after Colchester's relegation.

Overview:

Ever since chairman Robbie Cowling put the emphasis on building the team around the academy at Colchester four years ago, the U's have required final day escape acts to survive in this division in each of the following seasons. This season though proved to be one year of struggle too many as Colchester spent much of the campaign adrift in the relegation zone.

Despite an actually rather good first few months to the season where the additions of Callum Harriott, Darren Ambrose, Owen Garvan and Marvin Sordell finally looked to have added quality to a decent set of homegrown players, Colchester's abysmal defending let them down. Tony Humes was

dispensed with and after caretaker manager Wayne Brown turned down the job, Robbie Cowling was forced to make his first external appointment in six years.

Kevin Keen, who was in his first managerial posting, brought improved performances but the defensive leakiness meant that it was all too little, too late to turn things around in time. It took two months for Keen to record his first win and despite a revival around the Easter period, the die had already been cast.

Dropping into League Two could prove to be just what Colchester need after years of struggle. Yet the departure of Kevin Keen and his replacement with under-21 manager John McGreal suggests that the Colchester chairman is unwilling to alter practices that have taken the club into the Football League's basement division.

Target For Next Season:

Start The Season Strongly - The combination of an inexperienced squad, an inexperienced manager and a losing mentality developed from three years of struggle is not a healthy combination. A strong start is a must to avoid another season of struggle, this time in a lower division.

Crewe Alexandra



Final Position (Prediction): 24th (24th)

Record: W - 7, D - 13, L - 26

Top Scorer: Brad Inman (10)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R2

Manager:

Steve Davis - Once seen as a bright, young managerial prospect but has since presided over three consecutive seasons of struggle, culminating in a limp relegation this season. Hasn't been helped by a lack of resources but has come to represent the club's overall lack of ambition.

Star Player:

Ben Garrett - The young keeper has been in goal for the club for the past few seasons but has really blossomed in this doomed season. Not that his consistently excellent performances in goal made much of a difference thanks to the poor efforts of the other ten players in front of him.

Overview:

It's finally happened, Crewe are down and it's one of those relegations where you can't help but feel that it might be for the best. Over the last three seasons it's become increasingly apparent that Crewe just don't have the resources to compete at this level and a spell in the fourth-tier to reset is likely to do them more good than continuing to tread water in League One.

Manager Steve Davis attempted this season to get Crewe playing the style of football that they've been famed for in years past but realised early on that it just wasn't possible to do so with the squad he had available. It

was back to the old template of frustrating the opposition and attempting to hurt them on the counter but they lacked the firepower and defensive stability for that plan to succeed.

The production line at Crewe isn't quite what it once was, probably down to the requirements of battling against the drop, but keeper Ben Garrett looks to be the next to leave the club for better things. While Ryan Colclough left mid-season for Wigan, which left Crewe bereft of inspiration in the final third. Midfielders James Jones and Callum Ainley, as well as forward George Cooper, are likely to come further to the fore next season at a lower level.

Crewe shouldn't get complacent about League Two being good for them, the Conference is littered with clubs who underestimated the drop between the two divisions. But it could be a productive experience for their youngsters to be actually able to compete on a level footing in more games.

Target For Next Season:

Trust In The Youth - Not that it's likely to be any other way, but Crewe did deviate from their philosophy over the past few seasons, returning to the principles of old is likely to have a rejuvenating effect on the club.

Doncaster Rovers



Final Position (Prediction): 21st (5th)

Record: W - 11, D - 12, L - 22

Top Scorer: Andy Williams (12)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Third Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1

Manager:

Darren Ferguson - Looked to be leading Doncaster towards a late play-off push before his team inexplicably lost form. Never one of the most pragmatic managers, nor seemingly capable of managing clubs who aren't Peterborough.

Star Player:

Andy Williams - Unstoppable at this level when he's at his most confident - quick and an inventive finisher - but can struggle badly when he doesn't quite feel in form. His struggles over the second half of the campaign embodied Doncaster's awful form.

Overview:

At the half-way point this season, Doncaster looked as well placed as any to charge into the play-offs with a head of steam. With Darren Ferguson looking to have made the few necessary tweaks to take the shackles off the side following Paul Dickov's reign. With Andy Williams banging the goals in, the worst eventuality that looked possible was that the season would peter out with the side in mid-table.

What actually transpired was a complete collapse in form as Doncaster suddenly stopped winning between January and the middle of April. The confidence vaporised entirely and Darren Ferguson was completely clueless in his attempts to turn it around.

Having had one of the stronger squads in the division on paper, Doncaster went down with barely a whimper.

What went wrong exactly is hard to tell from the outside, but it does seem that a lack of leadership from boardroom level had a role to play. Paul Dickov was given money to build his own squad, it didn't work out and the board took an age to replace him with Darren Ferguson. Despite that horrendous run from January to April, the board are sticking by Darren Ferguson and letting him rebuild the squad.

Darren Ferguson heads into next season with a lot to prove with fans who'll understandably blame him for relegation. Nothing but promotion will be enough to make up for this season's massive underperformance, Doncaster have to win their fans back.

Target For Next Season:

Rebuild The Squad - Darren Ferguson has blamed poor recruitment for the club's woes this season and is bringing in his own Head of Recruitment. With freedom to mould the squad to his own liking, there'll be no excuses for failing to win promotion next season.

Fleetwood Town



Final Position (Prediction): 19th (18th)

Record: W - 12, D - 15, L - 18

Top Scorer: Bobby Grant (10)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern Final

Manager:

Steven Pressley - Similar to the end of his spell with Coventry City, it was a struggle for goals and an inability to hold onto leads that meant his Fleetwood side couldn't pull away from danger.

Star Player:

Jimmy Ryan - Oozed class from the centre of the park as Fleetwood's only signing of proven quality last summer. His influence on the side was the difference between having a chance and sinking like a stone.

Overview:

Fleetwood's struggles this season were largely down to a disastrous summer transfer window where the club failed to bring in the quality required to build on a strong finish last year. Financial fair play concerns were the excuse but Fleetwood's spending on getting out of trouble, bringing in most notably Shola Ameobi, suggested that perhaps the club got a little complacent in their belief that they would be able to push on or at least stay in the same place as they ended the previous campaign.

Graham Alexander had built Fleetwood on the principles of organisation and defensive discipline but a few early defeats put the strain on a side without any reliable source of goals in the squad. Steven Pressley's arrival saw some improvement but there was a

mental fragility that held the side back, as well as a lack of quality, from surviving more comfortably than they did.

Performances in the final months of the season suggested that with the injection of further quality in the final third, Fleetwood should be looking forward to a more exciting campaign next time out. Fleetwood were capable of claiming a few scalps of the promotion-chasing sides but lacked consistency. If they can find one or two goalscorers to convert their domination of games into goals, Fleetwood could be back on course for their lofty ambitions.

The difference between another season of struggle and progress next season will be what they do in the transfer market this summer. Steven Pressley showed during his time at Coventry City that he can build sides capable of playing eye-catching football but it's about finding the right players to implement it.

Target For Next Season:

Find Some Additional Quality In The Final Third - There were a number of games in the final months of the campaign where Fleetwood failed to take points despite being on top. Replacing Fleetwood's crop of inconsistent forwards with more reliable ones will make a big difference.

Gillingham

Final Position (Prediction): 9th (7th)
Record: W - 19, D - 12, L - 14
Top Scorer: Bradley Dack (13)
League Cup: Second Round
FA Cup: First Round
Football League Trophy: Southern QF



Manager:

Justin Edinburgh - Smart, resourceful manager who got a squad of fairly limited ability to challenge for promotion for much of the campaign based solely on good organisation and belief.

Star Player:

Bradley Dack - This was a breakthrough season for Dack who previously had impressed intermittently for the Gills. A reliable source of goals and assists from midfield, he exerted his influence on nearly every game he played with his technical ability and dynamism.

Overview:

A 4-0 victory over Sheffield United was a statement for a blistering start to the season for Gillingham. Building on a strong end to the previous campaign, Justin Edinburgh had bolstered his Gillingham squad with a series of astute free transfers to give the squad a young, hungry and dynamic feel. Ultimately though, the season proved to be a few games too long for Edinburgh's side to hold onto the top six finish they probably deserved.

The story of the Gills season was the form of midfielder Bradley Dack and centre-back John Egan. It was no surprise Egan maintained his status as a key player for Gillingham, having been impeccable during

his first season for the club. Dack's influential form was the culmination of a youngster finally making the step up from bright young thing to key player under a manager who put faith in him to carry the side.

Although Gillingham's form in the second half of the season was hardly blistering, they had looked to have done just enough to hold onto a play-off place. Injuries to Dack and Egan towards the end of the season disrupted the momentum they had built and even when the duo returned, they were unable to lift a flagging side enough to get those last few all-important results.

Having fallen just short, Bradley Dack looks almost certain to leave for a higher level with Egan likely to follow suit. Justin Edinburgh has showed this season that he can make a team larger than the sum of its parts on a relatively limited budget, finding new stars for his side is a completely different ask.

Target For Next Season:

Replace Dack And/Or Egan - If one or both of this season's stars go, there is the potential for the slump of the last few months to spill into this season. Justin Edinburgh is a resourceful manager though and should keep Gillingham competitive.

Millwall

Final Position (Prediction): 4th (11th)
Record: W - 24, D - 9, L - 13
Top Scorer: Lee Gregory (18)
League Cup: First Round
FA Cup: Second Round
Football League Trophy: Southern Final



Manager:

Neil Harris - Took over the club towards the end of last season looking to implement a sense of purpose and identity to a club that had lost direction. A somewhat slow start to the season didn't deter him, Harris stuck to his guns and saw the fruits of his belief in what he was doing as Millwall improved as the season progressed.

Star Player:

Lee Gregory - A decent first season for the club at Championship level was built on with a more prolific one this time out. An out-and-out goal poacher with a physical presence about him, something of a throwback to a different era of English football.

Overview:

It was a difficult start to the season for Millwall, particularly in their home games, with manager Neil Harris coming under fire from a section of the support. However, Harris stuck to his project of restoring Millwall into being a hard-working, combative and physical side and they improved as the season progressed. Not only that but Harris helped a number of young players establish themselves in the side, boding well for the club even if they fall short in the play-offs.

The story of the season for Millwall has been about rediscovering an identity and

gathering momentum. With a core of experienced campaigners such as Mark Beevers, Steve Morison and Byron Webster combining with young players on the rise such as Jordan Archer, Mahlon Romeo and Ben Thompson, Millwall had an excellent blend of youth and experience to put Neil Harris' beliefs into practice.

The style of play wasn't exactly intricate but it was full of intent and played with a belief in what they are doing. Solid down the middle, a bit of ingenuity out wide and two goalscorers in Steve Morison and Lee Gregory up top, Millwall demonstrated just how effective a simple formula can be.

With the chance to secure an immediate return to the Championship, Millwall will feel that they have great foundations in place for whatever division they're in next season. Neil Harris began the season a rookie manager at a club in an existential crisis and has ended it as one of the more impressive managers in the division at a club with a clear sense of direction.

Target For Next Season:

Stick To Their Beliefs - Not much has to change at Millwall regardless of what division they're in next season. They don't need to rebuild their squad, the fans are 100% behind the manager.

Oldham Athletic



Final Position (Prediction): 17th (23rd)

Record: W - 11, D - 18, L - 16

Top Scorer: Liam Kelly (6)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: Second Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1

Manager:

John Sheridan - After the club put their long League One stay in jeopardy by handing the inexperienced Darren Kelly and then David Dunn the managerial reigns, the assured presence of John Sheridan in the dug-out steadied what looked to be a sinking ship at Oldham.

Star Player:

Liam Kelly - Far too good to be playing in a side struggling at the bottom of League One and likely to be looking to move on in the summer. Excellent at breaking up play and then getting the ball moving forward, he exuded quality from the centre of the park once again this season.

Overview:

Oldham looked destined for the drop after a disastrous start to the season under first Darren Kelly and then David Dunn. Having looked to be in financial strife as well, Oldham looked set to be bringing to a close 19 consecutive seasons at this level of football. The appointment of John Sheridan in January proved to be an inspired move as he quickly turned Oldham around and secured safety with a surprising degree of comfort given the terrible start to the season that had been made.

Oldham had looked rudderless for much of the campaign, signing short-term loan

players left, right and centre to little avail, Sheridan brought leadership to the manager's role and organisation on the pitch which proved to have a transformative effect.

Oldham became a more competitive, abrasive side with hard-working forwards, energetic midfielders and an increasingly solid defence. Almost all of John Sheridan's signings came in and had an effect with forwards Curtis Main and Aaron Holloway in particular looking like inspired additions despite struggling at other clubs.

It's hard to tell what's ahead next season for Oldham, survival often looks like it's just enough for the club. John Sheridan showed he can turn a chaotic situation into comfortable survival. Depending on the ambition at the club, a few good signings make the most of a solid platform John Sheridan has built.

Target For Next Season:

Form A Tighter Team Unit - Oldham used nearly 40 players this season, quite a large number of those on short-term loans. Trimming the squad to a leaner, tighter unit could prove to be a formula for success.

Peterborough United

Final Position (Prediction): 13th (16th)

Record: W - 19, D - 6, L - 21

Top Scorer: Lee Angol & Jon Taylor (11)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Fourth Round

Football League Trophy: First Round



Manager:

Grant McCann (Caretaker) - It wasn't overly surprising that it ended in tears for Graham Westley, who changed too much when only minor tweaks were needed with Peterborough in red-hot form until February.

Star Player:

Marcus Maddison - Struggled towards the end of last season and the start of this but played his way back into form. A languid and selfish player but has prodigious quality from long range and set-pieces which more than makes up for his weaknesses as a player.

Overview:

Peterborough looked certain to push on towards at least the play-offs when we were at the half-way stage. However, a complete loss of form following the sale of Conor Washington in January saw the Posh end the season in mid-table obscurity.

Manager Graham Westley came in for praise for adapting his techniques upon his arrival at the club to implement an attractive and devastating style of football, however it was his constant tweaking of the side that disrupted momentum. His sacking has proved his doubters right once again as Posh chairman Darragh MacAnthony made another ill-judged managerial appointment.

Losing Conor Washington mid-season proved

to be the turning point of the campaign. Washington had sparked into life having previously underwhelmed with his profligate form in front of goal at London Road prior to the start of the season. Even more costly than losing Washington though was the subsequent decision to sign four new strikers to replace the one they had just sold to QPR, which destabilised the squad.

The season petered out once the Posh were knocked out of the FA Cup on penalties after going toe-to-toe with Premier League West Brom. Having used the more players than any other League One club this season, Peterborough badly need stability both in terms of team selection and in the managerial dug-out if they are to eventually bring to end an increasing period of mediocrity for a club so famed for signing and nurturing talented players.

Target For Next Season:

Get The Next Managerial Appointment Right - Other than twice appointing Darren Ferguson, chairman Darragh MacAnthony has gotten almost all of his other appointments completely wrong. Caretaker boss Grant McCann seems like a good option, the former Posh captain laid the foundations for an excellent run of form in Graham Westley's first few months in charge.

Port Vale

Final Position (Prediction): 12th (20th)

Record: W - 18, D - 11, L - 17

Top Scorer: Ajay Leitch-Smith (10)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Second Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1



Manager:

Robert Page - Has struggled to win over some Port Vale fans despite a comfortable mid-table finish in his first full season as a manager on a limited budget.

Star Player:

Jak Alnwick - The former Newcastle United youngster who had impressed on his Premier League debut around 18 months ago has perhaps shown that Newcastle were too hasty in discarding of his services. An excellent shot-stopper who is attracting admiring glances from the division above.

Overview:

Expectations were low for Port Vale heading into this season. The budget had just been slashed heavily and rookie manager Robert Page was heading into his first full season as a manager having struggled to get consistency out of his side during the time he'd been in charge the previous campaign.

Although Vale have remained inconsistent under Page this season, to have secured another solid mid-table finish should be regarded an achievement given the scope for things to have gone much worse. The situation up front was especially concerning heading into the campaign with no-one with any proven calibre to step into the gap in the squad left by Tom Pope.

Page has appeared to have developed a knack for getting the most out the players he has available, with the odd diamond in the rough brought in on a free. Players like Robert Duffy, Louis Dodds and Enoch Andoh became prominent players having previously been peripheral. Ajay Leitch-Smith in attack and Jak Alnwick in goal had both been overlooked by other teams before excelling this season with Vale.

With chairman Norman Smurthwaite already suggesting that next season's budget will be cut further, Robert Page is facing an uphill battle to build on a solid campaign. Vale were already scraping the barrel to bring in the players who did rather well for them this season, it's looking like a huge ask to keep Vale away from a relegation battle for another season.

Target For Next Season:

More Of The Same - It was already an achievement to keep Vale standing still this season for Robert Page, doing the same again on an even smaller budget would rank as a significant achievement, probably enough to put Page's name in the mix for bigger jobs.

Rochdale

Final Position (Prediction): 10th (12th)

Record: W - 19, D - 12, L - 15

Top Scorer: Ian Henderson (13)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern QF



Manager:

Keith Hill - Surely has a job for life at Rochdale after leading one of the club's with the smallest budgets in this division to another comfortable upper mid-table finish.

Star Player:

Ian Henderson - Like the rest of the team, didn't quite hit the heights of last season but still provided a healthy amount of goals and assists. In a side otherwise made up of journeymen and youngsters, Henderson is that bit of class who really makes a difference.

Overview:

Although it was a more difficult campaign in many regards for Rochdale compared to last time out, a good run in the final month briefly opened the door to the play-offs. It wasn't to be as a limited Rochdale squad ran out of steam slightly but it remains remarkable that Keith Hill can keep getting Dale in contention for the play-offs at this level.

The frustration for Rochdale is that had they started the season anywhere near as strongly as they ended it, it could have been a more memorable year. Rochdale have been a well-organised, tactically smart side under Keith Hill since promotion two years ago but have perhaps just lacked that extra bit of quality to convert good performances into points on

a more consistent basis.

Keith Hill combines getting the very best out of journeyman players most other clubs have long given up on, striker Calvin Andrew and wingers Nathaniel Mendez-Laing and Donal McDermott are good examples of this, with nurturing homegrown talents such as the impressive Callum Camps and Jamie Allen in midfield.

Although they fell short of the play-offs in the final weeks, there's little to be unhappy about for Rochdale fans. There may be disappointment that it wasn't a more consistent campaign, but there is also a realism about what is achievable at Rochdale given the resources available. This season has shown there's little danger of them struggling while Keith Hill remains in charge.

