

The Sideways Sammy

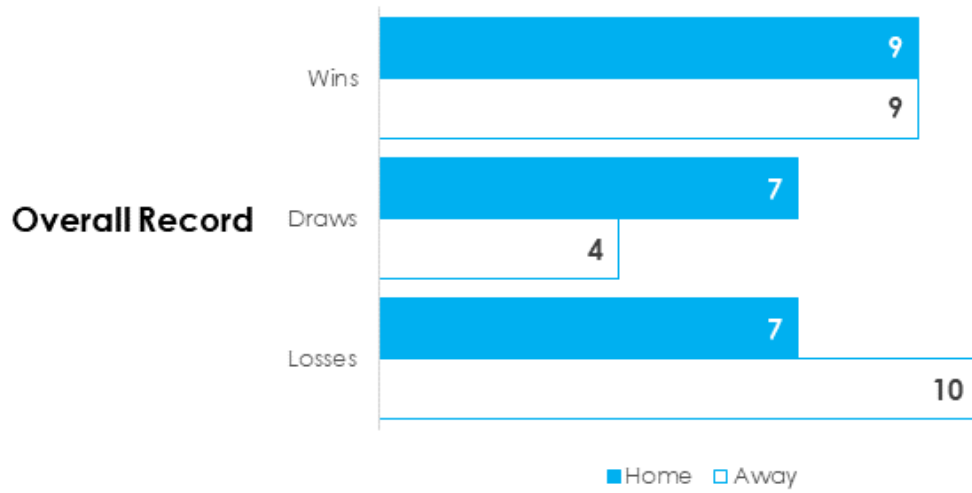


**2018/19
Season Review**

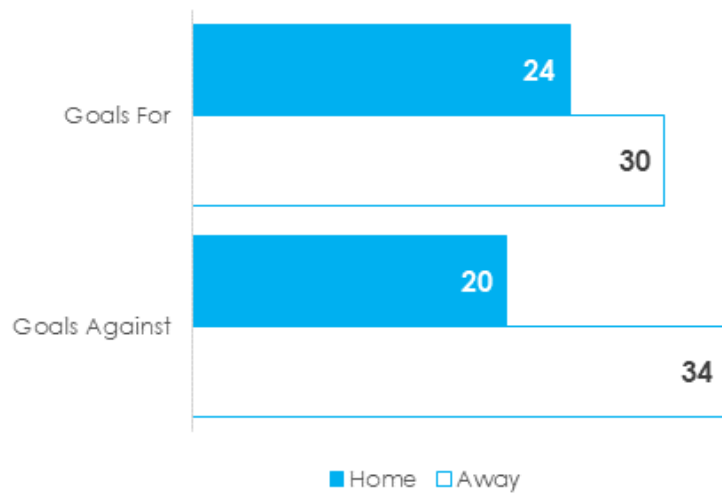
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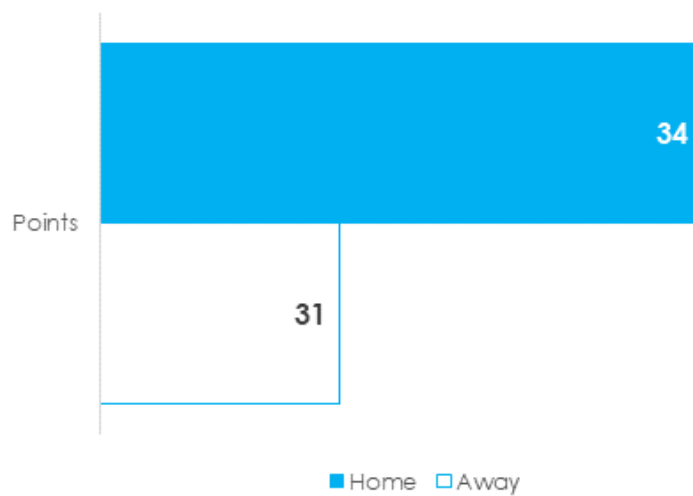
Home & Away Record



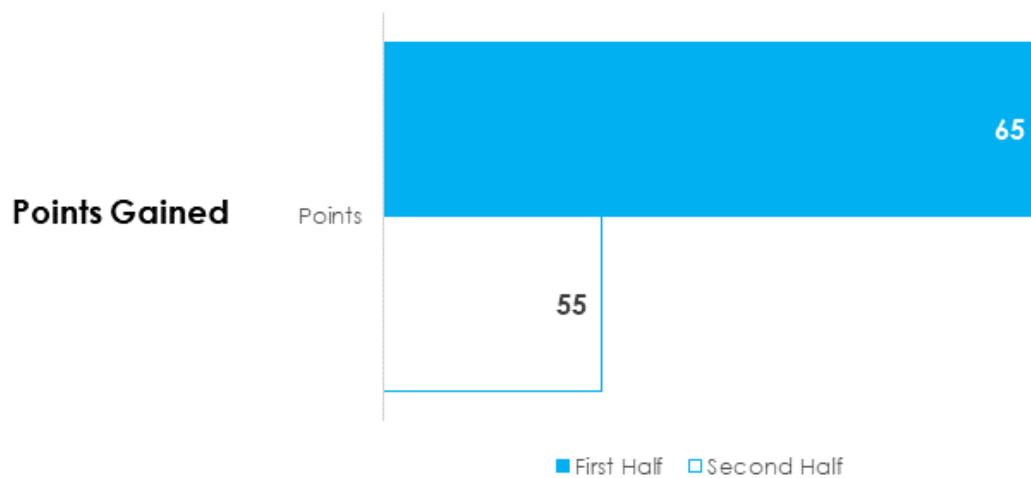
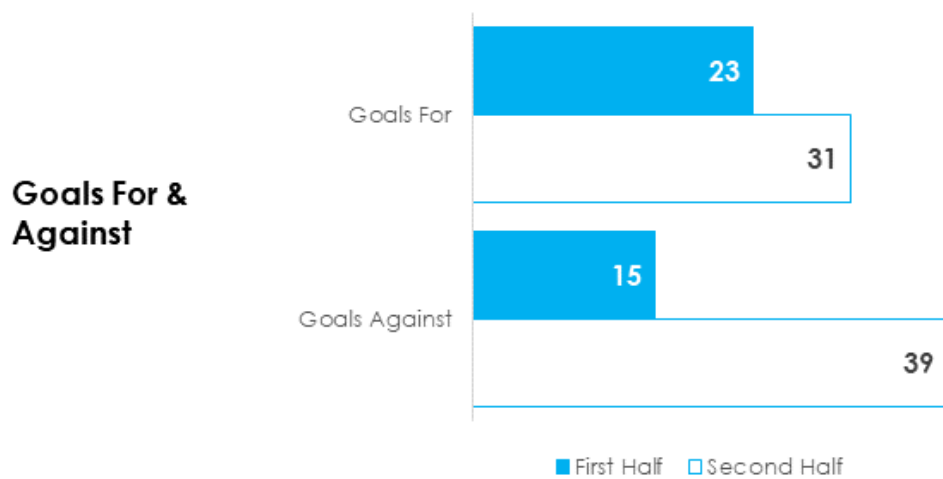
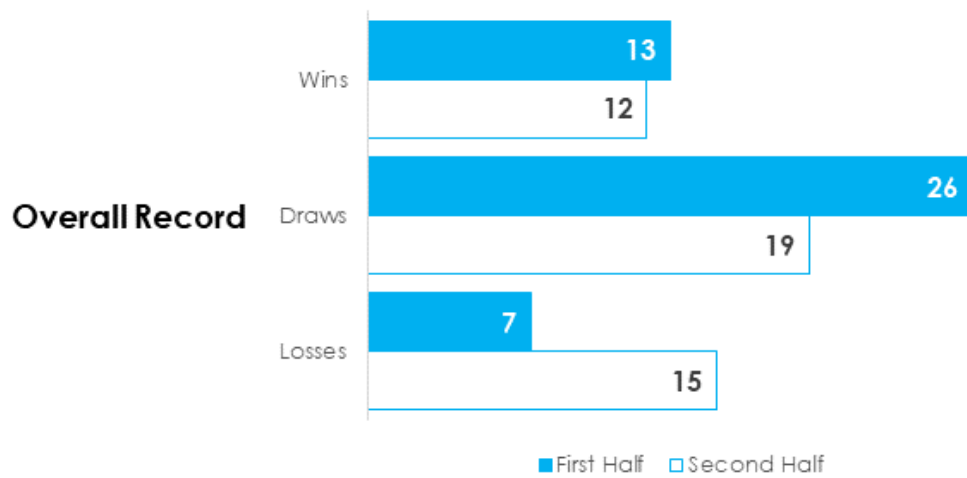
Goals For & Against



Points Gained



First vs Second-Half Record





Opening Words

A first season back in League One and a campaign in which we've mostly been challenging for the play-offs. At the very least, that is par against what most were expecting back in August.

Now that the season is over, the frustration is that only a few relatively minor details had to have gone in our favour to have bridged that gap between ourselves and the top six.

Had we kept Marc McNulty, would that have been the difference? Had we not made mistakes in the transfer market from the free transfers of Junior Brown and Abu Ogogo to the re-investment of the Marc McNulty money in Conor Chaplin and Amadou Bakayoko, would that have been the difference? Had we slightly more composure in front of goal, would that have been the difference? Had we been able to defend set-pieces better, would that have been the difference?

Perhaps what is remarkable about this season is that it feels that quite a lot went wrong and somehow, we've come out of it feeling like we weren't that far away from attaining success.

Those over-riding frustrations are perhaps a disservice to what Mark Robins has been able to do with the team at his disposal over the course of the season. Although our best winning streak occurred in October, the team has felt like it has improved as the season has progressed.

After a slow start to the campaign where it didn't look like Robins had an idea of his strongest line-up, formation or preferred style of play with the squad he had assembled, things have now look a lot more cohesive as we look ahead to the summer and next season.

From the improvement of individual players such as Dominic Hyam and Liam Kelly, to new signings Dujon

Sterling, Luke Thomas, Jordy Hiwula and Bright Enobakhare we now seem to have a better squad of players to carry us forward into future years – even if one or two may not be with us next year.

Importantly, there have been some great memories to take away from this campaign. The remarkable come-from-behind win at Charlton in October and the 5-4 victory over Sunderland at the Stadium of Light are likely to be the longest-lasting of this season's memories.

Moreover, this club is in the midst of a period of progress and stability under Mark Robins. Whereas in previous seasons, it was apparent from very early on whether it would be a memorable or forgettable campaign, we have a manager in charge who can build a squad that gradually improves over the course of the season and is able to get important results at key moments.

Although this has been a season marked by contrasting runs of form, even during the poorest streaks of the campaign, there was always an underlying belief that it wouldn't go on too long.

A final aspect of this campaign and one that stirs a nervous feeling in the bottom of the stomach has been the return of uncertainty over the club's status at the Ricoh Arena, and by extension its status within the city of Coventry and its longer-term existence.

The assumption for the majority of the campaign was that a face-saving compromise would be found despite the seemingly impassable red-lines set by all the parties involved in the dispute. However, the dispute

seemingly lurched to a point of no-return which made anything that happened on the pitch this season appear almost entirely inconsequential.