Target For Next Season:

More Consistency - Rochdale might look towards the examples of Gillingham and Walsall to see how they can upset the apple-cart even further on a limited budget. Like Walsall, they play some neat and tidy football and like Gillingham, they have a manager who knows how to make his team play to more than the sum of their parts.

Scunthorpe United



Final Position (Prediction): 6th (8th)

Record: W - 21, D - 11, L - 14

Top Scorer: Paddy Madden (20)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: Third Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R1

Manager:

Graham Alexander - Looked to have arrived too late to oversee a late run into the play-offs but quickly formed a winning team unit to take the race for sixth-place to the final day.

Star Player:

Paddy Madden - Has proven once again that he guarantees goals at this level. A nippy forward with predatory instincts in front of goal, and to think, Yeovil were so keen to get rid of him two and a half years ago.

Overview:

Scunthorpe's run of form towards the end of the season provided excitement in a campaign that had looked like it was petering out from September onwards. The run demonstrated the quality that Mark Robins had brought to the club in the transfer market, as well as just how much he was underachieving in being unable to lift the Iron away from lower mid-table.

A heavy defeat to Blackpool in January proved the breaking-point for Chairman Peter Swann who had backed Robins with both time and money. Caretaker manager Nick Daws oversaw a quick improvement to put Scunthorpe on the cusp of the play-offs but when Graham Alexander was given the permanent job in March, no-one expected that Scunthorpe would have been heading

into the final day with a chance of making the play-offs.

Alexander quickly got to grips with a squad containing one of the division's most lethal strikers in Paddy Madden, a midfield full of tough campaigners like Stephen Dawson and Neal Bishop, the dominant Murray Wallace in central defence and the exciting Hakeeb Adelakun out wide. It was an impressive achievement to win all of their final six games but in a sense, Scunthorpe were regressing towards the mean rather than playing out of their skins.

The talk will be of 'doing a Leicester' for Scunthorpe and there are similarities in that they both ended the season well and have a solid core to build upon. Graham Alexander has something to prove after a spell at Fleetwood where it never seemed he quite made the most of the club's financial power but he has a great chance at the club he started his playing career at to win promotion to the Championship.

Target For Next Season:

Challenge For Promotion - With a strong side already in place, two or three high calibre additions to the squad, could see Scunthorpe challenging for at least the play-offs next season.

Sheffield United



Final Position (Prediction): 11th (1st)

Record: W - 18, D - 12, L - 16

Top Scorer: Billy Sharp (21)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Third Round

Football League Trophy: Northern QF

Manager:

Nigel Adkins - Seen as the man who would finally see Sheffield United to an overdue promotion at this level but struggled to find a consistent side. Under big pressure to win promotion next season, that's if he remains in charge.

Star Player:

Billy Sharp - Having struggled for form over the past few seasons and for periods of this one, has registered an impressive goal return. His presence when he's not scoring is questionable but his ability to snaffle up chances isn't.

Overview:

In Nigel Adkins, Sheffield United looked to have finally found the manager capable of leading them back into the Championship. Having won promotion from this level twice with Scunthorpe and once with Southampton, Adkins came with as certain a guarantee that he could lift Sheffield United out of this division at long last as any.

An underwhelming campaign where Sheffield United never really got going has put Nigel Adkins' position under pressure. He was left a bloated and imbalanced squad by Nigel Clough and lost by far its best player in winger Jamie Murphy. However, only one of Adkins signings improved the squad (Billy Sharp) while the others only served to make

Sheffield United an even duller side than they had been under Clough.

A late, half-hearted push for the play-offs probably papered over the cracks a little. Sheffield United rarely looked like ever being good enough for the play-offs and other than Billy Sharp, goalkeeper George Long and striker Che Adams, few players can come out of the season with any credit.

It's been an agonising stay in League One for Sheffield United fans who continue to support the team in large numbers. Whether it's Nigel Adkins or somebody else, there is a big rebuilding job on the cards for the Blades next season with several big earners likely to be moved on.

Target For Next Season:

Get Out Of This Bloody Division - Despite reported budget cuts heading into next season, Sheffield United are still likely to have more resources available to them than most other teams in the division. It's not only about spending it right but having the sheer will and determination to end the continuing shambles of Sheffield United being a League One club.

Shrewsbury Town

Final Position (Prediction): 20th (17th)

Record: W - 13, D - 11, L - 22

Top Scorer: Sullay Kaikai (12)

League Cup: Second Round

FA Cup: Fifth Round

Football League Trophy: Northern R2



Manager:

Micky Mellon - Has endured a tricky season having led Shrewsbury to promotion last time out. Inconsistencies in selection have led to inconsistencies in form which made survival a harder task than it could have been.

Star Player:

Sullay Kaikai - Despite not being around for large chunks of the season, Kaikai's quality as both a creator and scorer of goals was the difference really between relegation and survival. Looks to be a talent on the rise who could well make an impression in the league above next season.

Overview:

There is some realism at Shrewsbury Town that a first season back in League One that ended in survival was pretty much job done. For all the highs and lows along the way, they did just about enough to avoid relegation without ever truly being in the mix for the drop but never really quite looking like kicking on further from there.

Although Shrewsbury headed into the season with some momentum following an impressive promotion season from League Two involving a prodigious home record, the departures of key players Connor Goldson and Ryan Woods rather dissipated the momentum. It left manager Micky Mellon

with the task of replacing his key centre-back and playmaker while adapting to a higher level.

Mellon has rarely given the impression that he's been overly satisfied with his squad this season with it being radically altered several times over the campaign. The arrivals of the creative Sullay Kaikai and Larnell Cole in the autumn injected creativity into the side before Kaikai returned to Crystal Palace. A 7-1 defeat to Chesterfield in January sparked an overhaul with several key members of the promotion winning side shipped out to make room for another re-jig.

It was the return of Kaikai that saved Shrewsbury's season but just at the point where they looked to be sailing comfortably towards mid-table, their form deserted them and they required the poor form of those below them to secure safety. It wasn't the smoothest of sails this season, but Shrewsbury just about made it to their port unscathed.

Target For Next Season:

Build A More Stable Squad - With Sullay Kaikai unlikely to be seen again in a Shrewsbury shirt in the near future, Micky Mellon is going to have to put a squad together that he can maintain faith in throughout the course of the campaign, otherwise they might not be so lucky again.

Southend United



Final Position (Prediction): 15th (15th)
Record: W - 16, D - 11, L - 19
Top Scorer: Jack Payne & Tyrone Barnett (9)
League Cup: First Round
FA Cup: First Round
Football League Trophy: Southern SF

Manager:

Phil Brown - Led a Southend United side full of fairly limited players to the verge of the play-offs at times this season, going some way to dispel the impression of him as being a managerial chancer.

Star Player:

Daniel Bentley - Commanding goalkeeper and the type who can single-handedly shut a game out without the help of his team-mates on his day. There have been a few difficult games for him this season but he looks almost certain to leave the club for a higher level next season.

Overview:

Although Southend tailed off badly in the glorified pre-season friendlies that are the final few games of the season for most clubs, they should be looking back on this season as a relatively successful one. To have challenged for the play-offs for such long periods of the campaign when they didn't look a lot better than those fighting relegation and having started slowly is remarkable really.

Southend's success this season was based on a blue-print of hard-work, organisation and physicality. The impressive Daniel Bentley in goal and the exciting attacking midfielder Jack Payne made that game plan more effective but it was otherwise a team made

up of lower league journeymen.

It's interesting though that Southend's drop-off in form coincided with Phil Brown being linked with the Bolton job but it could also simply be down to the team running out of steam. It required so much energy and concentration for Southend to be successful this season that when they did have reason to drop below 100%, it was tough to continue to get results.

With Daniel Bentley and Jack Payne looking likely to leave in the summer, Phil Brown - now looking likely to stay at the club - is going to have add some serious quality to the side to make up for the loss. There is a sense that this season was probably Southend's best shot in a while of making the play-offs at this level, Brown has to ensure that they can find a way to build on this season.

Target For Next Season:

Regroup And Refocus - The danger is that the loss of form at the end of this season spills into next season for Southend. They have to quickly pick themselves up and go again next season or it will be a very tough next campaign ahead.

Swindon Town



Final Position (Prediction): 16th (13th)
Record: W - 16, D - 11, L - 19
Top Scorer: Nicky Ajose (24)
League Cup: First Round
FA Cup: First Round
Football League Trophy: Southern R2

Manager:

Luke Williams - Talented coach who reluctantly took on the job following the shock departure of Martin Ling barely two months arriving at the club. Made a strong initial impact but a lack of purpose to the team's play saw the season peter out.

Star Player:

Nicky Ajose - Nippy striker who has been something of a confidence player throughout his career. Seems to have found some consistency this season in front of goal, ending up as the division's second top-scorer.

Overview:

It was a massive rebuilding job for Swindon Town this season with almost the entirety of the team that played at Wembley in the play-off final last May leaving the club. With a limited budget with which to replace a whole host of key players, Swindon struggled badly for the first few months of the season which set the tone for an underwhelming campaign.

Mark Cooper was sacked in October for veering too far away from the club's ideals of playing neat, passing football in the search for results. After an interregnum involving chairman Lee Power taking caretaker charge, Martin Ling was called in from the cold to see the club away from relegation danger. With Ling quitting for personal reasons weeks

after his arrival, coach Luke Williams became a reluctant manager having refused to even act as caretaker when Cooper left in October.

Williams oversaw an immediate upturn in results with the goals flying in from all angles, especially from star striker Nicky Ajose. However, the season ended under a cloud as Swindon lost form as soon as the play-offs were out of reach and had to suspend three first-team players after a video of them inhaling nitrous oxide was leaked on the internet, one of several disciplinary issues to emerge over the course of the season.

They didn't go down, but Swindon didn't do a lot else other than witness Nicky Ajose score a lot of goals. There are few positives to take from a campaign that will only be remembered for the wrong reasons and Swindon have a lot to make up for to their fans for next season.

Target For Next Season:

Sort The Squad Out - Player turnover and attitude was a big problem this season. There is the basis of a decent side in the making at Swindon but a lot of the rot that has set in this season must be cut from the squad.

Walsall

Final Position (Prediction): 3rd (9th)
Record: W - 24, D - 12, L - 10
Top Scorer: Tom Bradshaw (17)
League Cup: Third Round
FA Cup: Fourth Round
Football League Trophy: Northern QF



Manager:

Jon Whitney (Interim) - Brought in to steady the ship following Sean O'Driscoll's brief and toxic reign at the club. Pretty much returned to Dean Smith's ideas that had seen the club start the season so well to help Walsall secure a play-off spot.

Star Player:

Romaine Sawyers - A genius of a playmaker having previously shone in fits and starts at the Bescot Stadium. Possessing a wonderful eye for a pass and the innate ability to move the game to wherever he is on the pitch. Maybe too languid to excel at Championship level, which is where he's headed next season, with Walsall or not.

Overview:

Sometimes in football, the sensible decision can somehow prove to be the wrong one. Sean O'Driscoll looked to be every bit the perfect successor to Dean Smith when he took over in December. Famed for producing tidy, technical teams on a limited budget and based in the area, O'Driscoll seemed to be a more experienced version of Dean Smith.

Instead, O'Driscoll proved to be a disaster in his attempts to see Walsall into at least the play-offs. Star players Romaine Sawyers and Rico Henry were mismanaged and made to look like shadows of the players they were for much of the campaign. The Saddlers'

home form disintegrated via a series of heavy defeats and although they didn't fall out of the promotion race entirely, it was clear that the board had got it wrong in appointing O'Driscoll.

In a ruthless move, O'Driscoll was replaced just over two months after being appointed, with Jon Whitney, a trusted coach who had worked under Dean Smith. Whitney simply restored everything to like it was under Smith, and Walsall secured a top six finish, just falling short in the race for automatic promotion on the final day.

Whether Whitney has the nous to take Walsall any further remains to be seen, the play-offs are going to put his nascent managerial career under the microscope. Whatever happens, Walsall have to find a way of holding onto what was good about the Dean Smith years whilst trying to find a way forward. Promotion will simply decide whether star players Rico Henry, Romaine Sawyers and Tom Bradshaw hang around for another season.

Target For Next Season:

Find A Way Forward - Walsall need to finally move on from Dean Smith this summer, they just about got away with one botched attempt to do so when Sean O'Driscoll arrived, another failed attempt will prove more costly.

Wigan Athletic



Final Position (Prediction): 1st (2nd)

Record: W - 24, D - 15, L - 7

Top Scorer: Will Grigg (24)

League Cup: First Round

FA Cup: First Round

Football League Trophy: Northern SF

Manager:

Gary Caldwell - Looked to have changed too much and with far too grand ideas of how he wanted to play football to get Wigan out of this division, despite their massive financial advantage. In the end, it didn't matter because there was no outstanding team in the second half of the season and Wigan had too much quality to fail.

Star Player:

Yanic Wildschut - A case in point for Wigan having too much quality not to win promotion this season. Although he didn't quite do it for Middlesbrough at Championship level, the powerful Dutch winger obliterated League One full-backs for fun after his arrival at the club in October.

Overview:

It never should really have been in doubt that Wigan would win promotion this year. Not only did they enjoy a humongous financial advantage over the rest of the division but in the end, there wasn't even one outstanding team in the rest of the division capable of challenging them. They may have taken a while to get going, but once they did, it was a procession to the title.

Rookie manager Gary Caldwell made big changes to the squad over the summer, some necessary but many felt like they were made just for the sake of it, such as

offloading Emyr Huws who has since starred in the Championship for Huddersfield. It took time to gel but Caldwell showed he was capable of correcting his mistakes by bringing in further quality to patch things up.

Wigan were a combination of technically skilful and physically forceful that proved too much for the rest of the division. They were embodied by the six foot two winger Yanic Wildschut who ploughed through defenders like an NFL player for the majority of the campaign. Players such as Michael Jacobs, Will Grigg and Jussi Jaaskelainen proved to be too good for this division, although that wasn't really in any doubt.

The test for Wigan and Caldwell is going to be next season where they won't have the luxury of being by far the richest team in the division. Was what Caldwell did this season genuine managerial nous or down to simply having players too good to fail? Next season will tell us that.

Target For Next Season:

Prove That This Season Wasn't Just Down To Money - Wigan will move down the food chain in the Championship next season and will have to punch smart, not the hardest. This season in League One could prove to be productive, only if Caldwell has truly put in place a solid framework of play and not simply had the best squad in a weak league.

Coming Next Season...



Charlton Athletic - 22nd in Championship

Roland Duchatelet's pale imitation of the Watford model has turned Charlton into one of the Football League's crisis clubs with fans at war with the owner. A decent start to the season under Guy Luzon quickly went awry, Luzon was sacked and the club left the out-of-his-depth interim manager Karel Fraeye - who had previously been managing in the Belgian third-tier - for far too long. José Riga's return came far too late with results only picking up modestly. The likely appointment of Northampton Town boss Chris Wilder is seemingly a step in the right direction for chairman Roland Duchatelet with promotion next season the minimum requirement. There are some very talented youngsters on the books but they need leadership to flourish.

MK
DONS



Milton Keynes 'Dons' - 22nd in Championship

Despite lacking the resources to really compete in the Championship, Milton Keynes will be expected to challenge for promotion next season. Things could be more difficult than many are anticipating for MK 'Dons' given that their last promotion season required contributions from Benik Afobe, Will Grigg and Dele Alli and that they had underwhelmed in the couple of years prior. It feels important that the club bounces back at the first attempt next season but they'll need to increase their firepower in attack in order to turn their regularly good performances into wins on a consistent basis.



Bolton Wanderers - 24th in Championship

A disastrous campaign from start to finish with little to look back on fondly. The club's teetering on the brink of liquidation under a pile of debt accumulated during the Premier League years left Neil Lennon with a squad inadequate for the challenge of Championship football. Bolton weren't completely terrible, in fact they put in a number of decent performances, but lacked the quality to convert chances at one end and keep them out at the other. Following a takeover by former player Dean Holdsworth, Neil Lennon departed the club as they prepared for a complete overhaul of the club over the summer. Like Charlton, Bolton have a good youth system with several promising players likely to benefit from dropping into League One. It's hard to tell at this stage what Bolton's team will look like in August.



Northampton Town - 1st in League Two

All about the esprit de corps with the club's financial troubles only serving to galvanise the squad into a well-oiled winning machine. It was a campaign not so much about talented individuals, although striker Marc Richards and wingers Ricky Holmes and Nicky Adams were particularly impressive, but the collective unit fashioned by Chris Wilder. A team made up of experienced League Two players with just that added bit of quality in the final third gave the Cobblers the ability to win games at an unerring rate of consistency. Promotion was won at a canter, but manager Chris Wilder seems likely to leave for Charlton and whoever replaces him will have to find some way of maintaining that spirit while adding quality to the squad as they make the step up a level.

Oxford United



Oxford United - 2nd in League Two

Michael Appleton has salvaged a sullied managerial reputation after an excellent second full season in charge at Oxford United. Having one of the division's bigger budgets helped but Appleton brought in genuine quality, a nice mix of youth and experience while playing some decent stuff. The star attraction was Kemar Roofe, a mercurial talent who Oxford will do well to hold onto this summer, but contributions from midfielders John Lundstram, Liam Sercombe and Callum O'Dowda showed the U's strength in depth. With a few good additions to a group of players who have already look capable of making the step up with ease, Oxford could prove to be one of the division's surprise packages next season.



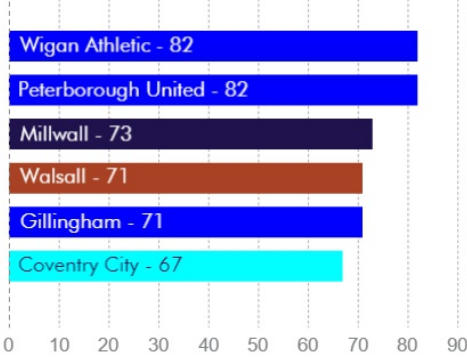
Bristol Rovers - 3rd in League Two

What a difference two years makes. Back in 2014, Bristol Rovers manager Darrell Clarke was crying on the pitch as his side dropped into non-league for the first time in their history. A slow start to life in the Conference did little to negate the impression that the job was too big for Clarke. However, the Gas rallied to secure promotion back to the Football League in a tense play-off final against Grimsby. This season was expected to be little more than a year of stabilisation only for Darrell Clarke's side to once again come good in the final months. The goals of Matty Taylor regularly proved the difference in tight contests. Making another step up looks a big ask for the current squad but they have momentum on their side, an excellent team spirit and an influx of money from a Jordanian takeover.