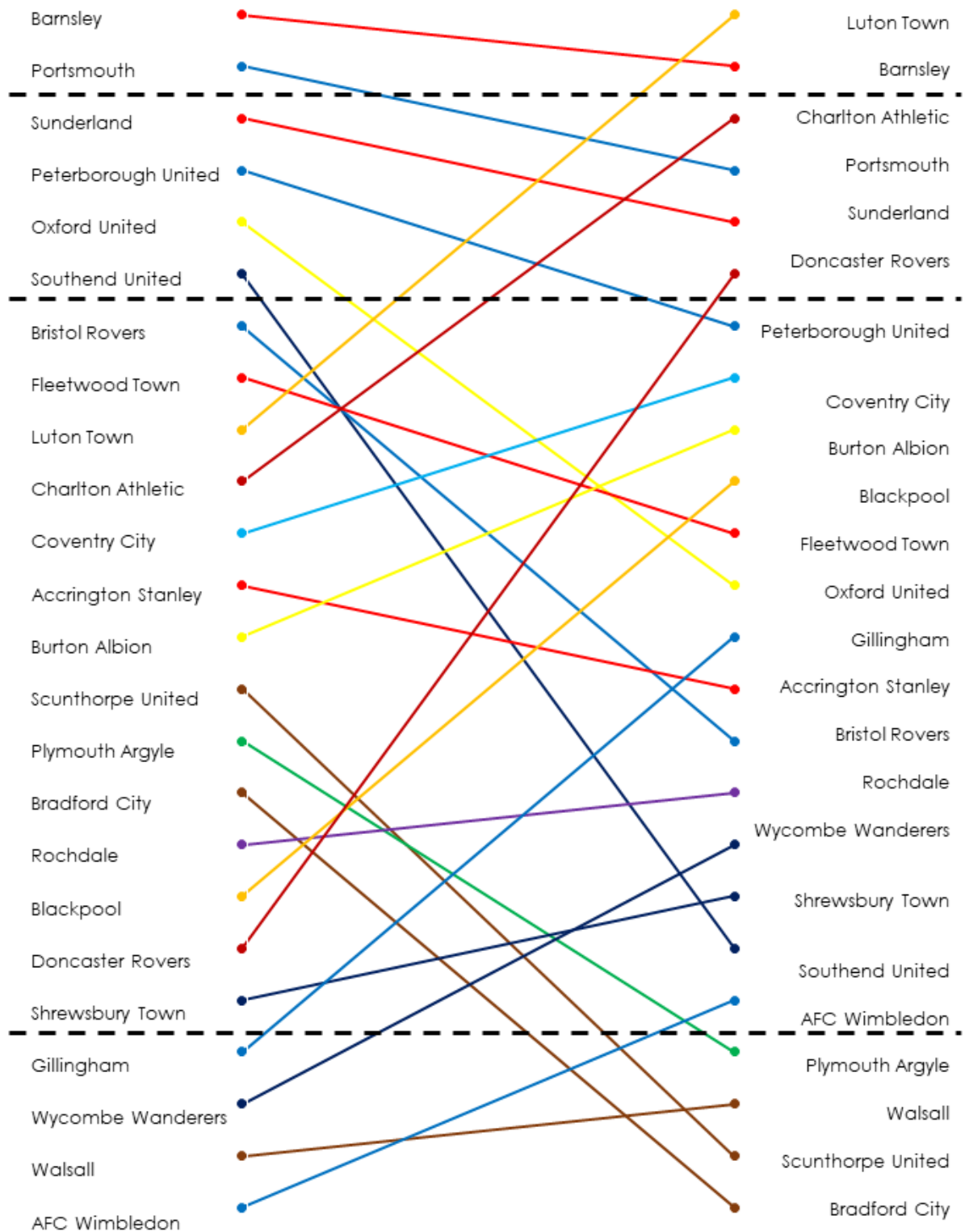
At the time of writing, it appears that common sense will prevail and that this Coventry City side under Mark Robins can continue to build on this era of progress. The re-emergence of this saga though is an uncomfortable reminder that darker days for the club are not far around the corner.

For now at least, we can look forward to the immediate future with hope and look back on the season that was in the knowledge that it can and will be build upon.



Club-By-Club Reviews

Predictions vs Reality



Accrington Stanley

Final Position: 14th



Top Scorer:

Sean McConville
(14)

17th in League

Most Assists:

Sean McConville (8)

9th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Sean McConville
(22)

8th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Mark Hughes (4,124)

10th in League

Players Used:

30

11th in League

Clean Sheets:

6

23rd in League

What I Said...

"With the momentum of a recent promotion behind them, I don't think Accrington will find themselves in too much trouble this season."

The Manager

John Coleman: Has implemented a clear style of play – a combination between free-flowing football and a harder edge – to elevate Accrington beyond their natural status in the pecking order. Pound-for-pound one of the best managers outside the Championship.

Star Player

Sean McConville: Although some of Accrington's core have struggled with the step up to League One football, winger McConville has taken it in his stride. A tactically intelligent wide-man with great technique, particularly in finding space on the edge of the area and curling dangerous efforts on goal.

Overview

Accrington Stanley's season has been divided between an excellent start and a poor final few months. Although Stanley looked capable of genuinely upsetting the apple cart for

periods of this campaign, staying up is a massive achievement given the club's resources.

Accrington are built on a core of experienced pros, from Mark Hughes in central defence, Seamus Conneely and Scott Brown in central midfield, the intricate wing-play of Jordan Clark and Sean McConville with Billy Kee the focal point in attack. With the additions of some key signings in Connor Ripley in goal, and the creativity of Daniel Barlasier and Sam Finley in midfield, Accrington troubled the very best on their day.

The winter was a key turning-point for Stanley as they lost keeper Connor Ripley after the end of his loan spell and began leaking goals – an awful pitch cannot have helped either. Although the struggles towards the end of the season point towards a need to evolve, keeping true to the principles that have taken them to this level is perhaps more important.

AFC Wimbledon

Final Position: 20th



Top Scorer:

Joe Pigott (15)

11th in League

Most Assists:

Andy Barcham &
Anthony
Wordsworth (4)

64th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Joe Pigott (18)

21st in League

Most Minutes Played:

Will Nightingale
(3,339)

84th in League

Players Used:

30

11th in League

Clean Sheets:

12

10th in League

What I Said...

"Without a sense of momentum behind them... this is going to be possibly the club's most difficult season in the Football League."

The Manager

Wally Downes: Having looked a sentimental appointment, Downes has proven an inspired choice for what looked a doomed AFC Wimbledon side. Instilling greater organisation and team spirit, the Dons posted near play-off form under Downes to survive.

Star Player

Joe Pigott: With finishing the biggest issue for AFC Wimbledon this season, the form of Pigott in front of goal was crucial in survival. A big striker but with a decent turn of pace and some excellent goals on his highlight reel, expect interest in him from bigger teams this summer.

Overview

It has been one of the more remarkable relegation escapes in recent League One history from AFC Wimbledon this season. Having spent almost the entirety of the campaign in the relegation zone, the Dons managed to move out of the bottom four in the

final weeks of the season thanks in no small part to the improved spirit and organisation instilled by mid-season managerial appointment Wally Downes.

Although performances hadn't been too bad under Downs' predecessor, Neal Ardley, the life was being drained from the Dons as they became mired in the relegation battle early into the campaign, with goals looking to be at a premium. The mid-season loan signing of Bournemouth youngster Aaron Ramsdale in goal was one of a number of key changes Downes made to turn around a sinking ship.

While the Dons can take great heart from a second half of a campaign under Wally Downes that would have delivered them a top-half finish, it is likely to be another battle against the drop next year. The question hanging over Downes' management of the club is whether he can continue to over-achieve.

Barnsley

Final Position: 2nd



Top Scorer:

Kieffer Moore &
Cauley Woodrow
(16)

8th in League

Most Assists:

Alex Mowatt (8)

9th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Kieffer Moore (20)

16th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Ethan Pinnock
(4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

27

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

21

1st in League

What I Said...

"They could blow this division away, but it all depends on how much patience is afforded to both manager and owners."

The Manager

Daniel Stendel: The German was brought in to revolutionise Barnsley's style of football and did so by operating largely with the squad he inherited. Barnsley played some electrifying football this season but were also able to dig-out results when needed, displaying a level of pragmatism allied to Stendel's style.

Star Player

Alex Mowatt: The former Leeds youngster has been revitalised this season as one of the key cogs in an attacking and enterprising Barnsley side. Mowatt's combination of energy and creativity have driven his side forward in midfield.

Overview

Barnsley looked like blowing the division away with a ferocious start to the campaign. However, the energy and performance levels couldn't quite be sustained as summer turned to autumn, threatening to put the side at risk of falling

out of the automatic promotion race. It has been a testament to Daniel Stendel's management that Barnsley improved over the course of the season to re-assert themselves as one of the top two sides in the division.

It has been a campaign of different players stepping up at key times. In Kieffer Moore, Cauley Woodrow, Jacob Brown and Mamadou Thiam, Barnsley had an array of attackers that could frighten the life out of defenders at this level. With Kenny Dougall, Cameron McGeehan and Alex Mowatt in midfield there was energy and creativity. Allied with the best defence in the division Barnsley were both an irresistible force and an immovable object.

While there is a clear gulf between League One and the Championship, Barnsley look the best-placed side to make to attack the second-tier with purpose. Barnsley should get better with more time for Daniel Stendel to mould the squad.

Blackpool

Final Position: 10th



Top Scorer:

Armand Gnanduillet
(10)

34th in League

Most Assists:

4 Players (3)

90th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Armand Gnanduillet
(12)

48th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Ben Heneghan
(3,691)

42nd in League

Players Used:

31

9th in League

Clean Sheets:

17

4th in League

What I Said...

"With less attacking flair than last season, this campaign looks set to be more difficult for Blackpool, but they should be relatively comfortable among a group of teams just above the relegation zone."

The Manager

Terry McPhillips: Few expected there to be anyone capable of doing better at Blackpool than McPhillips' predecessor, Gary Bowyer, however he proved to be the right man at the right time, maintaining Blackpool's defensive and physical football and counter-attacking threat.

Star Player

Armand Gnanduillet: Made a hasty return this summer to Blackpool after a move to South Africa fell through and has transformed from a awkward, limited target-man into a constant threat for opposing defences and a goalscorer.

Overview

It has been a remarkably solid campaign for Blackpool despite everything that has happened off the pitch. From continued boycotts, the loss of Lynch-pin manager Gary Bowyer in August, to the club entering

court-appointed receivership, Blackpool should have been nowhere near play-off contention.

That they were was down to the solid management of Terry McPhillips. Based on the platform of a powerful and miserly defence, Blackpool played to their limitations incredibly well, frustrating teams before nicking a goal and being able to sit on leads comfortably. The struggles have come in games Blackpool have been expected to win – particularly after the hated Oyston family were removed and fans flocked back to the Bloomfield Road – but a strong top-half finish was beyond what most could have expected.

This summer is a massive one in Blackpool's history. With the club's long-term ownership yet to be resolved – and reports suggesting the Oystons are plotting a return to the club – finding a new owner fans can unite behind would be the re-birth of a once-proud football club.

Bradford City

Final Position: 24th



Top Scorer:

Eoin Doyle (11)

28th in League

Most Assists:

Eoin Doyle (6)

29th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Eoin Doyle (17)

25th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Richard O'Donnell (3,780)

31st in League

Players Used:

35

2nd in League

Clean Sheets:

12

11th in League

What I Said...

"There's a chance Bradford could be a relatively surprising team at the wrong end of the table, but the strong recruitment, in theory, should make it hard for things to go too awry."

The Manager

Gary Bowyer: Arrived too late to be responsible for relegation and, based on his experience at a Blackpool side in much greater turmoil, appears to be the right man to turn around a great club that has unravelled over the past two seasons.

Star Player

Jack Payne: Often acted as a one-man attack for Bradford, the diminutive creative midfielder was probably placed with too large a burden in a dysfunctional side. Can take little blame for Bradford's 24th-place finish, expect him to go onto better at this level next season.

Overview

There is one man to blame for a disastrous season at Valley Parade – former co-owner Edin Rahic. Despite overseeing the spending of reportedly a top six budget, Rahic's desire to be the main man at Valley Parade reportedly turned-off potential managers and

resulted in the appointment of a rookie in Michael Collins, which is where a disastrous season began.

A rally over the Christmas period under Collins' replacement, David Hopkin, aside, Bradford were relegated in oddly meek fashion for the talent they had at their disposal. Players such as Richard O'Donnell in goal, Anthony O'Connor in defence, Hope Akpan in midfield, winger Sean Scannell, creative dynamos David Ball, Jack Payne and Lewis O'Brien with Eoin Doyle up front had no business being in a bottom-place side, but the lack of structure made Bradford significantly worse than the sum of their parts.

As disastrous as this season was, it would be a surprise if it bled too heavily into next season. With a manager in place in Gary Bowyer who will build a solid core and Rahic long since removed from the club, Bradford seem well set up to attack League Two with renewed vigour.

Bristol Rovers

Final Position: 15th



Top Scorer:

Jonson Clarke-Harris
(11)

28th in League

Most Assists:

Tom Nichols (6)

29th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Jonson Clarke-Harris
(11)

62nd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Tony Craig (4,098)

13th in League

Players Used:

29

14th in League

Clean Sheets:

15

6th in League

What I Said...

"They might just lack that cutting edge to challenge for the playoffs, but they are a number of sides heading into this season where the top six isn't out of the question."

The Manager

Graham Coughlan: Injected a greater sense of belief and purpose into a squad that had gone stale under his popular predecessor, Darrell Clarke. Has made a significant short-term impact at the club but the bigger test next season will be building on the second half to this campaign.

Star Player

Jonson Clarke-Harris: Struggled in front of goal during an underwhelming 18 months at Coventry City, but couldn't stop scoring once he pulled on a Bristol Rovers shirt. Is looking a hot property heading into the summer transfer window but may want to stick around at a club where he is the main man.

Overview

The progress at Bristol Rovers from non-league into play-off contention in League One couldn't be maintained by Darrell Clarke as the continual losses of star players to bigger clubs

eventually told. Few were expecting Clarke's interim replacement, Graham Coughlan, to make much of a difference, but the former Plymouth defender proved to be just the man to inject fresh impetus at the Memorial Stadium.

Most notably, the January signing of striker Jonson Clarke-Harris provided the goals that took a Bristol Rovers side whose strikers had misfired for almost the entirety of the campaign over the 50 point mark with a hot streak in March.

Bristol Rovers were a Jekyll and Hyde side between their home and away form – the worst home record in the division, the 8th-best away form – highlighting a clear area of improvement for Graham Coughlan to work upon over the summer.