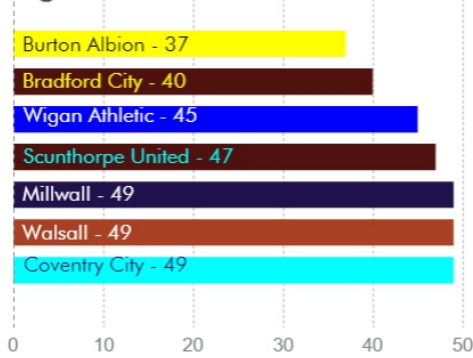
League One Stats

Goals

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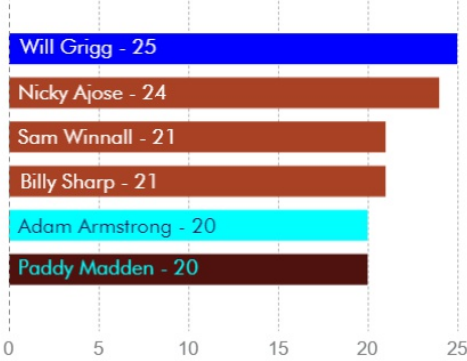


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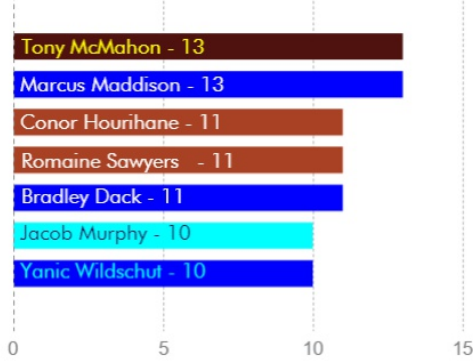


Players

Goals

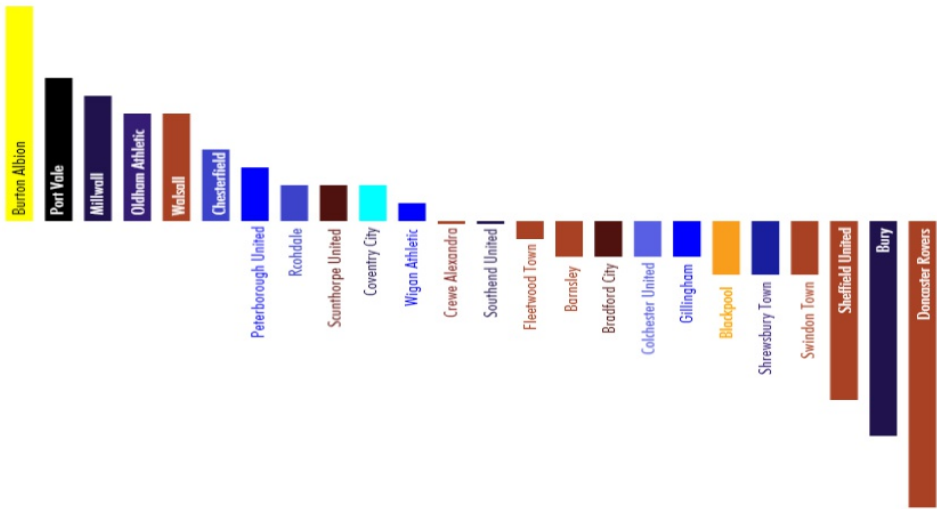


Assists



Prediction Accuracy

Accuracy Average: 4.5



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Team of the Season

Bradford didn't think they would be missing much when they released Jon McLaughlin two seasons ago. The Scottish keeper though has proven a reliable presence in goal for Burton during their back-to-back promotions where keeping clean sheets has been vital to their success.

Although Burton prefer to avoid the issue altogether, McLaughlin has proven himself to be an agile shot-stopper who keeps his team in games whenever that water-tight defence is breached. If Burton are to stand any chance of success in the Championship next season, McLaughlin is going to be vital as he will undoubtedly be busier at a higher level.



A five-year stint in Cyprus had made Jason Demetriou almost a forgotten man in English football until his former coach at Leyton Orient, Dean Smith, brought him back this summer. Having been consistently excellent in either midfield or at right-back for Leyton Orient when he last played at this level, Demetriou's performances this season should have come at no surprise.

Defends like a good right-back, attacks like a good winger/attacking-midfielder, Demetriou's enterprising play from right-back has been key to Walsall's style of football. Having played international and Champions League football, Demetriou should have no problems making the step up if Walsall go up.

Burton's defensive efforts this season couldn't go unrewarded and captain John Mousinho has been instrumental in organising one of the most fearsome defensive units in League football. Whilst Burton's overall defensive shape has been excellent, Mousinho's experience and leadership at the back has added that extra edge to their defending.

Mousinho's transformation from lower league journeyman midfielder to a vital cog at the heart of a now Championship side's defence sums up Burton's ability to have been more than the sum of their parts. Burton and Mousinho must know that their best chance of survival next season is via maintaining that spirit.





John Egan has barely put a foot wrong in the two years that he has been at Gillingham for. A composed presence at the back and a threat aerially in both boxes, Egan is the kind of dominant centre-back that most teams will spend ages, and millions, trying to find.

An injury in the latter part of the season coincided with a drop off in form for Gillingham which saw them slip out of the play-offs and now puts the defender's stay at the club in doubt. Championship sides can't have failed to have been impressed with Egan's consistently excellent performances and a move to a higher level is surely now in the offing.

Rico Henry has burst upon the scene this season, ousting the dependable and experienced Andy Taylor from the left-back berth at Walsall with a series of eye-catching performances. Like several Walsall players, Henry's form dipped under the management of Sean O'Driscoll but quickly recovered after his departure.

Rico Henry's pace and energy on the left side of the pitch has been a key component of Walsall's play as they stretched the play with two enterprising wing-backs. The 18 year-old's star is rising with each stand-out display and is likely to earn a move to a Premier League side in the summer, even if Walsall do win promotion via the play-offs.



Mark Duffy's arrival at Burton this season on loan from Birmingham was a fairly nondescript signing. Not even the man who signed him - Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink - could have anticipated that Duffy would become arguably the player of the season in League One.

The winger had a solid reputation from spells with Scunthorpe and Doncaster at this level but reached a whole new level of performance as he became Burton's key attacking threat this season. The rigorous organisation of the side complemented Duffy's industrious and direct wing play as he provided an outlet and constant threat out wide for the Brewers.

Romaine Sawyers had been a source of much frustration for Walsall fans for much of his time at the club. The languid midfielder has the tendency to drift in and out of games, only briefly offering the glimpses of quality that were to become his hallmark this season as he began to take control of games.

Possessing the innate ability to take the play to wherever he's standing on the pitch, Sawyers' passing ability and knack for the unpredictable gave Walsall a more varied attacking threat than the Tom Bradshaw formula of last season. With his contract running out in the summer, Walsall's hopes of keeping him would appear to depend on their ability to win the play-offs.





Having looked a useful player for the past couple of seasons for Gillingham, Bradley Dack took his game to a whole new level this season. The vital cog in Gillingham's success this season, Dack's creativity and control of games saw an otherwise fairly ordinary side challenge for promotion for much of the campaign.

Having resisted the temptation to move on in January when Bristol City were sniffing around, the PFA League One player of the year is going to have no shortage of suitors over the summer. With the Gills falling just short of the play-offs, Dack looks set to leave the club he came through at for a well-deserved step up next season.

Yanic Wildschut is a player who simply would not be playing at this level for any club other than Wigan. Although he didn't quite hit the heights at Middlesbrough, Wildschut was a proven performer in the Dutch top-flight whose arrival on Teesside had been something of a coup.

The powerful winger, standing at just under six foot two, initially arrived on loan at Wigan before agreeing a permanent deal in January. As expected, Wildschut has proven to be simply far too good for League One defences to cope with due to a mixture of pace, technical ability and his raw physicality. Wildschut should remain a vital player for Wigan at Championship level next season.



Wigan knew what they were getting when they brought in Will Grigg last summer, a proven goalscorer at League One level. The Northern Irish international's goals proved to be the difference as Wigan rose up the table in the final months of the campaign.

It was initially a slow start for Grigg as he mustered just six goals in his first 20 league appearances, mirroring his own side's struggles for form in the first half of the campaign. Grigg's 19 goals in his final 20 appearances made him the biggest individual reason why Wigan won the division. Having struggled at Championship level for Brentford, Grigg will have a point to prove next year that he simply isn't a flat-track bully.

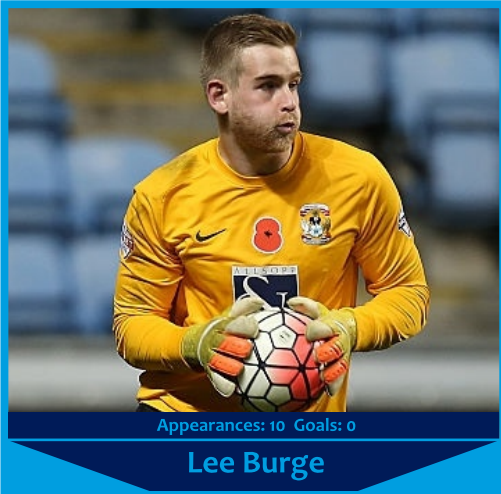
In the opening months of the season, Armstrong was almost embarrassingly good against League One defences. Not only possessing killer instincts in front of goal but lightning quick and hungry to prove himself, Armstrong emphatically fired home five goals in his first three appearances and was a regular scorer for the rest of the first half of the season.

The second half of the campaign has been tougher with the striker struggling for form due to a lack of creativity behind him. Some industrious performances in the final few months were eventually rewarded with a 20th goal of the season for a striker who looks to have a big future ahead of him.





The Squad



Despite some perfectly adequate performances at the start of the season, Lee Burge never did enough to win over his doubters before his first-team spot was usurped by Reice Charles-Cook. Has rarely portrayed confidence between the sticks despite a series of solid performances towards the end of last season that had made him first-choice heading into this year.

With Charles-Cook having firmly established himself as the first-choice keeper for the foreseeable future, Burge is going to have to be patient in waiting for his next opportunity. As a back-up player, Burge is a solid option, having proven himself to be a decent keeper at this level of football.

Has firmly seized the opportunity handed to him by Lee Burge's illness prior to the Shrewsbury game last October. His early performances were supremely confident, spilling over into arrogance as he would regularly take risks with the ball at his feet. Some errors in December appear to have chastened him into producing some more assured, risk-free performances in the final months.

Statistically, Reice Charles-Cook ranks as one of the better keepers in the division, so there's no need to look for an improvement in the summer. If he can continue to improve next season, we've got one hell of a goalkeeper on our hands.

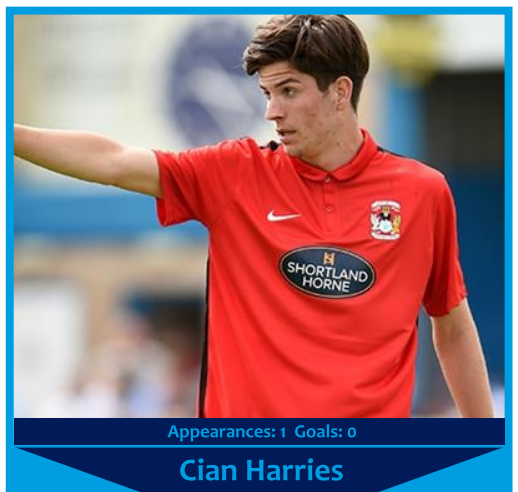


Ridiculously calm and adept on the ball for a centre-back, Cargill's ability was clear to see in an unfortunately curtailed spell on loan. His arrival, alongside Jack Stephens, brought in some much-needed composure in defence during a difficult period, albeit that their arrivals didn't really herald in a reversal in form.

Cargill still needs to round off his game, he looked overwhelmed at times when the team was under pressure or attempted overly ambitious cross-field passes which his team-mates weren't anticipating. There's clearly a very talented ball-playing centre-back in the making there, someone who might be worth bringing back next season if there's a vacancy in central defence.

One of the most highly-rated youngsters currently in the under-21 squad, Cian Harries impressed Tony Mowbray from very early on after the manager's arrival last year. A ball-playing centre-back who has consistently impressed at under-21 level, the only thing that has prevented him getting opportunities in the team has been a perceived lack of physicality.

Although it was an end of season game against Oldham, Harries more than held his own upon his debut. Mowbray doesn't seem like the kind of manager who'll completely put his faith in youngsters but a positive pre-season from Harries could put him in the first-team squad at the very least.





Slightly unlucky that Tony Mowbray arrived at the club when he had run out of steam last season and Chris Stokes was given an opportunity at left-back which he has made his own. Showed during the festive period that he's improved defensively since last season although he's still yet to recover that ability to make surging runs forward from left-back.

A loan spell at Cambridge, unfortunately curtailed by injury, saw Haynes' confidence grow further and stands him in good stead to challenge Chris Stokes further next season. If Haynes gets a run in the side next season, don't be surprised if he establishes himself as first-choice once again.

The Reda Johnson conundrum, the most influential defender that we could possibly afford but someone we can only afford because of a chronic injury record. The difference he makes whilst in the team is palpable, not only his qualities as a defender but his presence and leadership at the back that visibly lifts the team.

Tony Mowbray seems convinced that had it not been for a freak knock against Blackpool, Reda Johnson's injuries had been overcome. However, that wasn't enough to deter Mowbray from letting Johnson leave this summer with defensive injuries cited by the manager as one of the biggest reasons why we struggled to last the course this season.



After a couple of strong years at youth-level, Dion Kelly-Evans was finally rewarded with his league debut for the club on the final day of the season against Oldham. An energetic presence at full-back, constantly looking to get forwards, Kelly-Evans is one in a long line of decent right-backs produced by the club's academy.

A lack of height is going to hold him back to some extent, as Aaron Phillips has learned this season, which means he's going to have to be extra good defensively and productive going forward to force his way into the team. He's still at a very young age where it would be no disaster for him if he didn't make the full breakthrough next season.

Despite some decent-looking early appearances in a Sky Blue shirt, Lorentzson never got to establish himself in the side during his short stay here. A willing and enterprising outlet from right-back, Lorentzson was perhaps let down at times by a lack of willingness from team-mates to make runs into the box for him to cross towards.

However, a combination of struggles with injuries and the physical side of defending in League One made this an unsuccessful move for both parties. Lorentzson was clearly a useful player but just wasn't in the right team at the right time.





One of the most improved players this season, having started it looking likely to see out the final year of his contract. He looked like a bag of nerves this time last year with a slew of errors costing the team some important points. Fast forward 12 months and Aaron Martin is one of the most assured presences in our back-line.

Seemingly though, Mowbray didn't rate Martin's performances as highly as the fans did and was content to let him depart at the end of his contract this summer. Not only did he merit a stay performance-wise but with so many leaving in the summer, some continuity would surely have been helpful.

Aside from some mysterious errors that he made at times this season, it has been an improved season from Aaron Phillips where he's looked closer than ever to establishing himself as first-choice. However, it's never seemed like Tony Mowbray has particularly rated Aaron Phillips which is why he is headed towards the exit door this summer.

His final few performances for the side in particular demonstrated that he had learn from the several costly errors he'd made earlier in the season. It's hard not to feel like we're letting a player go who's on the cusp of proving himself at first-team level.

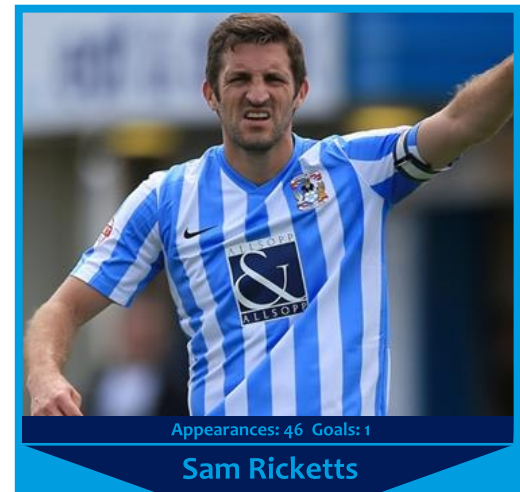


Signed purely as an extra defensive body, Peter Ramage's few performances for the side were nothing short of disastrous. His displays against Burton and Scunthorpe not only cost us the results but came at a turning-point in the season which we never really came back from.

Ramage himself is not really to blame for what happened, he was lacking match fitness and was not the type of defender that could fit into our style of play. A decent performance as a substitute against Port Vale showed that he was by no means a bad player but simply that it was poor judgement from Tony Mowbray to bring him in in the first place.

When Ricketts was first signed, I wondered whether he had past the point where his experience made up for a lack of pace. For the first few months of the season I was completely wrong as he led the defence by example, always managing to find himself in the right place at the right time. His form from November onwards has been nothing short of disastrous.

With a new contract on the table for Ricketts, Mowbray is going to have to use him more sparingly than he did this season. From watching him play, his vocal presence on the pitch has remained important but his appearances need to be managed for him to do himself justice.



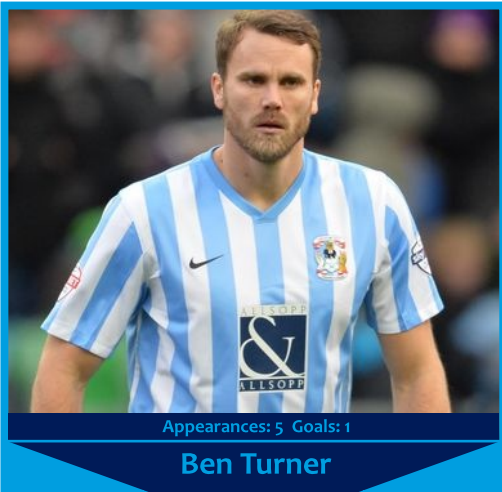
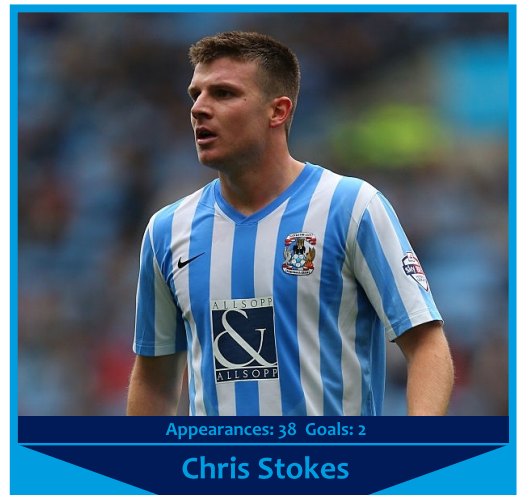


Arrived as a proven high-quality defender at League One level at displayed just why during his short stay here. Not only comfortable on the ball but willing to get stuck in with the defensive side of the game, Stephens was unfortunate to arrive at a time in the season where the team was falling apart, regardless of who played.