Just how sustainable Coughlan's revival of Rovers remains to be seen. It's one thing to make a short-term impact at a club, it is not clear yet what Coughlan can do over a longer-term period.

Burton Albion

Final Position: 9th



Top Scorer:

Lucas Akins (13)

20th in League

Most Assists:

Lucas Akins (9)

8th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Lucas Akins (22)

8th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Lucas Akins (4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

29

14th in League

Clean Sheets:

13

7th in League

What I Said...

"There is an outside chance they could find themselves in trouble if goalscoring proves to be an even bigger issue than it looks like being. Mid-table is probably the likeliest position they'll find themselves in"

The Manager

Nigel Clough: Has had to manage his way through a difficult campaign with a squad limited by injuries and budget cut-backs. Has recruited well within the circumstances, evidenced by Burton improving as the season progressed.

Star Player

Lucas Akins: Not only an incredibly versatile player – operating in defence, midfield and attack when required – but someone who has always made an impact whenever and wherever called upon. A solid defender, potent winger and effective centre-forward, Akins' is a very rare breed of footballer that Burton are lucky to have.

Overview

Although they had just spent two seasons in the Championship, most at Burton were well aware that this would likely be a transitional campaign at the Pirelli Stadium.

Although a very thin squad could well have struggled, Nigel Clough did well to first ensure that Burton were not sucked into the almighty relegation scrap that has gripped the division this season and then to manage an improvement over the course of the rest of the campaign. With a solid defence, energetic midfield and forwards in Lucas Akins, Liam Boyce and the rapidly improving youngster Marcus Harness, Burton were in play-off form over the second half of the campaign.

With it seeming likely that most of Burton's key players will be retained heading into next season, adding depth to the squad and finding some extra quality could see Burton stretch their second half of the season form across a longer portion of next season. Despite Nigel Clough's often overly cautious approach, Burton are at the very least an incredibly difficult side to play against under his management and will be better for the experience of this season.

Charlton Athletic

Final Position: 3rd



Top Scorer:

Lyle Taylor (22)

2nd in League

Most Assists:

Lyle Taylor (10)

5th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Lyle Taylor (32)

1st in League

Most Minutes Played:

Lyle Taylor (3,636)

51st in League

Players Used:

29

14th in League

Clean Sheets:

18

3rd in League

What I Said...

"The institutional crisis around Charlton is the main reason to be pessimistic about their hopes. If a takeover can be completed... the boost to the mood around the club could put them in automatic promotion contention."

The Manager

Lee Bowyer: In difficult circumstances off-the-pitch, Lee Bowyer has impressed with his clarity of vision on it. Albeit with a relatively strong squad for this level, Bowyer has built an attractive and consistent side at the Valley who are well-set to win promotion via the play-offs.

Star Player

Lyle Taylor: A marquee signing during a difficult summer, Lyle Taylor has further cemented his reputation as one of League One's best strikers this campaign. A physical and skilful centre-forward with an incredible work-rate, Taylor could probably have scored more than the 22 he managed with a greater degree of selfishness.

Overview

Charlton shouldn't have been so comfortably a play-off side this season based on everything that has been happening at boardroom level, with the hated Roland Duchatelet still yet to

complete the sale of the club after nearly two years of speculation.

Despite that, Lee Bowyer has been able to put together a strong team for this level in signing forward Lyle Taylor and midfielders Josh Cullen and Krystian Bielik who have added to an already strong squad. Charlton have played some very slick attacking football with a midfield diamond featuring Bielik, Cullen along with Ben Reeves and Joe Aribio. Not even the loss of Karlan Grant in attack to Premier League Huddersfield in January has derailed their season.

Charlton enter the play-offs as the form team over the second half of the campaign and will be the favourites in most quarters. With uncertainty surrounding Lee Bowyer's contract situation and key loanees and out-of-contract players likely to leave in the summer were they to remain in League One, this play-off campaign could be a key turning-point in the club's recent history.

Doncaster Rovers

Final Position: 6th



Top Scorer:

John Marquis (21)

3rd in League

Most Assists:

James Coppinger
(16)

1st in League

Most Goals Involved In:

John Marquis (22)

3rd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Danny Andrew
(4,116)

11th in League

Players Used:

28

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

12

11th in League

What I Said...

"The quality in attack that John Marquis offers is a massive plus point for Doncaster heading into this season, but mid-table looks to be the current ceiling for this side."

The Manager

Grant McCann: After an underwhelming stint at Peterborough United, few were expecting Grant McCann to make much of an impact at Doncaster Rovers. Instead, McCann has gotten the very best out of his resources, playing a fast-paced, exciting brand of possession football.

Star Player

James Coppinger: While John Marquis grabs the attention at Doncaster for his goals, Coppinger's creativity this season has been the vital cog in Grant McCann's system. The veteran midfielder has shown versatility in switching between a central and wide role while consistently influencing games.

Overview

There were few ingredients in place at Doncaster Rovers to suggest they would enjoy the season they have just experienced. Grant McCann was brought in relatively late in the summer

after his predecessor, Darren Ferguson, resigned over a lack of transfer funds. Leaving little scope – in terms of time or resources – for McCann to mould the squad into what has proven to be a top six side.

Building on the goalscoring-creative axis of John Marquis and a 38-year-old James Coppinger, McCann further supplemented Doncaster's attacking threat with the loan signings of forward Mallik Wilks and central midfielder Herbie Kane. Doncaster have been an impressive attacking, ball-playing side, especially at home.

Making the play-offs has been the achievement for Doncaster Rovers, with little expectation on them to go on to secure promotion. As impressive as the system McCann has instilled is, the test will be to see just how much further the Northern Irishman can take the club.

Fleetwood Town

Final Position: 11th



Top Scorer:

Ched Evans (17)

7th in League

Most Assists:

Ashley Hunter (11)

3rd in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Paddy Madden (22)

8th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Alex Cairns (4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

33

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

16

5th in League

What I Said...

"Fleetwood seem a relatively good club for Barton to choose in his first managerial posting... A play-off challenge is a reasonable expectation if things go to plan."

The Manager

Joey Barton: Has achieved just about par this season in securing a top-half finish for Fleetwood. At times he has had his side playing good football and troubling the best in the division but just not on a consistent enough basis to trouble the play-offs.

Star Player

Ched Evans: The first good season for Evans since his return to the game three years ago. A powerful and aggressive forward who can both occupy defenders and score goals, Evans has led the line superbly for Fleetwood Town this season.

Overview

Joey Barton seemed like a sink or swim kind of appointment for Fleetwood Town but has proven to be a surprisingly safe, fairly unremarkable, pair of hands. Although given a reasonably strong squad and budget for this level, Barton hasn't done a particularly terrible or outstanding job in attaining

a comfortable mid-table finish.

In the pros column for Barton has been some good results against the better teams at this level getting the best out of forwards Ched Evans and Paddy Madden while blooding a number of young players. Against him is a poor record on the road, only taking six points from losing positions and alienating talented players such as Kyle Dempsey and Conor McAleny – not to mention an alleged post-match assault on Barnsley manager Daniel Stendel which possibly casts a cloud over his longer-term future.

Barton seems likely that he will be given the opportunity over the summer to build on this campaign and further assert his managerial credentials. After a season of finding his feet and identity as a manager, there will be greater pressure on Barton to kick-on next year.

Gillingham

Final Position: 15th



Top Scorer:

Tom Eaves (20)

4th in League

Most Assists:

Mark Byrne (5)

43rd in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Tom Eaves (24)

6th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Tomas Holy (4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

27

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

11

15th in League

What I Said...

"While Gills fans will be looking to kick-on from last year, the reality is that anything other than a relegation scrap will be a bonus for them this season"

The Manager

Vacant: Steve Lovell was strangely dispensed as manager once safety was secured. With the club operating on a relatively limited budget, it's hard to justify such a call, especially against a manager so well-liked by the fans.

Star Player

Tom Eaves: The target-man has built on a prolific previous season to cement his reputation as one of the division's leading marksmen. A strong physical presence but capable of scoring some excellent technical finishes, out of contract, Eaves will be the top of the shopping list for sides chasing promotion next season.

Overview

Few outside of Gillingham foresaw anything other than a relegation scrap this season in Steve Lovell's first, and what proved to be only, full season in charge of the club. With a limited budget and few notable additions

to a squad that had struggled the previous year, Lovell and Gillingham were relying on team spirit to keep their heads above water.

At times, Gillingham threatened to be a little better than relegation strugglers, with some promising performances from forwards Brandon Hanlan and Elliott List in support of star man Tom Eaves giving the Gills a more diversified attacking threat than expected.

With Steve Lovell looking to have gotten close to the maximum out of his resources, the decision to sack him either implies an elevated idea of Gillingham's standing at this level or that owner Paul Scally will provide more backing for the club's next manager. Having made such a big call, the start of next season will be vital for Scally to justify having taken it.

Luton Town

Final Position: 1st



Top Scorer:

James Collins (25)

1st in League

Most Assists:

Jack Stacey (8)

9th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

James Collins (29)

2nd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Pelly Ruddock Mpanzu (4,125)

9th in League

Players Used:

28

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

20

2nd in League

What I Said...

"They are possibly lacking a level of physical assertiveness in midfield, but they should make a reasonable fist of a playoff challenge."

The Manager

Graeme Jones: Will lead Luton Town into the Championship next season after Nathan Jones and Mick Harford put together an incredible campaign at Kenilworth Road. Despite a strong coaching CV, Jones' lack of managerial experience makes this a huge call.

Star Player

Andrew Shinnie: The Scottish creative dynamo's performances may have gone under the radar a little but 'Shinnie-esta' has been a key cog in providing the sudden change in tempo in midfield to turn Luton's possession into attacking threat – his link play with right-back Jack Stacey being particularly important.

Overview

There were expectations around Kenilworth Road that Luton would be able to build on last season's promotion from League Two, however, few were expecting them to achieve automatic

promotion and to do so in relatively comfortable fashion, especially after the mid-season departure of manager Nathan Jones.

While individual performances from James Collins in attack, Andrew Shinnie and Pelly Ruddock Mpanzu in midfield, and full-backs James Justin and Jack Stacey have caught the eye, what has shone through the most has been the power of the system at Luton. Although Mick Harford made some minor tweaks after stepping into Nathan Jones' place, the groundwork laid by the former manager is clearly why Luton are now a Championship club.

As much as Luton have dominated this season, stepping up to the Championship is going to be a huge test of the set-up of the club. Luton have to stay true to their ideals but they also have to be ruthless in upgrading in key areas. Doing so under a rookie manager in Graeme Jones makes it a tougher, but far from impossible, task.

Oxford United

Final Position: 12th



Top Scorer:

James Henry (11)

28th in League

Most Assists:

Jamie Mackie (6)

29th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

James Henry (15)

35th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Curtis Nelson (4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

34

3rd in League

Clean Sheets:

13

8th in League

What I Said...

"Oxford have the players to make Robinson's style of football work, and in a relatively open field they are possibly even outside contenders for automatic promotion."

The Manager

Karl Robinson: Has showed greater adaptability than he is credited for in adding a physical, almost nasty, edge to Oxford's game in the face of a relegation battle. This season has been an important learning experience for Robinson that he appears to have come out the other side of.

Star Player

James Henry: In a side lacking a goalscoring centre-forward, James Henry's contribution from an attacking midfield position was close to crucial for Oxford United this season. Has developed his game from his early days of being a flying winger to become effective from a central role, even showing an ability to play slightly deeper.

Overview

Oxford United were among the most surprising relegation strugglers this season, by virtue of an awful opening 10 games of the season. Oxford went on to

post play-off form for much of the rest of the campaign, underlining just how important getting off to a good start can be.

Although Karl Robinson had an almost ludicrously talented squad with their attacking midfielders Marcus Browne, James Henry and Gavin Whyte stand-out performers, allying that individual talent into a more rugged system proved to be the key reason why Oxford improved over the course of the season.

Heading into the summer, re-organising a squad that was massively imbalanced towards attacking midfielders and short on strikers and defenders is likely to be a key priority for Karl Robinson. Although a backdrop to the campaign has been off-field issues involving the cash flow from their Thai owner, it feels as if Oxford are one of the better-placed clubs outside the top six to mount a promotion challenge next season.

Peterborough United

Final Position: 7th



Top Scorer:

Ivan Toney (15)

11th in League

Most Assists:

Marcus Maddison
(14)

2nd in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Marcus Maddison
(22)

8th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Jason Naismith
(3,708)

40th in League

Players Used:

27

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

10

20th in League

What I Said...

"The combination of power and technical quality at London Road is something few other teams at this level possess. The play-offs should be the minimum Peterborough achieve this season."

The Manager

Darren Ferguson: Initially struggled to turn around a squad that was heading in the wrong direction under Steve Evans but managed to reverse the momentum enough to take the race to the play-offs to the final day by instilling a more attractive brand of football.

Star Player

Marcus Maddison: Maddison's combination of movement and superlative technical ability make him the best player at this level on his day. Having been frozen out for the opening months of the season as he was linked with a move away, Maddison's return has yet again supplied Peterborough with a key source of goals and assists.