At times, he has a tendency to over-complicate things when he's on the ball when the simple option would work. It's that which could hold his longer-term career back but he seems destined next season to be given another shot in the Championship having failed to make an impression at Middlesbrough.

Built on a promising stint on loan from Forest Green last season having clearly benefited from a more rigorous pre-season. Very little gets past Chris Stokes nowadays although he still lacks belief in his ability to deliver crosses which can often sees attacks break down on his side of the pitch.

An injury in March which ruled him out for the final blowings of our play-off push was unfortunate and with Ryan Haynes having had a good loan spell with Cambridge, there will be competition for his left-back spot next season. A reliable performer for us, he now has to work on the quality of his final ball to take his game to the next level.



It's sad to see such a talented footballer have his career completely destroyed by injuries. Ben Turner came here back in November to prove his fitness after one long injury lay-off, only to suffer yet another one in the final game of his loan spell.

An absolute man mountain that nothing got past during his short return to the club, Turner demonstrated just why he belongs at a higher-level than League One football. That latest injury you fear could be the end of his career in earnest, it's going to take a lot of willpower and luck for him to come back from that injury. If he can ever get back to full fitness, someone is going to have one monster of a defender on their hands.

Picked up two terrible injuries back-to-back that denied him the opportunity to nail down a position for himself at either right-back or centre-back. Having missed slightly less than the entire season, Jordan Willis is going to be back at square one in the summer. Is he capable of developing the attacking instincts of becoming a good right-back or is he going to get a chance to play at his seemingly more natural centre-back position?

It was positive from the club to hand him a two-year contract when he was still out injured so we can only hope that he can make a full recovery by the start of next season. This could have been a really big season for him.



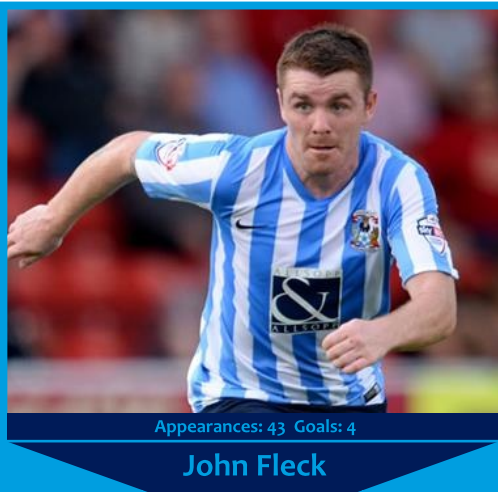


Similar to Jordan Clarke in a sense, Gael Bigirimana clearly has excellent technical ability and reading of the game but suffers routinely from lapses in concentration. His performance against Peterborough towards the end of the season summed it all up really, played some excellent passes in the first-half only to invite pressure on the defence with some really sloppy ones for the rest of the game.

It seems unlikely right now that he'll ever deliver on the promise of his breakthrough here and I wouldn't entirely blame him for sitting on his final year of a big contract at Newcastle. If he does stay, he has to learn how to keep his concentration up.

The major disappointment about Joe Cole's short time at this football club is that he spent so much of it either looking to build fitness or being played out on the wing. On the occasions he was actually played in the centre of the pitch, Joe Cole's presence offered composure on the ball and control of the game.

It took time for Cole to adapt his game to the level of football and his advanced years, but as soon as he started playing as a more cerebral presence on the pitch, his quality oozed out. It was certainly a highlight of the season when he signed and it was pleasing to see some good performances from a legend of the game. Joe Cole will be remembered fondly.

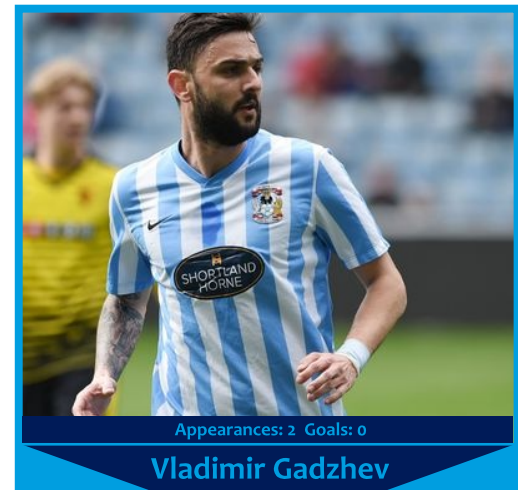


A midfielder of such quality that we're never likely to find a similar player while we remain at this level. On his day, John Fleck has nearly everything you would want from a midfielder, excellent vision, can pass long or short, can drive forward, a powerful shot, and can even perform his share of the defensive duties. The problem is that he has a tendency to recede into himself during difficult periods for the team.

This year was an improvement from him, not just in his goal return, as he looked to be taking a more active role as a leader of the team. It's sad that he's likely to go, just when it seemed that he's finally added drive to his skill-set.

One of three signings made in March with next season already in mind, we have yet to see much from Vladimir Gadzhev as he acclimatises to English football. As a Bulgarian international, you would imagine that he is a high-calibre signing. His reputation back home is that he's a solid midfielder technically who has a fierce shot on him.

It seems possible that Gadzhev is Fleck's replacement, but there is relatively little to go on as to what type of midfielder he really is. Two solid substitute appearances thus far have shown that he is solid technically but it is very early days.





Billed by Tony Mowbray as a player who could 'pick passes some of our younger players don't even think about', Stephen Hunt has been a disastrous signing on those terms. There seemed little logic behind signing a 34 year-old industrious winger who hadn't played in six months, particularly when the team was missing the injection of pace that Ryan Kent provided.

The signing has more-or-less turned out as expected and it's another ill-considered move by Mowbray in January that has to go down as a black mark against his record. Some committed performances at left-back in the final games showed that Hunt was an okay footballer, but just never have been brought in.

Jones' arrival in March looked to be with a view to next season in mind but an impressive performance at under-21 level saw him shoot up the pecking order. His involvement in a handful of games at the end of the season injected some much needed pace and trickery into the side, although slightly too late to affect our play-off hopes.

He looks like an excellent find by the improved scouting network put in place by Tony Mowbray and Mark Venus but Jones is far from the finished product. His tendency to over-run with the ball and his lightweight manner are going to put him in line for criticism next season, if he doesn't add a final product.



A lack of end product became an obsession for many during his spell here, but Ryan Kent brought a level of threat in abundance. A player who improved with each game, it's a shame that Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp thought it was better for him to be playing under-21 football rather than the real thing for us.

There is certainly something to be said for Kent's lack of end product, at times he seemed too keen to add an extra bit of skill rather than play in a team-mate. But this seemed to be down to inexperience rather than selfishness. Had he stayed for longer, we would have benefited from a talented player learning to make the right decisions.

After impressing alongside James Maddison in those glorious opening three wins, Ruben lameiras has had a stop-start season. A player capable of sometimes jaw-dropping moments of technical brilliance, his ability to play reverse-passes in particular being a sight to behold. Yet, a lack of directness to his game made him a less effective player than he should have been.

I don't think Tony Mowbray was entirely unjustified in not playing more this season, there were some games where he was given chances and failed to make any impact. Next season, Lameiras has got to prove to Mowbray just why he should be starting every week.





From everything I've read about Ivor Lawton, he will have been spent much of the campaign kicking his heels in frustration at having picked up an injury after his first appearance for the club. A former youth-team captain with a reputation for being tough in the tackle, Lawton was handed a one-year deal by Mowbray to show he could develop the technical side of his game.

Next season looks like Lawton's one last chance to prove himself to Mowbray. By all accounts, there'll be no-one more determined to make himself a success for this club than Ivor Lawton, let's hope we finally get a chance to see what he's like rather than constantly reading about him.

The golden kid who could do nothing wrong, until he was sold to Norwich in the final seconds of the January transfer window. Fitness issues had meant that until his sale, Maddison had never been able to have a run in the side and it was during a long run in the team that he suffered his first ever dip in form

A combination of becoming a marked man, the big move on the horizon, the dip in form and the stick he got from a lot of fans made it very difficult to lift himself out of a rut. It's perhaps why he may benefit from moving on this summer where he can make a fresh start. We all saw what a special talent he is, I'm certain that Maddison remains a star in the making.



There's not a lot more to be written about Bryn Morris than there was in January. A midfielder with solid technique and a decent engine on him but lacking a defining quality to make him really stand out on the football pitch. Since leaving the club back in November, he hasn't been missed at all, the very little we actually saw from him.

It's not a great surprise that he struggled at York in League Two and didn't really get onto the pitch much with Walsall in League One either. He has been very highly-rated as a youngster, he just needs to find somewhere he can play regular football.

10 goals and 10 assists this season but for some reason, Jacob Murphy was decried as one of our worst players this season from a vocal section of fans. The criticism was that he didn't track back, something that was only really true in his first few games but something that shouldn't be a criteria you judge an attacking player on.

It seems like the criticism affected him in the final few months of the campaign but his introduction in the last game against Oldham, where he got two assists, demonstrated that he can come out the other side of a rut. It will be interesting to see how far he can go in game.



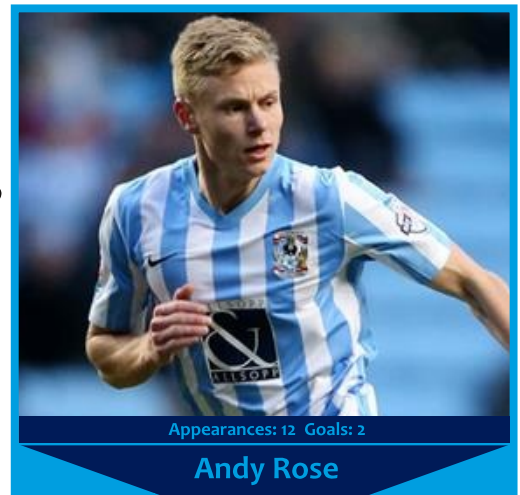


A player who Tony Mowbray never really rated, despite the regularly important contributions he made on the pitch, the decision to let him leave on loan for Scunthorpe played a role in our decline in the final months. At his best, he raised the intensity of our more intricate forward players and played some glorious through balls for Adam Armstrong.

Mowbray didn't seem to appreciate a perceived lack of tactical discipline which meant O'Brien was regularly dropped from the team. A proven performer at this level of football, it feels wasteful that we're letting him go to presumably another club at this level.

An energetic and robust presence on the pitch in the various positions that he has so far been utilised, Andy Rose is likely to be an important player for us next season. A committed player who has offered forward drive whenever he has been utilised, his two goals thus far have shown that he has some technical quality to go along with the effort.

Tony Mowbray hasn't felt yet like Rose has the discipline to play in one of those deep central midfield roles in his preferred 4-2-3-1 formation which may hold him back from establishing himself in the team next season. Rose's contribution already has demonstrated that we've got a good player on our hands.



Such a frustrating player who has seen a very promising career slide away from him. Aside from a few cameo appearances, it was in the Northampton cup game that we got to see Conor Thomas the longest. Showing the ability to pick out some wonderful long-range passes, he lacked the fortitude to dominate the game as he could have.

The injuries this season curtailed any hopes of Conor Thomas rediscovering his form of a few years ago with him set to leave in the summer. The frustration isn't that he was over-rated as a youngster but that he has all the ability to deliver on his potential but seemingly lacks the mental drive to do so.

Having been one of our best players for much of the campaign, a series of poor performances in the final couple of months raise question marks where previously there were none. At his best this season, nothing got past him at the base of the midfield. His presence in the side gave John Fleck the freedom to deliver on a more regular basis than he had been capable of previously.

Just what has gone wrong over the final months is hard to tell, perhaps it's just that he's getting on in age or that he burned out from over-use. Whatever it was, it's vital that Vincelot comes back next season refreshed and as good as he was at the start of the season.





The star of the season, no-one knew how good Armstrong would prove to be when he arrived in the summer but an emphatic start to the season made it apparent he was simply too good for this level of football. Quick, an excellent finisher but above all, a player with the confidence to back himself to do anything, we have just witnessed the start of a great career.

The frustration is that we didn't get the full benefit of having such a special striker on our books. A few rough patches showed that he still had much to learn but he remained committed to the cause even when things weren't going quite so well. A 20th goal of the season was just reward for continuing to work for the team.

Up there with Stephen Hunt and Peter Ramage as the most pointless signing of the season but the difference with Lateef Elford-Alliyu is that there was a logic to his signing and we weren't falling apart when he arrived. We needed another striker in the side who could possibly fill in for Armstrong, in the end we found alternative solutions rather than give Elford-Alliyu a chance.

That he is currently without a club having left us suggests strongly that he wasn't going to be good enough for us even if he'd been given a chance. He looked okay the couple of times he played but it's no loss that he was let go.

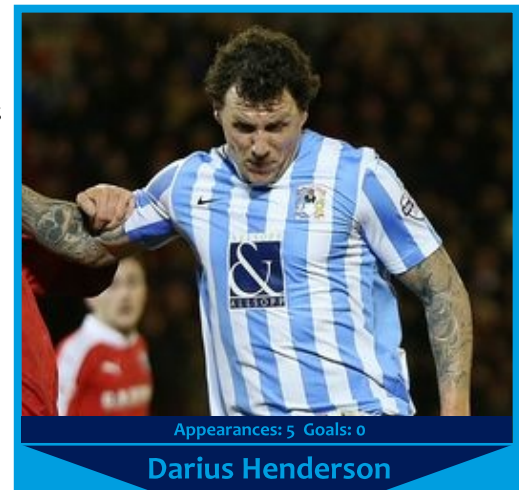


There is a use for Fortuné but it depends on the ability of others to play well rather than Fortuné alone. Capable for holding the ball up for as long as he wants, Fortuné needs support players to get around him as he lacks any kind of touch in front of goal to score goals all by himself.

For much of the season, the thought of playing Fortuné appalled many a Coventry City fan but he did show towards the end of the season that he can be effective in a limited role. Having both Fortuné and Tudgay as our back-up attacking options meant that we lacked that extra goal threat that could have made a big difference, we couldn't continue with both in the squad.

Someone who was long past his best when he arrived at the football club, that Darius Henderson was brought in seemed something of an indictment of Tudgay and Fortuné's contributions this season. Henderson offered an aerial outlet up front which we had severely lacked, especially when we were chasing games.

Henderson is what he is, he wins headers but at his advanced age, he doesn't offer much else. His impact made no difference whatsoever on our season and you wonder whether we could have used the opportunities handed to him on a player of our own or someone younger we could have brought in he would be around next season.



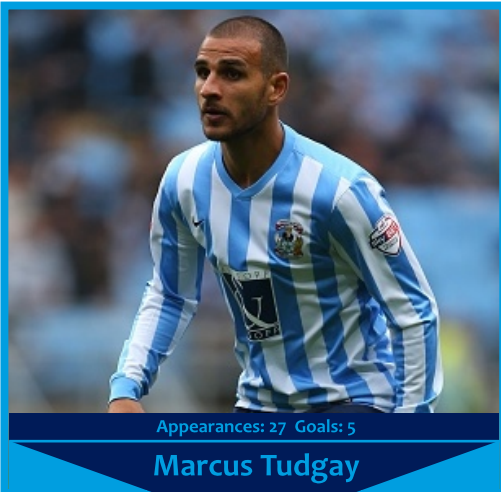
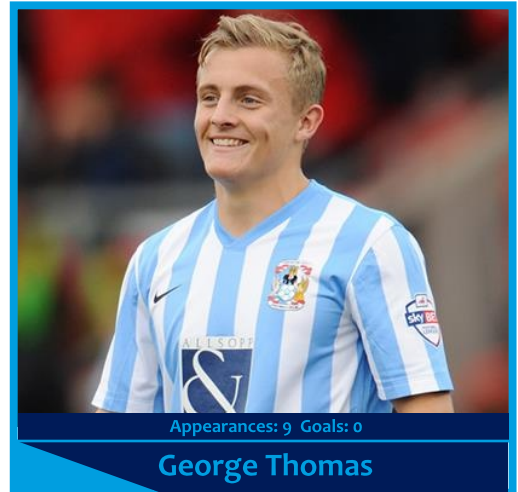


Bassala Sambou's goals in the FA Youth Cup caught the attention this season, so much so that he's off to get lost in Everton's youth system. In the one short appearance he made this season, Sambou looked quick but some way off first-team quality with his slight frame and awkward running style.

Some have been decrying his lack of inclusion this season when more experienced names have underwhelmed. Given that he struggled to even get into the under-21 side, it's understandable why Sambou wasn't anywhere close to getting a chance. Looks like he has a lot to learn, whether a Premier League academy is the best move for him remains to be seen.

George Thomas' one big contribution this season was an assist for Richard Wood's own goal at Fleetwood in October. An energetic forward who is always looking to play the ball forward towards goal, he could perhaps have been handed a further few opportunities as the season progressed rather than playing old players unlikely to be around next season.

Thomas appears right now to lack a predatory instinct in front of goal, understandable for a kid yet to establish himself at first-team level. If he does want to make that step up, Thomas is going to have add the extra element of goals to the energy and positivity he already provides.



There's a debate to be had as to whether Marcus Tudgay was under-used this season. A return of five goals is a respectable contribution from a bit-part player but being neither an out-and-out goalscorer or the kind of player who can physically dominate the opposition has made it hard to find a use for him in the team.

The frustrating thing is that on the occasions where he's looked like he had more to offer, he's underwhelmed in subsequent appearances. A goal against Fleetwood and an anonymous performance against Barnsley the week after summed him up. It seems like Mowbray appreciates his personality in the dressing room and his willingness to play a bit-part role in the squad.