Overview

Having gambled on handing the keys to the club to Steve Evans, Peterborough owner, Darragh MacAnthony, was quick – perhaps too quick – to correct his error as things

looked to be heading on a downward trajectory, despite the club being 6th-place at the time of Evans' sacking.

The re-appointment of Darren Ferguson was a signal of a desire to return to the attacking, risk-taking Peterborough United of old. Despite patchy form since Ferguson's return, the latent talent in this Peterborough squad kept them in the play-off race nonetheless. Marcus Maddison was again Peterborough's creator-in-chief, while Ivan Toney and Matt Godden proved an effective strike pairing to latch onto Maddison's play.

There promises to be a summer overhaul of the squad as Peterborough look to put the Steve Evans era further out of memory. Although they may lose Maddison over the summer, there is a sense that returning to the 'Peterborough United way' will be what turns around a club that has consistently underachieved over the past five years.

Plymouth Argyle

Final Position: 21st



Top Scorer:

Freddie Ladapo (18)

6th in League

Most Assists:

Graham Carey (11)

3rd in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Freddie Ladapo (23)

7th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Graham Carey (3,821)

29th in League

Players Used:

29

14th in League

Clean Sheets:

6

23rd in League

What I Said...

"A comfortable mid-table finish and another series of needless digs between [former manager, Derek] Adams and opposing managers looks on the cards for this coming season."

The Manager

Vacant: Although Plymouth Argyle had struggled for most of the campaign, the shocking unravelling of form in the final weeks of the season, with Derek Adams falling out with key players, spelled the end of what had been an otherwise successful reign at the club.

Star Player

Ruben lameiras: A natural number 10 with incredible close control in tight areas and an improved eye for goal, Lameiras' form over the course of the season threatened to keep Argyle up. Out of contract, Lameiras is being linked with a move to Ligue 1 heavyweights Bordeaux.

Overview

Repeating last season's 7th-place season was always going to be unlikely for Plymouth, however few expected that a side managed by Derek Adams' would struggle to the extent that Plymouth did. Although they started poorly,

Plymouth looked to have repeated the trick of improving as the season progressed, until the wheels came off just as safety looked assured.

Derek Adams' confrontational style proved to be his undoing, with a 5-1 defeat at Accrington on the penultimate day of the season the last straw. Despite the performances of Ruben Lameiras, the continued creativity of Graham Carey, and Freddie Ladapo's goals, Plymouth were only a functioning side for short bursts of the season, with a lack of quality in defence being a key failing.

With Adams having been both manager and director of football, there is very little structure for a new manager to inherit as they look to restore the club's League One status next season. With their best performers likely to leave over the summer, it would be a surprise were Plymouth to bounce-back to the third-tier next season.

Portsmouth

Final Position: 4th



Top Scorer:

Jamal Lowe (15)

11th in League

Most Assists:

Ronan Curtis &
Jamal Lowe (10)

5th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Jamal Lowe (25)

5th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Craig MacGillivray
(4,140)

1st in League

Players Used:

27

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

11

14th in League

What I Said...

"Portsmouth are arguably the strongest team that competed in League One last season heading into this year... A top six finish should be seen as attainable, they are possibly even capable of pushing on towards the top two"

The Manager

Kenny Jackett: Aside from an extended poor run mid-season, Jackett's solid, if slightly unspectacular, brand of football and squad management made Portsmouth promotion contenders for much of the campaign with the chance to finish the job off in the play-offs.

Star Player

Matt Clarke: A central defender who combines physicality and technical ability in a manner befitting a higher-level. Clarke has not only been key in establishing a strong defensive unit at Fratton Park but his ability to play out from the back is a feature of Portsmouth's pattern of play.

Overview

Having been top for much of the first half of the season, the frustration for Portsmouth fans is that the disruption of the January transfer window – as well as an injury to key centre-back Jack

Whatmough – have cost Pompey automatic promotion.

A few months ago, that disruption looked set to derail Portsmouth's promotion hopes entirely. That it didn't has been down to Kenny Jackett's management of his resources, rotating the squad to freshen things up and adding depth in attack on January transfer deadline day, to supplement the incredible wing play of Jamal Lowe and Ronan Curtis – both of whom registered double-figures for both goals and assists over the league season.

Portsmouth's play-off semi-final tie with Sunderland looks a mouth-watering clash of two League One giants desperate for a return to the Championship. With Kenny Jackett's side holding a winning record over the Black Cats in the league and Checkatrade Trophy, Portsmouth are favourites to make it the play-off final.

Rochdale

Final Position: 16th



Top Scorer:

Ian Henderson (20)

4th in League

Most Assists:

Ian Henderson (6)

29th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Ian Henderson (26)

3rd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Ian Henderson (3,992)

17th in League

Players Used:

37

1st in League

Clean Sheets:

12

11th in League

What I Said...

"It's hard to ever write Rochdale [under Keith Hill] off. Another struggle seems unlikely, they should be comfortable in mid-table at the very least."

The Manager

Brian Barry-Murphy: Injected fresh life into Rochdale after stepping up in the wake of Keith Hill's departure towards the end of the season. Having made a short-term impact, next season will be a larger test of his managerial credentials.

Star Player

Ian Henderson: Has reached double-figures for goals in each of the past six seasons for Rochdale while also being a key source of creativity. Is the type of forward that can go under the radar at times before stepping up out of the blue to deliver decisive moments.

Overview

With things having looked to have gone stale under Keith Hill, Rochdale decision to sack their club stalwart was bold decision nonetheless. Relegation to League Two looked all but certain yet there appeared to be few better-placed to get the club back to this level than Hill.

It's fair to say then that Hill's replacement, Brian Barry-Murphy, has made much more of an impact than anyone could have expected. Rochdale have played with a renewed energy under Barry-Murphy having grown cautious and limited in attacking ideas under his predecessor.

With limited resources, although with little threat of key players leaving, Barry-Murphy will now have to prove what impact he can make over a longer-term period at Rochdale. This is a club that is punching above its weight simply by being in League One, what their former manager had shown though was that budgetary limitations are not necessarily prohibitive to success at this level.

Scunthorpe United

Final Position: 23rd



Top Scorer:

Lee Novak (12)

24th in League

Most Assists:

Josh Morris &
George Thomas (7)

17th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Lee Novak (13)

43rd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Jak Alnwick (3,690)

44th in League

Players Used:

33

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

7

22nd in League

What I Said...