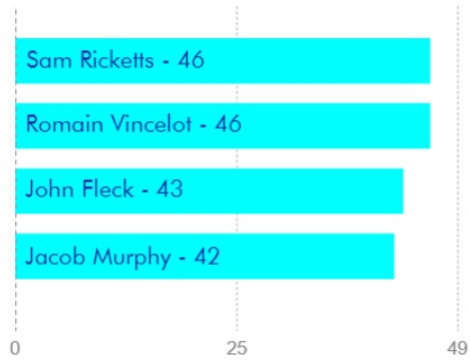
Most Used Team



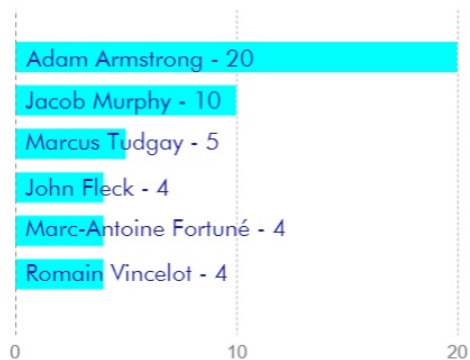
Based on appearances in all competitions

Player Stats

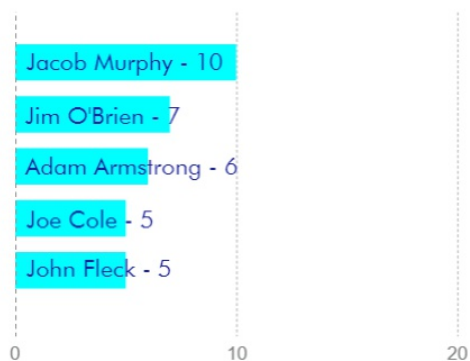
Most Appearances



Top Scorer



Most Assists



What Do We Need Next Season?

There has been expectation that there'll be a large squad turnover heading into next season with all our key loan players returning to their parent clubs and unlikely to return and at least 11 players leaving at the end of their contracts. However, there are perhaps likely to be fewer changes, or signings at least, than many are anticipating.

First of all, we seem to have situation in goal finally sorted out. Reice Charles-Cook is established as first-choice and appears to have come through a difficult period in December a much better player. Lee Burge as back-up is absolutely fine and there is no need to waste money on bringing in another keeper as either first-choice or back-up.

With Chris Stokes and Ryan Haynes likely to push each other closely for the left-back slot, that's another position sorted. The shock departure of Aaron Martin and the less surprising one of Reda Johnson leaves a whole in central defence but no more than two new centre-backs are likely to arrive. With Sam Ricketts, Jordan Willis and Chris Stokes capable of filling in at centre-back and Cian Harries looking solid on his first-team debut, it may not necessarily be an entirely new-look back-line

In addition to one or two new centre-backs, a new right-back will be required as well. Martin Lorentzson feel quickly out of favour for Mowbray who also lost faith with Aaron Phillips after the Burton game, if he had ever had his full faith anyway. A new attacking right-back who is decent defensively would add another dimension to this team, so hopefully the decision to let Phillips leave means there's a quality replacement lined-up.

John Fleck seems certain to leave over the summer, despite both parties saying that there will be 'talks'. It's probably the right time for Fleck to leave to progress his career but it leaves us in need of either a player who can dictate the

game from deep or someone with a presence about them to provide a platform for players ahead of them. Given that we're losing Joe Cole and James Maddison too, a new playmaker midfielder appears to be vital.

There is unlikely to be more than one new central midfielder arriving at the club over the summer with Romain Vincelot, Andy Rose and Vladimir Gadzhev already in the building. Vincelot's form has been iffy in the final months of the season but we'll need his abilities as a holding midfielder with neither Rose nor Gadzhev looking like having the qualities to fulfil that task. If Gael Bigirimana is offered a deal to stay and Ben Stevenson has a strong pre-season, there may not even be a need to add another central midfielder.

It's likely to be a complete rebuild in those attacking positions with only Ruben Lameiras, Jodi Jones and George Thomas under contract for next season. Marcus Tudgay has been offered a new contract to ensure some continuity and experience in attack but it's possible that only one of the above four will be first-choice next season.

It would be nice if we weren't reliant on just the one goalscorer next season. By that, I don't mean having two strikers to call upon that score all our goals but having players who can fit in just behind the centre-forward who can score goals themselves. In a promotion-winning season, you need players who can step up at different times of the season and keep the run going, if we're reliant on one goalscorer again next season, we're going to fall short.

Player of the Season

Any player in contention for the player of the season award comes with major caveats, something that seemed impossible when we were positively teeming with candidates back in January. Here's an assessment of who was in contention back then and ultimately, who should win it now.

Jacob Murphy

His form has dropped off a cliff over the second half of the season but there were still several games where his influence was key. That burst of acceleration into the final third though wasn't seen enough in the final few months where fatigue clearly took hold of him. That drop-off in form was slightly too great to keep him in contention for player of the year but his two assists on the final day provided a final reminder of his talent.

Jim O'Brien

Would probably have been in contention had he not been loaned out to Scunthorpe in February but perhaps he wouldn't have been involved enough regardless. The amount of assists O'Brien produced this season for Adam Armstrong can make it no coincidence that the latter's goalscoring form dropped off in the final months of the campaign and it's hard to feel that Mowbray denied himself an effective player despite not feeling he was tactically disciplined enough to fit into the team.

Romain Vincelot

One of the players who has suffered the biggest drops in form over the second half of the season. At the half-way stage, he had barely put a foot wrong as he had been more-or-less the kind of defensive midfield signing that we had been crying out for for a long period of time. His positional play, desire and aerial ability gave the team a platform to build from, especially in the bifurcated manner that we generally played

where the defenders defended deeply and we attacked with only four or five players.

Quite where it started going wrong for Vincelot is hard to pin-point but his passing became very sloppy and he started to find himself in bad positions. For much of the second half of the season, Vincelot was given more of a box-to-box role in the side and was even used as an attacking midfielder at times, clearly not his strong suit. He was even used in defence for a few games, suggesting more that he was being relied upon less as a defensive midfielder than for his performances in defence.

He's a player that only Sam Ricketts would consider to be player of the season for us, it's been disappointing to see him drop-off so badly, especially as he is one of few who'll be around next year, but he isn't on the shortlist for me.

Aaron Martin

Two months out with a somewhat mysterious injury might just take him out of contention but Aaron Martin has rarely let the team down this season. Had he not been under contract heading into the campaign, Tony Mowbray would surely had let him go after a series of disastrous performances at the end of last season but he has become our defensive lynch-pin this season.

The opportunity in the team presented itself when Jordan Willis suffered an injury back in August and Martin stepped into the vacated centre-back slot with Sam Ricketts moving to right-back. Despite an own goal against Burton in his second appearance of the season, he has barely put a foot wrong this season as virtually all areas of his play have massively improved.

Not only has he started winning all his aerial challenges but his ability to cover the defence and play out from the back have been a marked improvement. His importance to the side was outlined by the defensive improvement upon his

return to the team in March, certainly the most improved player of the season and an outsider for overall player of the year. Tony Mowbray's obsession with a dominant centre-back has meant that we're letting a talented defender go.

John Fleck

Almost certain to leave in the summer, John Fleck has had his best campaign yet for the Sky Blues. From very early on, it became apparent that he had the desire to take control of games that he had lacked for much of a dismal previous season. Fleck's passing ability set the tempo for the side and he is the type of player that's not easy to replace when you're at this level of football.

Although they've barely been regular, Fleck has added goals to his game this season which sums up his improvement. Not only has he found himself in more advanced positions in games, but he's been more willing to actually shoot, which has been rewarded with his improved goal return. His higher assist tally versus last season, further demonstrates the added level he's had to his game this year.

A surprise winner of the club's player of the season award, it makes sense when you begin to think about it. Although there have been several points lost by costly errors from Fleck in front of his own goal, he has been one of the most important and consistent players throughout the campaign.

Adam Armstrong

Although Armstrong suffered badly for goals in the final months of the season, the committed nature of his performances made him one of the loan players that even the most vociferous critics of the side couldn't deny lacked desire. At his very best this season, Armstrong looked several levels above League One defences but a lack of service ultimately undermined his efforts to finish the season as the division's top-scorer.

Not only is Armstrong quick and an excellent

finisher but he has a real drive in his game to chase down chances and lead the line for the team. Although his return of goals diminished over the course of the season, it's interesting that he started to record assists for the side to demonstrate that he isn't just a goalscorer.

A player who is clearly destined for much bigger things in the future and who'll probably get a chance at a Newcastle side who are likely to drop into the Championship next season. In comparison to Callum Wilson, they both have a drive and determination about their games that sets them up to make an impact at the very top. The goals will return for him, it's just sad that they didn't in time to save our season.

Other Contenders

The two names that stand out who didn't make the list at the half-way stage are **Reice Charles-Cook** and **Chris Stokes**. Personally, I've never felt that Chris Stokes has put in a player of the season-worthy performance simply despite his consistency throughout the campaign. For me, a player of the season has to have won you his fair share of games and I can't really think of a game where Stokes' solid contributions have.

On the subject of winning their fair share games for us, Reice Charles-Cook on the other hand, has. There was a period in December where he cost us a few games with rookie errors but he has shown over the past few months in particular his ability to come through those mistakes a better player. As bad as we were in the final months of the season, Charles-Cook's contribution at times meant we held onto points and some of those final few games to at least end the season with a modicum of respectability. We've finally sorted out the goalkeeping position two years after Joe Murphy left.

And The Winner Is...

Given that there's almost no distinction to be made between the young player of the year and overall player of the year, I'm going to name them both in the same article.

Adam Armstrong is my player of the year, simply because he was the difference between what would have been a slow start to the season and actually being in promotion contention. More than any other player in the team, Armstrong was responsible for everything good that happened this season. He may have stopped scoring at the end but he was making a contribution in other ways which ensures that overall, he is our player of the year.

As for the young player, Reice Charles-Cook takes it for me, even if it is odd that he's older than the overall player of the season. Charles-Cook has broken into the first-team, held onto his place, learned from his mistakes and is now probably one of the best goalkeepers in the division. Not bad for a player who spent last season on loan at Nuneaton and back-up to Lee Burge. Any player in contention for the player of the season award comes with major caveats, something that seemed impossible when we were positively teeming with candidates back in January. Here's an assessment of who was in contention back then and ultimately, who should win it now.



Story Of The Season

A Fantastic Start



There was a feel-good factor breaking out at Coventry City following the end of a campaign which required a final day win at Crawley to secure safety. The club acted quickly in announcing cut-price season tickets and eventually securing manager Tony Mowbray on a longer-term contract. The two moves acted as both an apology for another year of underperformance and a promise that things had to, and would, get better next season.

In Tony Mowbray, we had secured a manager with experience of managing in both the Premier League and briefly in the Champions League. In the few months he had already been at the club, he had not only eked out the results for survival but had improved the quality of play from a set of players who weren't his own.

The club appeared ready to realise its potential and many fans expected the club to keep the momentum going with a big summer in the transfer market. That big recruitment drive never really came, with other clubs in the division acting more decisively in the transfer market and when signings were made, they were of the unknown or inexperienced variety. It was hard not to feel underwhelmed after some big talk during the months prior.

The main additions were defensive midfielder Romain Vincelot and the experienced defender Sam Ricketts. Neither of the two had experienced particularly positive previous campaigns but would now be forming the cornerstone of the side. The unknown midfielder Ruben lameiras had been signed after a successful trial and the 18 year-old Newcastle United striker Adam Armstrong arrived on a

season long loan as nominally the club's main goal threat.

It was a typically hot August afternoon as the Sky Blues fans made their way back to the Ricoh Arena for another season, which was feeling just like another season. A poor pre-season campaign where the team struggled for goals further suggested that it was likely to be a slow start to the season with the squad still appearing to be missing a few important elements.

Against newly-relegated Wigan Athletic, the Sky Blues were comfortably the underdogs and probably looking to soak up pressure and hope for something on the counter-attack. Tony Mowbray though surprised both the opposition and the home fans by setting the team out in an enterprising 4-2-4 formation with the lightweight attacking midfielders Ruben lameiras and James Maddison nominally occupying the centre forwards roles.

The formation worked a treat, although Wigan enjoyed plenty of possession, it was the Sky Blues who were playing with intent. The front four of lameiras and Maddison with Armstrong and Jim O'Brien out wide were energetic, dynamic and devoted to the game plan that they had been set. Armstrong in particular stood out on that balmy August afternoon, making his first impression with the home fans with a blistering turn of pace early on that caught his marker cold and won a corner.

It became clear that Armstrong not only had an excellent turn of pace but the movement and finishing ability to make him a lethal goalscorer. In the 15th minute, the Sky Blues broke from a corner and Jim O'Brien played a perfectly-weighted through ball for Armstrong who made a darting run from the right wing to the centre of the pitch and finished with ease past the Wigan keeper Richard O'Donnell. Perhaps this wasn't going to be just another season after all.

For all the youthful energy up front, there was an assurance at the back as well. Reda Johnson was his usual dominant, charismatic self at the back with new captain Sam Ricketts providing a calmer presence alongside Johnson with the ability to snuff out attacks by being in the right position at the right time. With Romain Vincelot providing the padlock just in front of the defence with his excellent positional sense and surprisingly good aerial ability, the balance of the side looked to be just perfect.

As Wigan grew frustrated in their attempts to pick a way through or around our defence, a youthful front-line desperate to impress took it in turns to strut their stuff. James Maddison was constantly able to slip past markers with his deft control of the football and agility. Ruben lameiras was slippery too but more down to his

Wigan Athletic (H)
League One
Score: 2-0
Scorer(s): Armstrong (2)
League Position: 4th

preternatural ability, taking one more touch than most players would take, creating confusion in the defence. Armstrong's pace and drive proved a constant thorn in Wigan's side and the Newcastle loanee produced a deft finish from a John Fleck cross in the second-half to seal the win.

Rochdale (A)
League Cup
Score: 1-1 (3-5 on pens)
Scorer(s): Tudgay

An impressive victory over the pre-season favourites but it was clear that heading into a League Cup tie the following Tuesday, the lack of squad depth was a big issue. Tony Mowbray attempted to rest as many players as he could and got a disjointed performance at Spotland as the visitors struggled to get into a rhythm until Maddison was introduced as a second-half substitute with the side already a goal down. Marcus Tudgay equalised to force extra-time but a Ruben Lameiras missed penalty in the following shoot-out ended the Sky Blues' League Cup run at the first hurdle.

The defeat tempered expectations after the high of the opening day as league action resumed for a trip to Millwall. Yet the visit to South London proved to be one of the Sky Blues' most memorable performances of the season and up there with one of the best since relegation from the Premier League.

It all started in the unlikeliest of circumstances as Millwall's Lee Gregory won a questionable-looking penalty in the first five minutes, sparking an impassioned protest from Chris Stokes, who had to be separated from the forward to be saved from a booking. Gregory's penalty was hit at a good height for Lee Burge to save and a few minutes later, the Sky Blues took the lead via an audacious 35-yard lob from Adam Armstrong out of nowhere.

It was not only the impudence of actually attempting the effort but the technique and belief it took to actually pull it off that made it such a special goal. It was Armstrong's belief in his own abilities that seemed to rub off on the rest of his team-mates, particularly Ruben Lameiras and James Maddison, as they set about dismantling a rugged Millwall defence.

Maddison set Lameiras up for a well-placed finish at the near-post to double the lead in the 20th minute and minutes later Lameiras set Armstrong through on goal for a third goal. The notion that this was a team under-prepared for the season ahead looked to have been shattered, Tony Mowbray had found an attacking trifecta in Lameiras, Maddison and Armstrong that looked capable of tearing this division apart, their movement, confidence and ability looking a class above anything else you would find in League One.

The second-half was pretty much a non-event, Millwall had already been beaten and both sides knew it. Millwall's meek attempts to get back into the game only served to offer up further opportunity for

Millwall (A)
League One
Score: 4-0
Scorer(s): Armstrong (2),
Lameiras, O'Brien
League Position: 1st

the Sky Blues to extend the proportion of the victory. New loan signing Jacob Murphy added raw pace as he was introduced from the bench and it was his deflected effort that landed for Jim O'Brien to play a neat one-two with Marcus Tudgay and finish to make the final score 4-0.

This Coventry City side had just announced itself to the division in comfortably beating two of its better sides by a combined score of 6-0 in the opening two games. It may have only been two games out of 46 but there was already the impression that things already felt like they had changed for the better just from the coaching and man management ability of Tony Mowbray. The Tuesday night home game against the bogeymen of Crewe offered the chance to prove things really had changed.

John Fleck, whose control of the game and forward drive were a marked improvement from a difficult previous season, got his reward for an assured all-round display as he gave the team the lead after hammering home a deflection from a corner kick. It was the midfielder's first goal for 16 months, demonstrating that there were others in this side capable of stepping up.

The confidence level of the Sky Blues was sky high as they stroked the ball around the lush Ricoh Arena turf for the first 45 minutes. Not only was there assurance in possession but the movement and understanding between the players appeared cohesive already at this early stage of the campaign. This was summed up by a chance created in the first-half started by Adam Armstrong dropping deep to receive the ball from the centre-backs and the ball moving effortlessly forward for James Maddison to test the goalkeeper.

Crewe though gave the confident home crowd cause to doubt this team for the first time as they took advantage of a moment's hesitation on the right side of defence to curl in an unexpected equaliser around the 30th minute, the first league goal of the season conceded. The Sky Blues got themselves back into a rhythm for the second-half with Adam Armstrong producing a typically unerring finish but Crewe managed another equaliser while many in the stadium were still watching the replay on the big screen.

It threatened to spoil a confident performance for this embryonic Sky Blues side, that dominance in the first-half looked a little wasteful and our defence looked rather static and susceptible. With the level of tension rising as the prospect of the Sky Blues managing not to beat Crewe yet again rose, another player from outside that thrilling front three stepped up to the mark. Jim O'Brien, another player outside of the thrilling trifecta up front, sensed his opportunity as a clearance fell to him 25 yards from goal which he hit first time to finally vanquish Crewe.

Crewe Alexandra (H)
League One
Score: 3-2
Scorer(s): Fleck, Armstrong,
O'Brien
League Position: 1st

The Search For Consistency



A bumper Sky Blue army made the trip to Walsall as Coventry City looked to assert their position at the top of the League One table. For the first time this season, they would be up against a team in form themselves making it the first proper test of whether this team had the ability to maintain a push for promotion.

It was a fairly positive start for the Sky Blues who were putting their hosts under pressure in the opening stages. The momentum of the game was reversed minutes into those opening exchanges as Walsall's Adam Chambers clattered into James Maddison for a 50/50 tackle which forced the Sky Blues' prize talent off with an ankle injury.

Although the extent of the injury wasn't apparent at the time, just how much the loss of Maddison would affect the team was laid out. The team had lost its key link between attack and defence, the ball stopped moving forward with intent with those at the back were now forced to make the choice between either playing it safe or sending long, hopeful punts forward to nowhere.

With the Sky Blues bereft of ideas, it was Walsall who took the initiative and proceeded to dominate the game. It was then that it became apparent just how far ahead of us Walsall were as a team-unit, the movement, understanding and intent of their play was much more cohesive than our spluttering Maddison-less play.

Much of the rest of the game was spent chasing Walsall's shadows on a hot late August afternoon, the Saddlers appeared to constantly

have a spare man whenever in possession. Walsall appeared to be relishing their position as the dominant side and rather than look to put the ball in the net, they tortured our back-line with constant switches of the play and flashing of the ball across the six yard box. Eventually, Walsall took the lead via Anthony Forde who was set through with a perfectly-timed pass by Romaine Sawyers. The lead was then doubled shortly after half-time via Tom Bradshaw poking home a cross.

Walsall (A)
League One
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Murphy
League Position: 3rd

Out of the blue, the Sky Blues pulled a goal back via a neatly worked short corner routine which was finished emphatically by Jacob Murphy right in front of the away stand. Yet it already felt understood that this just wasn't going to be the Sky Blues' day with relatively few chances created in the closing stages and Adam Armstrong struggling to get involved for the first time in a Coventry City shirt.

The result and performance became especially troubling when it was announced that James Maddison's injury was genuinely serious and would keep him out until the end of December. The thought of labouring through three or four months' worth of games in the same manner as that sweltering afternoon in Walsall sucked away a lot of that optimism that had been built up over an excellent first three league games.

The following game against Southend back at the Ricoh Arena was going to be a good indicator of how this team would cope longer-term without Maddison available to knit the team together. With the visitors winless for the season at that point, this was a game that many would have expected the Sky Blues to win comfortably but it was apparent from early on both that the loss of Maddison would disrupt our flow and that Southend were going to be a tough nut to crack.

Southend were robust and competitive as they closed down the Sky Blues' back-line to force errors early on and raise the anxiety levels of the home fans. After riding out the early nerves through, Reda Johnson's bullet header from a corner looked set to calm things down following a period where the team had started to exert influence over the proceedings.

The visitors continued to be awkward as they scored almost directly after the restart through a header via a delivery from the left-wing after a half-cleared corner. Southend continued to get into the faces of the Sky Blues and had seemingly gotten their just reward for that energy and commitment after they won a penalty by putting pressure on Aaron Phillips in a 50/50 in his own box. David Mooney converted the spot-kick just before a half-time and those seeds of doubt in this side continued to grow.

The second-half was an improvement with winger Jacob Murphy impressing in his surges past Southend defenders to draw a slew of fouls and yellow cards. There was little sign of a breakthrough though until Southend gave away their own avoidable penalty-kick mid-way through the second-half. Jim O'Brien stepped up to the spot and hit a tame effort at an easy to save height which seemingly confirmed that it wasn't to be the Sky Blues' evening.

Southend United (H)
League One
Score: 2-2
Scorer(s): Armstrong,
Ricketts
League Position: 5th

With a chorus of 'Don't worry about a thing...' spontaneously sweeping the stadium as the fans tried to defiantly overcome an otherwise frustrating and disappointing evening, captain Sam Ricketts nodded in a near-post header from a corner to level the scores as the chanting reached a crescendo. Both team and fans spurred each other on as they searched for a winner in the final stages, which ultimately wasn't to come but the game served to vindicate a growing level of belief in this team's home form, which was soon to become a theme as the season progressed.

Heading into an away trip to surprise packages Burton Albion, the Sky Blues were without Adam Armstrong due to international duty, leaving the side without another vital cog from those early exuberant performances. Unsurprisingly it was a sluggish performance in the opening stages of the match, which the team looked like they had ridden out until Burton's Mark Duffy whipped in a teasing delivery for Aaron Martin to divert awkwardly into the back of his own net.

Burton Albion (A)
League One
Score: 2-1
Scorer(s): Tudgay, Vincelot
League Position: 2nd

Instead of further dissipating the momentum of those first few games, the rest of the game provided evidence that this team was made of stronger stuff than previous Sky Blues sides. A fluent move involving John Fleck, Jacob Murphy and Ruben lameiras laid the ball on a tee for Marcus Tudgay to level. The winning goal came via Romain Vincelot who poked home a set-piece from a seemingly offside position, which television replays proved was comfortably onside.

To accommodate for the loss of Maddison for an extended period, Tony Mowbray eventually added two different kinds of players to his squad. The first was Marc-Antoine Fortuné, a physical centre-forward with whom Mowbray had worked with at West Brom and Celtic. The other was the highly-rated Liverpool winger Ryan Kent who the club had reportedly secured ahead of a host of League One and Championship clubs. These were the type of signings many had been anticipating earlier in the summer and looked to have finally given Mowbray some all-important options.

The next game against a Scunthorpe side who had started the season in poor form under the beleaguered former Sky Blues boss Mark Robins, looked like the perfect opportunity to put together

Scunthorpe United (H)
League One
Score: 0-1
League Position: 4th

another winning run. Yet Robins wily made the move to press the Sky Blues high up the pitch and to bring back two former City players with a point to prove – Jordan Clarke and Gary McSheffrey - into his side. Scunthorpe choked the life out of the Sky Blues, who failed to register a shot on target, and got a much-deserved winner late on when Paddy Madden pounced on a John Fleck error.

Chesterfield (H)
League One
Score: 1-0
Scorer(s): Armstrong
League Position: 4th

A return to the Ricoh Arena seemed to freshen the team up after a disappointing, sluggish display the previous week. Adam Armstrong in particular appeared to be relishing the space opened up to him by the use of the exciting wingers Jacob Murphy and Ryan Kent, scoring the only goal of the game. The freewheeling nature of the performance against Chesterfield with yet more exciting, skilful young prospects in the side demonstrated Tony Mowbray and Mark Venus' ability to identify the best young talent available and give them the freedom to flourish.

The following away trip to Bury though was another reminder of how far this team still had to go. Too many of the exciting young talents were off-colour with Bury's Leon Clarke demonstrating just what it took to do it week-in-week-out. First, the former Sky Blues striker headed in a cross from another former City player in Chris Hussey, then he used his body intelligently to win a soft penalty which he duly converted to give Bury an unassailable lead.

Bury (A)
League One
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Johnson
League Position: 4th

Although Reda Johnson's goal back later on in the game gave the Sky Blues a foothold that they nearly used to salvage a point, the damage had been done with an insipid start to the game. It was a reminder of the perils of relying on young players getting their first taste of men's football, that their form will peak and trough erratically. There was still time for things to come together, but it was frustrating that the team didn't further press home the advantage of a terrific start to the season.

Getting To The Top



It was back to the Ricoh Arena again as the Sky Blues looked to pick themselves up from the defeat at Bury. An illness to keeper Lee Burge meant that Reice Charles-Cook was handed his first league appearance for the club in goal and what would be just his third appearance in the Football League in total. With Shrewsbury Town potentially tricky opponents, it looked set to be another test of this side's mettle.

It was the visitors who started the game brightest, coming close to opening the scoring when Charles-Cook casually booted a back-pass into their striker James Collins, only for the deflection to luckily bounce back into the debutant keeper's hands. The Sky Blues punished Shrewsbury for not making the most of being on top when Adam Armstrong carefully placed an effort in the 20th minute to give the home team the lead. It was a lead that was doubled by Marc-Antoine Fortuné from the spot after he was rugby-tackled by Shrewsbury's Nathaniel Knight-Percival.

Despite not playing particularly well, the Sky Blues were creating chances with ease and were in fact guilty of being rather wasteful at times. Whenever Shrewsbury advanced past the half-way line, it was seen as yet another opportunity to mount a counter-attack. The introduction of Fortuné into the mix provided the team another dimension in attack, the ability to dominate opponents physically while Armstrong, Murphy and Kent rang amok in the spaces left in behind.

With the final goal of the game coming from another counter-attack

Shrewsbury Town (H)
League One
Score: 3-0
Scorer(s): Armstrong (2),
Fortuné
League Position: 5th

and another piece of combination play between Armstrong and Fortuné, the Sky Blues had once again found comfort at home. The missing ingredient of consistency was still to present itself but the ease of the win against Shrewsbury suggested that it would come soon enough.

Yeovil Town (A)
Football League Trophy
Score: 0-0 (3-4 on pens)

Another Tuesday night cup tie, this time in the Johnstone's Paint Trophy, saw Tony Mowbray once again deploy the back-up brigade to turn the game into essentially a friendly match. It was hardly a glamour tie away to Yeovil and it turned out to be a game of few chances with the hosts eventually winning through on penalties as the Sky Blues once again exited a cup tournament at the first hurdle.

Fleetwood Town (A)
League One
Score: 1-0
Scorer(s): Own Goal
League Position: 5th

There was intrigue heading into the next league game, away at Fleetwood, with former Sky Blues boss Steven Pressley being appointed as manager of the Cod Army in time for a reunion. Adam Armstrong and Ryan Kent were unavailable for selection due to international duty, meaning that several of the back-up brigade who laboured against Yeovil would have to step up to league action. In a tight game the Sky Blues just about edged, George Thomas' shot deflected in off former Coventry City defender Richard Wood to secure a second consecutive league win, for the first time since August.

With momentum starting to build again on the pitch, the bandwagon went into overdrive when it was announced that former England international Joe Cole was to sign on loan. A transfer coup so ridiculous that it could only be believed when Cole presented himself in corporeal form at the club's Ryton training ground to confirm that he was still indeed Joe Cole and Joe Cole had indeed signed for Coventry City. In a short space of time, Tony Mowbray had turned Coventry City from a club condemned to fester in the lower leagues into an exciting place of free-flowing football that the Joe Cole wanted to be at.

Blackpool (H)
League One
Score: 0-0
League Position: 5th

Heading into the Blackpool game at fortress Ricoh Arena with back-to-back wins and Joe Cole in tow, the confidence was overflowing. The visitors however provided a taste of dour League One reality with a resolute display to completely stifle our exciting attacking players to turn the game into a dull spectacle. A bore 0-0 draw was only memorable for another long-term injury to a key player – this time to Reda Johnson – who saw his season ended following an innocuous twist of his ankle in the second-half.

Joe Cole went on to make his debut in the following game away to Rochdale. Cole's presence did little to lift the team in a dour performance where they were perhaps lucky not to be beaten by the hosts. The Sky Blues had the impressive Reice Charles-Cook in goal to thank for a third clean-sheet in a row since making his debut.

Rochdale (A)
League One
Score: 0-0
League Position: 4th

The former youngster providing a more confident and ebullient presence in goal compared to his predecessor Lee Burge who seemed to lack self-esteem.

The away trip to Swindon presented another chance to exorcise one of the club's biggest bogey sides of recent years. With the hosts struggling at the bottom of the division and being managed temporarily by their chairman and the Sky Blues unbeaten in four, impenetrable at the back and with *the Joe Cole*, this was our best opportunity to beat Swindon in the league in half a century.

Another scrappy away performance but one in which we managed to score when Romain Vincelot capitalised on a goalkeeping error and then Marcus Tudgay tucking away the rebound from his own missed penalty with nine minutes to go. Ben Gladwin's wonder-goal for the beleaguered hosts saw Reice Charles-Cook's record-breaking clean-sheet streak broken but looked like merely a consolation. That was until Aaron Martin and Aaron Phillips conspired to give away a penalty from simultaneous errors which was duly converted by Nicky Ajose – a player who nearly joined in the summer – to allow Swindon's mysterious unbeaten streak against us to continue.

Swindon Town (A)
League One
Score: 2-2
Scorer(s): Vincelot, Tudgay
League Position: 4th

From four games unbeaten, Tony Mowbray's side were now three without a win after a run of disappointing draws. The sense that we had all got a little over-excited was vindicated via a lamentably poor first-half performance against Peterborough in the Ricoh Arena as the visitors dominating the game with an exhibition of possession football. To have been only two goals behind at the break was a let-off considering the clear gulf in quality on display between the two sides.

A half-time reshuffle saw the ineffective Fortuné sacrificed for an extra midfielder in Jim O'Brien to bring balance to the side and the powder-puff Ruben Lameiras replaced with the pacey and direct Ryan Kent. Although Peterborough looked likeliest to score the next goal, the changes eventually saw the balance of the game shift in the Sky Blues' favour. O'Brien, in tandem with Romain Vincelot in midfield, pressed and harried the Posh into mistakes to disrupt their rhythm. With Kent demonstrating early on that he had the beating of his full-back, further doubt was cast into Peterborough minds.

The combination of sheer determination with flair in attack provided one of the most memorable second-half performances in recent Sky Blues history. Romain Vincelot bundled home a set-piece before Adam Armstrong tucked home a cut-back from a blistering Jacob Murphy run to level the score. Armstrong's ice-cold killer instinct in front of goal was there for all to see as he snatched on a half-chance to emphatically complete a heady comeback, which had seemed simply impossible at half-time, and reignite the season just as it had

Peterborough United (H)
League One
Score: 3-2
Scorer(s): Vincelot,
Armstrong (2)
League Position: 4th

appeared to be flagging.

A Tuesday night home game against a beleaguered Barnsley side looked a great chance to string together another run of wins and the Sky Blues looked to have taken that chance with consummate professionalism as they eased to a 2-0 half-time lead via Ryan Kent and Adam Armstrong. Barnsley looked simply nowhere near good enough to put that comfortable lead under any doubt but took advantage of a lapse in concentration from a set-piece to pull a goal back just after the break.

It didn't seem to matter though as Adam Armstrong was set through by Jim O'Brien not long after Barnsley's goal to restore the two-goal lead. Barnsley found another riposte though as Josh Scowen pulled a goal back to make it 3-2, although he appeared to handle the ball in the build-up to the goal.

As Joe Cole stepped up for a free-kick just before the hour mark, the crowd already seemed to know what was going to happen next. The ball sailed predictably into the top corner from the former England international to confirm not only the win but Cole having finally adapted to League One football. A 4-2 win was more nervy than it should have been but Coventry City did something they so rarely do when things are going well, win games they're expected to win.

Barnsley (H)
League One
Score: 4-3
Scorer(s): Kent, Armstrong (2), Cole
League Position: 4th

Then Aaron Phillips gave away a perfunctory penalty in the final second of the game just to ensure that no-one forgot that it was Coventry City they had been watching.

The wins against Barnsley and Peterborough seemed to emphasise though just how reliant we had become on loan players. The club's third cup exit at the first hurdle, this time in the FA Cup to Northampton, pressed that point home further. Without Ryan Kent or Adam Armstrong in the side, the team lacked the ability to break a well-organised away side down. That Jacob Murphy, another loan player, scored the only goal in the 2-1 defeat only served to press home that point further.

Northampton Town (H)
FA Cup
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Murphy

It was the same problem heading into the next league fixture, away at Colchester United, but this time Tony Mowbray found a solution in deploying winger Jacob Murphy in a central position. After falling a goal behind, it was Murphy's directness in his driving runs from the centre of the pitch and Colchester's abysmal defending that swung the game. The Norwich loanee managed a brace as he marched through the Colchester defence and Marc-Antoine Fortuné got himself a rare goal to complete the turnaround for a third consecutive league victory.

Colchester United (A)
League One
Score: 3-1
Scorer(s): Murphy (2), Fortuné
League Position: 2nd

With Adam Armstrong and Ryan Kent both available for the

upcoming game against league-leaders Gillingham, Tony Mowbray further bolstered the squad by bringing back the much-loved Ben Turner and Gael Bigirimana to the club on loan deals. Turner, a mountain of a man, who excelled for one injury-shortened season and had subsequently impressed at Premier League level for Cardiff arrived as a direct replacement for Reda Johnson. Bigirimana, one of the few to come out of the club's relegation season from the Championship with any credit, was a further midfield option to provide effective back-up to Romain Vincelot and John Fleck.

The 15,000 Sky Blues fans who braved a bitterly cold November afternoon were rewarded for their belief in their side with a blisteringly clinical first-half performance, or rather 12 minutes. After an even set of opening exchanges, Jacob Murphy – again playing in the centre – took full advantage of a defensive error to go through one-on-one and open the scoring. Ben Turner rose highest from a corner-kick won by another Jacob Murphy surge to double the lead. Jim O'Brien sent Murphy through again for the game's third goal, Chris Stokes' cut-back three minutes later allowed Murphy to complete his first career hat-trick and the first seen at the Ricoh Arena in six years to hand the Sky Blues for a stunning four goal half-time lead with most of the home fans catatonic in jubilation during the 15-minute half-time interval.

Both sides knew that the game had been rendered over as a contest as they played out the second-half. Adam Armstrong spurned a great chance to join the party and make it five, before the impressive Bradley Dack fired home from outside of the area for a consolation goal for Gillingham. The final 45 minutes provided an opportunity for Coventry City fans to process what they had just witnessed, their team playing up to the big occasion, going top of the division and looking genuinely like one of the best sides in the league.

Gillingham (H)
League One
Score: 4-1
Scorer(s): Turner, Murphy (3)
League Position: 1st

The Trouble With Being Top



The evisceration of Gillingham had confirmed the Sky Blues as the most fluent, exciting, attacking team in the division, and also the small matter of being league leaders. Now that the Sky Blues had gotten to the top, the challenge would be to stay there. A cold Tuesday night trip to Valley Parade to face a physical Bradford City side would be as good a test of credentials as any.

Tony Mowbray decided that rather than stick with a side that was clearly at the top of their form, that it was better to rest players. Ryan Kent, John Fleck and Jim O'Brien were rested to allow Ruben lameiras, Gael Bigirimana and Marc-Antoine Fortuné a run-out. It was a big call, and one that could only be justified by getting the result.

Predictably for a side that was playing without several key players, the Sky Blues started the game slowly, struggling to create chances and lacking an understanding of how they were supposed to play. It took the late introductions of Jim O'Brien and Ryan Kent to actually give the team a serious attacking threat but the duo arrived too late to prevent the match finishing 0-0.

Bradford City (A)
League One
Score: 0-0
League Position: 1st

Tony Mowbray could just about say that he got the result while resting players but it still felt like a missed opportunity. Getting a home win against mid-table Doncaster in the following game would have served to further confirm Tony Mowbray's theory that it was wiser to preserve energy against Bradford rather than risk over-playing players at the top of their form.

Tony Mowbray recalled the entire starting 11 from the Gillingham game but it was clear from very early on that the fluency wasn't there. Doncaster started the game brighter but fell behind in the 30th minute when Adam Armstrong pounced on a deflection in the penalty area to score a goal that wouldn't even have been a chance for any other player.

The Sky Blues began to take charge of the game from that point onwards, enjoying plenty of possession but not doing a great deal with it. Although Doncaster's level of performance faded in the second-half, they levelled when Reice Charles-Cook parried a shot into the path of Nathan Tyson which he couldn't miss. Not long after, John Fleck picked up a clearance from a corner, the crowd yelled 'shoot!', and he did just that to put the Sky Blues back in the lead.

It seemed like the game would be another showcase of this team's attacking prowess simply being too much for the quotidian League One side to handle. It should have been really but the Sky Blues grew increasingly casual in possession in front of their own goal as the game wore on. That was where Doncaster eventually found an equaliser via Nathan Tyson again who accepted a gift from John Fleck to put him in a position where it would have been difficult to miss.

Doncaster Rovers (H)
League One
Score: 2-2
Scorer(s): Armstrong, Fleck
League Position: 1st

After the underwhelming performance against Bradford, it was sheer sloppiness again that saw the Sky Blues drop another two points and their lead at the top of the division reduced from three to just one. The momentum had stalled somewhat and the team now had to find a reaction in the next game to prevent two sloppy performances spilling into a more worrying trend.

A reaction came in front of the Sky cameras as the Sky Blues dominated much of the game against a beleaguered Sheffield United side at Bramall Lane. Tony Mowbray's squad rotation policy looked to be working this time, a fresh Ruben lameiras terrorised the Sheffield United defence, leading to increasingly desperate and crude attempts to put the Portuguese playmaker in a leg brace.

The referee's intransigence in not doling out fair punishment for Sheffield United's indiscretions soon turned into white-hot fury from the Coventry City fans when a deflected Jacob Murphy cross appeared to cross the line late in the second-half but was not given as a goal. It crystallised the sense that it just wasn't going to be Coventry City's day, Sheffield United's late winning goal from a corner only proved the theory and Sam Ricketts' late red card for two relatively minor fouls converted the tragedy into sheer comedy.

Sheffield United (A)
League One
Score: 0-1
League Position: 2nd

At least there were reasonable mitigating circumstances for another

poor result, which somehow now meant that the Sky Blues had fallen four points behind league leaders Burton Albion. The feeling that teams were setting themselves up to negate our attacking threat through organisation or physicality was starting to crop up and the worry was that we weren't showing the correct nerve to battle through it.

The build-up for the next home game gave way to the outpouring of emotion to the news of club icon Jimmy Hill's death just hours before kick-off. Whether the emotionally charged atmosphere had any effect upon the performance was debatable as the Sky Blues again looked nervy and uncertain against defensively-minded opponents. An injury to Ben Turner in the first-half unsettled the fluency further with Chris Stokes forced to play as a makeshift centre-back and there was a clear sense of panic whenever the back four were on the ball.

It looked like proving to be an academic concern as Aaron Martin headed in a corner just after the break to give the Sky Blues a lead Oldham looked incapable of overcoming. Just as the job looked like it had been done on the day that Jimmy Hill died, Oldham scored a soft goal in the final seconds as another error from Reice Charles-Cook in goal, this time flapping at a chest-high header, gave the visitors a scarcely deserved point.

Oldham Athletic (H)
League One
Score: 1-1
Scorer(s): Martin
League Position: 3rd

It was beginning to look like this team had lost its composure with too many young players in the side incapable of battling through a period where the team was expected to win. From the incisive, lethal, dynamic attacking unit against Gillingham, to the slow, stodgy and indecisive one against Oldham in such a short space of time, the Sky Blues were already looking like a different side to the one of a few games prior. The next few games looked likely to define whether the Sky Blues could battle through this tough spell or let it derail the season.

That's why the Boxing Day victory over Port Vale felt so important, the same kind of performance against Oldham but this time ending with a win. The honours fell to the returning boy-wonder James Maddison who lit up a dull, cold spectacle with a well-placed side-foot effort from 25 yards out which involved beating three defenders beforehand. In the midst of the team's rise to the top of the table, it had almost been forgotten what an important player Maddison had been in the opening weeks, that goal reminded us just what we had missed out on in his absence.

Port Vale (H)
League One
Score: 1-0
Scorer(s): Maddison
League Position: 4th

Tony Mowbray's changes to the team for the following game away to Chesterfield once again proved disruptive. Marc-Antoine Fortuné was restored to the side with Adam Armstrong dropped and the Sky Blues lost their attacking fluency and threat once again. The

relegation-battling Spireites took the lead via a looping Lee Novak header from a set-piece, an increasingly apparent Achilles' Heel for the defence, who in open play were restricting the opposition to relatively few chances.

Chesterfield (A)
League One
Score: 1-1
Scorer(s): Maddison
League Position: 4th

Maddison further added to his own hype by salvaging the result for the Sky Blues with a spectacular goal from a direct free-kick in the 89th minute, sparking a minor pitch invasion from the Coventry City fans behind the goal. Two games into his return, and he was already the team's key player again. There was only one way this kid's talent was going.

The New Year saw the Sky Blues finally return to that fluency of late November as they well and truly exorcised the demon that is Crewe Alexandra. Adam Armstrong returned to goalscoring form as he and Jacob Murphy proceeded to terrorise the flaky Crewe Alexandra defence. Armstrong scored for just the second time away from home all season as he latched onto a Murphy through-ball in the 11th minute. Murphy curled an emphatic effort into the far top corner from the edge of the area soon after and Armstrong made it 3-0 from the spot as he converted a penalty won by Romain Vincelot.

Crewe Alexandra (A)
League One
Score: 5-0
Scorer(s): Armstrong (3),
Murphy (2)
League Position: 4th

There was to be no coming back from such a large deficit for Crewe, who found Reice Charles-Cook in inspired form in goal for the Sky Blues, which further conveyed the feeling that things were falling back into place after a difficult month. Armstrong completed his first career hat-trick just before half-time as he dispossessed a hapless Crewe defender and finished with aplomb to make it 4-0. Murphy completed the rout in the second-half with a placed finish as a bedraggled Crewe defence thought backing off of him was the best approach to take.

With back-to-back games at the Ricoh Arena against promotion rivals Walsall and Burton Albion to follow, a golden opportunity to get back to the top of the division had presented itself. Not only was the opportunity there but the team looked like it had found its form again at just the right time. Jacob Murphy and Adam Armstrong had shown against Crewe how potent they were against poor League One defence. Joe Cole had finally been integrated into the team as a playmaker and set-piece taker. Then there was Maddison back at his best, to give the team that further edge going forwards.

Against Walsall in the first leg of the double-header it was a fairly tight contest which the Sky Blues were on top of for the first 60 minutes. Chris Stokes headed in a Joe Cole free-kick mid-way through the first-half to hand the Sky Blues the lead against nominally our local rivals. The Saddlers looked dangerous in their rare forays forward, with Romaine Sawyers languidly orchestrating everything positive for the away side.

Walsall (H)
League One
Score: 1-1
Scorer(s): Stokes
League Position: 4th

The threat was there but it took a few spurned chances from the Sky Blues early in the second-half and a subsequent retreat that finally saw Walsall break into consistent attacking momentum. Sawyers was again instrumental as he picked out the pacey full-back Rico Henry in acres of space as he effortlessly switched the play and the latter curled in an accurate delivery for Tom Bradshaw to equalise and hand the visitors a point.

It was frustrating not to win the game but with Burton next to come, they was still a great opportunity to get back into the automatic promotion spots. Again, the Sky Blues dominated much of the game with James Maddison proving too difficult for the opposition to contain via anything other than crude, late fouls which the referee refused to punish. The best chances of the first-half fell the Sky Blues' way but Jon McLaughlin in goal for the Brewers produced some excellent saves to further frustrate the home side.

The frustration that a limited but immaculately organised Burton side were not only proving impossible to break down but that they had actually found themselves in the promotion spots with such a cautious approach seemed to spill over in the second-half as the Sky Blues grew increasingly desperate. The Brewers were almost literally handed the lead as Aaron Phillips decided to appeal for an offside whilst he was chesting a back-pass to Reice Charles-Cook and the ball landed kindly for the on-rushing Calum Butcher to smash into the roof of the net.

Burton Albion (H)
League One
Score: 0-2
League Position: 4th

It was another piece of predatory play to capitalise on the type of defensive error that Burton themselves would never have made themselves that sealed the result. Peter Ramage switched off entirely as a long-ball came back down from a great height to fall at the feet of Stuart Beavon, who scored a rare goal with an emphatic near-post finish.

Two big games to get back in the automatic promotion places, one point and our profligacy again proving costly.

A False Dawn



Southend United (A)
League One
Score: 0-3
League Position: 5th

Scunthorpe United (H)
League One
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Armstrong
League Position: 5th

If the results against Walsall and Burton had felt like disappointments, it was nothing compared to the two abject defeats against mid-table opposition that followed. The Sky Blues never found their rhythm against an abrasive Southend side who triumphed 3-0 at Roots Hall despite spending most of the second-half with 10-men. An improved performance against Scunthorpe nevertheless witnessed a third-consecutive defeat thanks to shockingly inept performances in central defence from Peter Ramage and Sam Ricketts.

Not only had a great opportunity to assert ourselves in the promotion race now been squandered but the season was careening towards full-on meltdown, something Tony Mowbray had experienced in his two previous complete league seasons as a manager. Prior to the run of three consecutive defeats, Tony Mowbray had never lost back-to-back games since taking over as Coventry City manager and we hadn't lost at home in the league all season. The damn had been burst and the floods were in full flow.

Suddenly, teams knew how to beat us and were accomplishing it with ease. Block the centre, bully our youngsters and wait for opportunities to be handed to them at the other end. Tony Mowbray's communications with the media were particularly uninspiring, although his calm, even tone during a poor run was probably a virtue, the constant slew of excuses suggested that he was denying that we had serious problems rather than addressing them.

The squad though was bolstered on transfer deadline day with the loan signings of centre-backs Jack Stephens and Baily Cargill. Both looked like the kind of athletic, composed on the ball centre-backs that would offer calm at the back when we were looking to play out from defence, compared to the slow and nervy Peter Ramage and Sam Ricketts. Although it was troubling that major surgery to our defence was deemed necessary by Tony Mowbray with 17 games to go, it at least looked like a solution to our problems.

A fairly productive January transfer window overall where we didn't quite get the additional firepower we needed but at least boosted the depth in the squad was ultimately overshadowed by the sale of James Maddison in the final minutes before the deadline. The one exciting attacking player who was ours, probably the most technically-gifted footballer ever to have been produced by our academy and a player destined for the very top was sold out of the blue, to Norwich.

The loan back agreement seemed like little consolation when we were already running at the maximum number of loan players, it only served to highlight why there was no need to sell him at the that particular time. Once again, the club had chosen to sell one of its best players before they had the chance to really do anything for us. Within the space of less than three weeks, the club's best season since relegation from the Premier League was looking just like every other season in that agonising interim period.

Morale was low heading into the away trip to Port Vale and despite taking the lead against the run of play, the mentality was far too negative to hold onto the result. There was the effective counter-attacking football that had served us so well at the start of the season and then there was the ultra-negative, protect the goal at all costs stuff that we played at Vale Park. It was a formula that very nearly worked, until Port Vale scored a stunning late equaliser to ensure the injustice of the result wasn't too great.

Port Vale (A)
League One
Score: 1-1
Scorer(s): Murphy
League Position: 5th

Prior to the Bury home game, the club held a well-observed memorial service for Jimmy Hill after his passing in December. The memorial coincided with the club's annual Legend's day celebration which further charged the sense of occasion to the game. With a large canvas image of Jimmy Hill looking out from the North Stand, something of the spirit of Jimmy rubbed off on the team as they returned to winning ways in emphatic fashion.

The potential nerviness of a contest against an opposing side jam-packed with former Sky Blues players was completely negated by two early goals from Joe Cole set-pieces. Chris Stokes and the impressive Baily Cargill bundled home two expert deliveries, aided and abetted by abject marking from the opposition, to set the Sky

Blues on the way to mark a weekend devoted to Jimmy Hill in style.

James Maddison scored a typically well-placed effort from outside the penalty area to end the match as a contest before John Fleck scored a fourth against the hapless Bury keeper Ian Lawlor. Adam Armstrong brought up the 'Old Five' with Joe Cole yet again instrumental as he picked the striker out in a precision counter-attacking move. Another rapier-like counter-attack, another Adam Armstrong goal, with John Fleck getting the assist to make the score 6-0.

Bury (H)
League One
Score: 6-0
Scorer(s): Stokes, Cargill,
Maddison, Fleck, Armstrong
(2)
League Position: 5th

The win lent credibility to Tony Mowbray's main argument that defensive injuries and failing to have Joe Cole, James Maddison, Adam Armstrong and Jacob Murphy available in the same team had been behind the poor run since topping the table in November. It wasn't just the goals but it was a complete performance all-round from the team. The two new centre-backs were comfortable on the ball and dealt with the danger Bury threw at them with ease. Maddison, Cole and Fleck in midfield at the same time gave us control and a link between midfield and attack. Armstrong and Murphy further forwards offered the vital component of penetration.

It wasn't going to be that easy again but the result confirmed that we were a good team that had played badly over the previous two months rather than one that was regressing to the mean having previously over-performed. A week off thanks to Shrewsbury's progress in the FA Cup meant that the team had an extra period of rest to take on Steven Pressley's Fleetwood Town and attack the rest of the campaign with purpose.

From watching the first half of the game, you wouldn't have known that the Sky Blues had had an extra week's rest as they plodded lethargically around the pitch. Fleetwood, who looked well-drilled and pacey on the counter, eventually took advantage of one of the several counter-attacks they had been enjoying to take the lead just after half-time.

The formula that had beaten Bury and given us hope of perhaps getting back into the automatic promotion picture had to be abandoned once we fell behind. Too many players were having an off-day and something had to be changed. Marc-Antoine Fortuné, who was booed as he entered the action, and Marcus Tudgay were eventually introduced and made a difference as the Sky Blues started to ask questions of Fleetwood at last.

Tudgay scored a late equaliser after Ruben lameiras played one of his glorious reverse passes for Adam Armstrong who cut the ball back for Tudgay, who muscled Marc-Antoine Fortuné out of the way

Fleetwood Town (H)
League One
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Tudgay
League Position: 6th

to ensure the ball found the back of the net. Just when it looked like we'd edged our way back into the game and could set about finding the winner, Fleetwood's David Ball scored a stunner to win the game for Steven Pressley's side.

Barnsley (A)
League One
Score: 0-2
League Position: 6th

The emphatic 25-yard strike seemed to have rattled the side as they made their way up to Barnsley and were promptly beaten 2-0 without the hosts needing to get out of second gear. The Sky Blues remained punch-drunk in the ensuing home game against Rochdale as a dire contest was decided by a final-minute penalty needlessly given away by John Fleck.

Rochdale (H)
League One
Score: 0-2
League Position: 7th

Things had gotten a whole lot worse from the low of the three defeats on the spin in January, already it seemed there was a grim acceptance that the season was over as the team slid further away from the top and out of the play-offs altogether. The exuberance and excitement of earlier in the season had become a burden on the shoulders of our exciting, young attacking players who in the space of two months had gone from heroes to villains for a vocal section of Coventry City fans.

James Maddison and Jacob Murphy, both now on loan from Norwich City, were taking the brunt of increasingly personal attacks for the crime of not playing as well as they had been. For the home-town kid Maddison, the vitriol was especially hot with some seemingly desperate to tar him with the accusation that he had gotten too big for his boots now that he'd made his big move.

Shrewsbury Town (A)
League One
Score: 1-2
Scorer(s): Martin
League Position: 8th

There was a chance to move on quickly from another run of three consecutive defeats in a Tuesday night away game at Shrewsbury. The team seemed to realise this too with an improved performance embodied by the work-rate and link-up play of the vilified Marc-Antoine Fortuné. Aaron Martin scored an early goal upon his return to the team to reward a bright start. Yet, despite dominating the rest of the game, Shrewsbury took full advantage of two defensive errors to secure the win.

The Sky Blues descent into mid-table showed no signs of abating.

Giving Up



The wheels had well and truly fallen off following a sixth defeat in eight games that had seen the Sky Blues slip from 4th and with an 11 point cushion from 7th place to 8th and three points behind 6th. The slide looked inexorable, players were woefully out of form and there didn't appear to be a discernible style of play to fall back on. Not only were we losing but we had become a genuinely bad team.

Tony Mowbray's position as manager was under increasing scrutiny from the fans, with his actions surprisingly naive for such an experienced manager. Mowbray's constant tinkering and some bizarre transfer dealings had disrupted and reversed the momentum that had been built in the first half of the campaign. Although the default setting for many Coventry City fans is to blame the owners, it was looking more and more like it was Mowbray holding back a talented set of players.

A victory against Blackpool, which in theory kept the play-off push alive, only served to confirm what a terrible team we were. It was a contest between two awful teams on an awful surface decided by an awful goal as Marc-Antoine Fortuné capitalised on a dropped catch from the Blackpool keeper to tap into an empty net. The Sky Blues spent the rest of the game protecting the lead and were nearly made to pay for sitting back too deeply when Blackpool equalised in the final seconds, only for the goal to be disallowed for handball.

Blackpool (A)
League One
Score: 1-0
Scorer(s): Fortuné
League Position: 7th

The win earned Mowbray some breathing space with the season still alive at a stage where it was probably too late to bring anyone new

in. The fans could only hope that a fortuitous win would inspire a flagging side back into some kind of form in time to make it back into the play-off spot that had been so easily spurned.

A home game against a resurgent and free-scoring Swindon Town side with a bumper away following looked foreboding. Although it was an improved performance from the Sky Blues, it was clear that the team had been set up to contain the visitors rather than go out to win the game to maintain the play-off push.

As it transpired, not only did Swindon lack ambition on the ball but there were chances to win the game, despite the lack of drive to actually create them. Andy Rose was called offside as he tapped home a Joe Cole cross in the first-half with an excellent chance for the veteran Darius Henderson to snatch all three points falling to him at the death, only for him to slash his effort over the bar. It was a decent point but would have been more had there been any ambition to win the game on our part.

Swindon Town (H)
League One
Score: 0-0
League Position: 8th

The point kept the prospect of the play-offs dangling tantalisingly close enough in front of us to believe that even this underwhelming, uninspiring side could somehow still make it. An away trip to Peterborough on Good Friday in front of the Sky TV cameras offered a chance to keep alive those faint hopes of things suddenly turning around.

When Sky initially picked out the fixture a few months prior, they must have been anticipating a heated contest between two sides in contention for automatic promotion. When the game actually arrived, it was between two teams that had both badly fallen off during a bleak winter. With Peterborough having dropped away from the play-off picture entirely and in worse form than the Sky Blues, this was a great opportunity to pick off a team in disarray.

Peterborough's woes were clear to see in the first-half as they presented numerous chances for the visitors via their woefully erratic back-line. Not only were Peterborough awful but the Sky Blues were well in control of the game with John Fleck and Gael Bigirimana controlling the midfield and Marc-Antoine Fortuné and Jacob Murphy getting into dangerous positions up front. The best chance of the half fell to Fortuné, but his goal-bound effort was cleared off the line by a covering Peterborough defender.

That sort of awareness to cover mistakes in defence was completely absent at the other end of the pitch as Peterborough somehow took the lead in first-half stoppage time. Sam Ricketts left his man at a corner completely unmarked and Marc-Antoine Fortuné deserted his station on the post to allow the post to take a 1-0 lead into half-time.

Sensing an opportunity to end a terrible run of form at their home, Peterborough upped the ante in the second-half to turn their undeserved lead into a deserved one. Introducing an extra striker to proceedings to pressure us in our attempts to play out from the back, Peterborough doubled their lead on the hour mark from good closing down. Joe Cole pulled one back after an excellent Jacob Murphy assist but Peterborough maintained their stranglehold on the result as Gael Bigirimana was caught in possession and punished to make the final score 3-1.

Peterborough United (A)
League One
Score: 1-3
Scorer(s): Cole
League Position: 9th

Despite actually playing well for the first-half, the game was another example of a profligacy that had been in evidence across most of the season but was proving costly now that confidence was low. Attacks were being made with little conviction and little idea of how we were actually going to turn possession into goals. Once we had fallen behind, it only served to confirm our self-doubts as we ended up defeating ourselves with errors resulting from shifting the ball around unconvincingly in front of our own goal.

The one ray of light in the Peterborough game had been the performance of second-half substitute Jodi Jones who looked like the kind of direct, skilful, attacking player that had been the archetype of our blistering start to the season. In the space of a fortnight, Jones had gone from the substitutes' bench at Dagenham & Redbridge to bright prospect at Coventry City, demonstrating just how much we had been in need of an injection of fresh ideas.

There was still a chance just about of getting back into the play-off picture heading into a Tuesday night home game against a Colchester side who looked certain for relegation. It was going to be a tall order regardless of whether we got the win or not with a tough final set of fixtures against teams in the top-half, but failing to get the win here would surely spell the end of the season.

Colchester United (H)
League One
Score: 0-1
League Position: 9th

Colchester took a thoroughly deserved lead in the 18th minute which emphasised the surprising gulf in belief between the two sides. Although the Sky Blues dominated much of the rest of the contest, it was the same kind of attacking without conviction that had plagued us for much of the past few months. Even when a penalty was won late in the first-half, it was taken without conviction and easily saved by the visiting goalkeeper. An entirely unsurprising surprise defeat for the Sky Blues to extinguish the dying embers of the play-off bid.

It left the Sky Blues simply with fixtures left to fulfil rather than looking to achieve anything in what had been a promising season. To let it slip in the manner that it did against Colchester, with players lacking the belief required to alter the result was especially disappointing. We had only needed to be vaguely competent for the

second half of the season to hang onto a play-off spot given the position we had found ourselves in, and we had failed to match even those low standards.

The away trip to Gillingham looked like offering up a grim reminder of just how far we had fallen as we faced a side that we had destroyed in November to go top of the league. The hosts were still holding onto a play-off spot, having themselves remained competent despite going off the boil slightly. In a similar manner to the Swindon game, the Sky Blues were overly cautious despite it being apparent that Gillingham were lacking the ideas to actually win the game. Marcus Tudgay missed a sitter in the closing stages to further confirm our descent into mid-table obscurity.

Gillingham (A)
League One
Score: 0-0
League Position: 11th

There was even less hope heading into the following away game against a Wigan side that were running away with the division. In sharp contrast to the energetic, dynamic, free-flowing performance against Wigan on the opening day of the season, the Sky Blues were again cautious, self-doubting and lacking in ideas. Wigan eased to a 1-0 win that would have been a whole lot more had they ever been required to step up a gear.

Wigan Athletic (A)
League One
Score: 0-1
League Position: 13th

The Final Flail



The only thing left for the Sky Blues in the final few games was to establish just how low they would drop to at the end of the season. The idea that this season counted as progress was looking increasingly spurious, what kind of progress was it if you got worse as the season progressed? The season was looking increasingly reminiscent of the collapse under Steven Pressley in the Sixfields season, which at least had the justification of financial meltdown.

A home game against Millwall only promised one thing, further pain. It was entirely unsurprising when Millwall dominated the opening half hour of the game and deservedly took the lead as once again the Sky Blues were caught in disarray from a set-piece. It was hard even to be angry about it at this point, the season had already been written-off and it was best saving it for when games actually mattered again.

Hope for the season was resurrected in the unlikeliest of circumstances as Millwall's Shaun Williams head-butted Ruben lameiras after his team had just won a free-kick. It was such a parodic act of violence for a Millwall player that it was almost farcical to see. The Sky Blues suddenly had a way back into the match, entirely thanks to a moment of utter brainlessness by the opposition.

Tony Mowbray got the idea right in stretching the play against the ten-men but we didn't appear to have the right players to take advantage of the endless crossing opportunities that we inevitably created. Time after time, Millwall easily headed the ball away from

their own area and it looked like the effort that was clearly on show after the man advantage had been gained would go unrewarded.

Millwall (H)
League One
Score: 2-1
Scorer(s): Fleck, Tudgay
League Position: 12th

The equaliser eventually came from an absolute wonder-strike from John Fleck from just outside the area. It was going to take something special to find the opening and Fleck's goal was certainly that as he curled the ball into the top left corner from over 25 yards out. Fleck was involved in the eventual winning goal as his pass to Adam Armstrong was flicked into the path of Marcus Tudgay, who bundled the ball in under the advancing Millwall keeper.

The win meant almost nothing but it was at least pleasing to see the team put in an effort despite the season being over, albeit that they required a red card and a wonder-goal to set them on their way. Expectations remained low as Bradford visited the following Tuesday night and Tony Mowbray experimented with his starting formation by playing three at the back.

Bradford City (H)
League One
Score: 1-0
Scorer(s): Rose
League Position: 11th

It was a similar script to the win against Millwall, only in reverse order, as the Sky Blues worked hard for a 1-0 win. Although the visitors had the best of the opening opportunities, Andy Rose smashed home the game's only goal with his first touch of the ball after coming on in the second-half. With Bradford building pressure in the final minutes, their forward Steven Davies kicked out at Jack Stephens in front of the referee and was duly sent-off.

Suddenly, the door to the play-offs was just about open again, even if it required teams above us to drop points in the final three games of the season. With an away game against a Doncaster side who were on the verge of relegation to League Two after a dismal second half of the season, the opportunity to extend our season into the final weeks had presented itself.

Doncaster Rovers (A)
League One
Score: 0-2
League Position: 12th

The game though proved to be a reminder of just why we had fallen off so badly over the previous couple of months. The Sky Blues started the game brightly, only for Doncaster to score the game's opening goal from a set-piece. After Doncaster made it 2-0 not long after, the game played itself out at walking speed with several players again seemingly content to let our season peter out rather than to force the result.

The defeat really did mean that the season was over this time round, emphasising the small margins that would have been the difference between this slump and just about making the play-offs. Had we found just one win in those dismal performances against the likes of Fleetwood, Rochdale, Colchester and Doncaster, there would still have been something to play for in the final weeks of the season. As we had just found out, we didn't have to maintain the amazing form of the first few months of the season, we just had to scrape one or

two more odd results in those final months despite being insipid for much of the previous few months.

The Sheffield United game looked only to be an opportunity to see what the players who would be around next season could offer. Tony Mowbray didn't make the major changes that many were expecting though, only handing a surprise start to George Thomas outside of picking a team he might otherwise have chosen.

It was a game that served as another reminder of what could have been this season as the Sky Blues raced into a 2-0 lead against a Sheffield United side still hoping to make the play-offs. Adam Armstrong's long-range effort deflected fortunately off Fortuné before Joe Cole played a perfectly-weighted pass for Andy Rose to finish powerfully in the 8th minute.

The lead proved unassailable as a stodgy Sheffield United took control of the game but failed to make the most of the good positions they found themselves in. Billy Sharp won a very soft penalty in the second-half to make it nervy for a while but the late introductions of Ruben Lameiras and Jodi Jones gave the Sky Blues a counter-threat which eventually paid off when Lameiras slotted home a Jones centre via Aaron Phillips' delicate back-heel to make it 3-1.

Sheffield United (H)
League One
Score: 3-1
Scorer(s): Fortuné, Rose, Lameiras
League Position: 9th

The win meant that the players could undertake a lap of honour at the end of the final home game of the season with some semblance of pride, even if they had fallen massively off where they should have been. Although it mattered for very little, we had at least seen a Coventry City team make an effort in the final weeks of the season once there was nothing to play for.

The players continued to take that positive mentality heading into the final game of the season away at Oldham. Against a side also with nothing to play for, the Sky Blues once again demonstrated their determination to put in a performance for the fans as they eased to a 2-0 victory thanks to two late goals from Romain Vincelot and Adam Armstrong.

Adam Armstrong's goal, his 20th of the season, capped off a run of good performances from the youngster that had gone unrewarded with a goal. Armstrong, assisted for one last time by Jacob Murphy, was clearly moved at the occasion of his final goal for Coventry City. The achievement also seemed to mean a lot for the whole team as Reice Charles-Cook rushed the length of the pitch to congratulate his team-mate, symbolising the sense of unity between a group of players who throughout the season had clearly relished playing with each other.

Oldham Athletic (A)
League One
Score: 2-0
Scorer(s): Vincelot, Armstrong
League Position: 8th

A late goal for Millwall against Gillingham ensured that the Sky Blues would finish 8th in the league, their highest finish in a division since the first year at the Ricoh Arena where Dennis Wise inspired the team to a late run for 8th place in an otherwise underwhelming season. In contrast to that year, the league finish felt like scant consolation for the highs that the team achieved over the course of the campaign.

It was positive step to feel disappointed at not finishing higher in the league with the mood being that this year was a good start and not an achievement in and of itself.



Final Thoughts...



Tony Mowbray

Overall, there is still the feeling that Tony Mowbray is by some distance the best man for the Coventry City job. At times this season I've looked at who the potential contenders would be were he to ever leave or be sacked and by God, they're uninspiring. It's not only that Mowbray is a good manager but that he seems to have a vision of taking us forward by playing good football with exciting players.

Of course, he is a manager with his limitations and what we've seen of them over the past 15 months, there's a reason why he's a League One manager and not still in the Premier League. A lack of tactical flexibility and perhaps just that little bit of drive to coax higher standards from his players has held us back at times this season with what has been a very talented squad.

It's difficult at the moment though to separate the fact that he put this exciting, talented squad together and that he underachieved with the players he had at his disposal. If Tony Mowbray had never been here, there's no way that this team would have come together and even though it's disappointing that he didn't get the best from them for the entirety of the season, it

was still a very good season by our standards.

The scrutiny will be more intense next season, it truly will be his squad and he'll have had time to implement his preferred style of play and a year with a proper recruitment infrastructure that he implemented. If we find ourselves in the same position of missing out on the play-offs and relying on loan players, it won't be as easy to forgive.

There has been talk over what impact the owners had on our season, but personally, I think that negates some valid criticisms of how Mowbray handled the squad. There were a load of signings made over January and only really Jack Stephens appeared to be an improvement over what we had. My own feeling is that adding one extra source of goals to the team instead of all three of Darius Henderson, Stephen Hunt and Peter Ramage would have made that marginal difference between mid-table and the play-offs.

Tony Mowbray showed this season that it was perfectly possible to take the resources already available at the club and create a side that can at least challenge for the play-offs. We didn't fluke

our way to the top of the table like it felt the last few times we got into that kind of position under Steven Pressley and Aidy Boothroyd, this was a good team that deserved to be at the top end of the division.

It wasn't just player recruitment in January that let Mowbray let himself down with, the management of some of the players was questionable at times. The constant rotation of the squad following that win over Gillingham in November seemed to do more harm than good, disrupting our rhythm just when we had found peak form. Players like Ruben lameiras and Marcus Tudgay probably deserved more game-time than they were given but even odder was the management of Jim O'Brien.

It was clear just why Tony Mowbray didn't quite rate Jim O'Brien as highly as most of the fans did, at times O'Brien's tactical discipline off-the-ball caused problems for the team. But O'Brien's other contributions far outweighed that one drawback, his energy and the ability to thread perfect through balls for Adam Armstrong supplied the team with dynamism. After O'Brien's move out on loan to Scunthorpe, Armstrong was never quite the same and the team itself appeared more lethargic and less dynamic without O'Brien.

Next season, Mowbray won't be saddled with players like O'Brien who he clearly didn't see eye-to-eye with. While it means we will lose an undoubtedly high-quality performer in the division, it allows Tony Mowbray more freedom to bring in players of his own that he can work with. The advantage is that these kinds of falling-outs are unlikely to happen but the downside is that it's likely to make the squad more similar rather than having a bit of variation about it.

Tony Mowbray clearly isn't without his flaws, like many of his players, if he didn't have flaws, he wouldn't be with us in this division. We can only hope that he learns from the errors he has made at times this season, or at least puts together a better squad that can hide his deficiencies more effectively. This is the third full season in a row that he has been a manager in where his team

has collapsed in the second half of the season, it would be unforgivable if it happened a fourth time.

The final few games provided more hope than expected that Tony Mowbray could bring an improved performance next season with this club. Although several of the players involved in those final few games are going to leave, John Fleck and Adam Armstrong likely to be the biggest losses, Mowbray showed a tactical flexibility that injected new energy into the team.

It's easy to read too much into meaningless end of season games but there seemed to be more purpose and ideas in the way the team attacked. For much of the season, Mowbray was guilty on relying on talented forward players to beat two or three players to score stunning goals, there was more combination play and movement from the team as a whole which saw the goals spread out more between the squad.

Getting the recruitment right this summer is going to be crucial for Tony Mowbray but the signings of Andy Rose and Jodi Jones have already demonstrated that the improved scouting system is turning out gems. To contradict those who are demanded a big budget for Mowbray, he's shown a knack for improving unheralded players who've shown they're willing to learn from him. Those are the players who should be looking to to get us out of the league rather than experienced players in January who let us down.

The extended run after the Gillingham game was relegation form and Mowbray has to be held accountable for that. Tony Mowbray is though doing some good work at this club which was rewarded somewhat with a decent finish to the season but the mistakes of this season cannot be repeated for another year. It still feels though that changing managers would be taking a step back, there will be higher standards next year.



Conclusion

I wonder sometimes not whether Coventry City fans don't want success but that perhaps we're a little too proud of our lack of success. When someone tweeted recently just how many years it had been since our last top six finish compared to any other English team, it was almost as if it was a badge of honour that we support a club that has failed so consistently.

Not only is the 47 years without a top six finish slightly misleading given that we spent 34 of those years in the top-flight and won the FA Cup in the process but it paints the picture that our lack of success is way above what any other football fan experiences. Although there has been a lack of success at this club for a long time, being a football is mostly a painful experience anyway.

Periods of success are islands in a sea of failure and disappointment in football. Success doesn't last and that is what makes it so special when it does eventually happen. You've got to hold onto that feeling after an amazing win or an achievement for as long as you can because there'll be a whole lot of football after that to remind you what it's like to watch your team

disappoint you.

What has been so great about this season is that there have been some great moments, the thrashings of Millwall, Gillingham and Bury, signing Joe Cole, remembering Jimmy Hill. It's a fallacy sometimes that only winners are remembered in football, take the great Brazil side of 1982 or the Holland side of 74, sometimes providing excitement is a goal in and of itself. I would say that even though this season was one of great highs and lows, I would prefer it over a more consistent season with less excitement.

It doesn't make me any less disappointed and angry that we didn't go on to achieve something tangible this season, with this manager and with this squad. It looked like a golden opportunity where a combination of getting things right ourselves and a lack of outstanding teams at the top of the division opened things up for us and we didn't take advantage of that. For a period, we were the best side – in attack at least – in the division and there can be no doubting that we should have done better than we ending up doing.

There have been an attempts by some to paint this failure as regressing to the mean, that perhaps we weren't quite as good as we thought we were in the first 18 games of the season. It's been especially directed at the players, Jacob Murphy and James Maddison in particular, who were perceived to have gotten too big for their boots but I couldn't disagree more. That almost makes an excuse for the failure though, as if we were saying that this team wasn't good enough to go up when we all saw that it was.

Having failed to take such a massive opportunity, it's easy to become fatalistic about where this club is headed. James Maddison has been sold far too early and it's seemingly already being communicated by the club that we aren't going to go out and spend that money on a much better team next season. Whether by method or fluke, we stumbled upon a team that was for periods far too good for this division and seemingly there is an acceptance from many that the odds are far too great for it to come together again, for a long time apparently.

At the moment though, we don't know what kind of team we're going to be able to put together over the summer and how they'll perform next season. It's easy to feel that it's never going to be better than the one we put together this season but we cannot possibly know that. Even if it isn't next season that we finally go on to achieve something, we will eventually see a successful Coventry City side.

Football is relentless, had we gone up this season, we would be feeling anxious right now as to whether we could compete in the Championship. The thought of playing Villa again is one thing, but playing them again and losing to them is just a little bit too scary. A few games into the following season, the talk would have been about how great it was when we were in League One and had a chance of winning more games.

It's hypothetical now, we didn't go up so we're beating ourselves up and fearing the worst for next season. As soon as the dust settles, we'll be

talking about new signings, reading way too much into pre-season friendlies and eventually taking our seats at the Ricoh for another season.

As fans, we are so powerless to affect what happens on the pitch. The players, the manager and the owners are in charge of that, we just provide what happens on the pitch with meaning. We can only sit and watch what happens and try and derive some enjoyment from it.

It is galling to see your team spend yet another year of failing to achieve anything but you can become overly obsessed with that desperation for actual achievement that you forget that football is not solely about winning. It's probably a sad thing to admit but I've come to expect that it's the exception when we're actually doing well and it's made me look for other ways to enjoy football other than see my team win trophies.

When we are doing well, I make sure to hold onto that feeling for as long as I can because it fades away. It makes me look to enjoy those great moments within a season for what they are rather than what they might mean for some future event that may or may not happen. This season has been another lesson in that for me and personally, I'm glad that I did. Equally, I know that when it's bad, it's going to eventually get better at some point.

Next season might be better or worse than this one, there are reasons to look forward to it and there are reasons to worry that it could be a more difficult campaign for us. I can just about see us moving forwards from where we were 12 months ago but it's tentative, if we sign three or four bad players in the summer, it sets us back. I'll be back regardless of whatever goes on over the summer in the hope that one day we won't be looking for ways to justify why this club is the worst one to support.