"A lack of depth, both in quantity and quality of back-up options, looks to be Scunthorpe's biggest concern heading into this season. Their starting XI is probably still close to top six quality."

The Manager

Andy Dawson (Interim):

Could do little to reverse the malaise that had set in at Scunthorpe United under previous regimes. Seems unlikely to be given the permanent job after being inculcated in Scunthorpe's end-of-season collapse.

Star Player

Lee Novak: A hard-working and effective target-man at this level of football who is perhaps never quite given the credit that he deserves. To have reached double figures for a team struggling against the drop suggests he was someone deserving of better than the team around him.

Overview

After a summer of balancing the books and off-loading almost all of their best players from recent play-off campaigns, it still would have taken a pessimistic Scunthorpe United fan to predict just how disastrously this season would pan out at Glanford Park.

Having made what proved to be the wrong decision to back caretaker manager Nick Daws to oversee a summer of where smart recruitment was required, Scunthorpe thought they had made corrected that mistake in appointing the experienced Stuart McCall as Daws' replacement and then backing him in the January transfer market. Although Scunthorpe were unlucky in key players such as wingers Ryan Colclough and Josh Morris picking up big injuries, the club failed to address a lack of character on-the-pitch and leadership off it.

Scunthorpe cannot continue to overspend with their relatively modest attendance figures. The days of aspiring towards Championship football look to be over at Glanford Park, but the latent talent left in the squad is likely to make them promotion contenders in League Two next season – especially with the right managerial appointment.

Shrewsbury Town

Final Position: 18th



Top Scorer:

Fejiri Okenabirhie
(10)

34th in League

Most Assists:

Greg Docherty (8)

9th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Greg Docherty (15)

35th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Luke Waterfall
(3,883)

28th in League

Players Used:

33

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

14

7th in League

What I Said...

"There is probably enough about them to avoid a relegation battle, but it may take them time to get up and running."

The Manager

Sam Ricketts: Has yet to really justify his appointment mid-way through the season with such little prior managerial experience. Has pulled off some important results but has frustrated with his constant tinkering.

Star Player

Fejiri Okenabirhie: One of several smart summer signings by previous manager John Askey who never really got going until the former manager's departure from the club. A skilful and pacey striker whose goalscoring form in December was crucial in Shrewsbury evading the drop.

Overview

While there was hope in some quarters at Shrewsbury Town that they could build on last year's promotion near-miss – or at least finish comfortably in mid-table – losing manager Paul Hurst and so many key players over the summer was inevitably going to lead to

the season of transition that unfolded.

Although Hurst's replacement, John Askey, recruited relatively well in the transfer market, he struggled to win the fans over with his dull persona and, more importantly, poor results. Appointing the inexperienced Sam Ricketts as his replacement was a bold move but has yet to really be justified even though Shrewsbury attained survival in relative comfort.

Despite this year's struggles, Shrewsbury have recruited a number of players who could carry the team forward towards a more productive next season. With the right recruitment around them, talents such as Ro-Shaun Williams in defence, Ollie Norburn in midfield and Fejiri Okenabirhie in attack should form a good League One side. Whether Sam Ricketts is the man to bring it all together remains to be seen.

Southend United

Final Position: 19th



Top Scorer:

Simon Cox (15)

11th in League

Most Assists:

Simon Cox (7)

17th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Simon Cox (22)

8th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Sam Mantom (3,751)

34th in League

Players Used:

33

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

11

14th in League

What I Said...

"Quietly, they could well be something of a surprise package this season, although they do appear to lack reliable goalscorers in attack."

The Manager

Kevin Bond (Interim): Most famous for being Harry Redknapp's assistant manager, Kevin Bond provided the impetus to just about keep Southend's up after a dangerous collapse in form under predecessor Chris Powell.

Star Player

Simon Cox: There were perhaps a few doubts surrounding Simon Cox's longevity heading into the season, but he proved those wrong by leading Southend's goalscoring charts while his attacking partners dropped like flies with injuries.

Overview

For much of the season, Southend would have fancied themselves as outside contenders for the play-offs. With a manager in Chris Powell who was both a club legend as a player and had won promotion from this level as a manager in the past, the first half of the campaign was relatively

solid despite some key injuries in attack and defence.

With a reasonably solid defence and the goalscoring form of Simon Cox in attack, at the very worst it looked like it would be a mid-table season for Southend. However, things unravelled progressively as the campaign wore on with Chris Powell increasingly unable to find solutions to Southend's worsening performances.

Chris Powell's departure in the final month of the campaign proved to be the razor-thin difference between relegation and safety. Whether interim manager Kevin Bond is the man to rebuild a demoralised Southend side over the summer is impossible to tell based on the handful of games he has had in charge even if he produced some spirited performances.

Sunderland

Final Position: 5th



Top Scorer:

Josh Maja (15)

11th in League

Most Assists:

Lynden Gooch (8)

9th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Josh Maja & Aiden McGeady (17)

25th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Jon McLaughlin (4,126)

8th in League

Players Used:

31

9th in League

Clean Sheets:

13

8th in League

What I Said...

"There is the potential for Sunderland to be a very exciting team this year, although goalscoring currently looks to be [a key] area of weakness... Promotion is the minimum... they may not be as dominant as anticipated."

The Manager

Jack Ross: Has produced some good football at times but has struggled to find a way to get Sunderland to consistently dominate games. His record this season is likely to be judged on whether he pulls promotion out of the bag via the play-offs.

Star Player

Aiden McGeady: Has been crucial for Sunderland both in how his goalscoring has helped the club recover from the blow of losing top-scorer Josh Maja in January and his ability to produce individual moments of magic in a side lacking a cutting edge.

Overview

Although heavy favourites for promotion by virtue of their continued parachute payments after recent relegation from the Premier League, the rebuilding job at Sunderland was vast due to the number of high-earners on the books unwanted by other clubs. It

left little scope for new manager Jack Ross to make the sweeping changes demanded to whip Sunderland back in shape but left the club with players who would otherwise be far too good for this level with the right motivation.

Sunderland have been patchy and inconsistent even within games this season, probably as a result of the squad being such a mish-mash of different eras at the club. Jack Ross has wanted his side to control and dominate games, but that control has been hard to maintain, with there being a particular struggle in creating good chances on a consistent basis – leading to big January signing Will Grigg struggling to hit form.

All will be forgiven if Sunderland secure promotion via the play-offs. With the club likely to have to make further budget cut-backs this coming summer if they remain in League One, there is a lot resting on Jack Ross' side as they head into knock-out football.

Walsall

Final Position: 22nd



Top Scorer:

Andy Cook (13)

20th in League

Most Assists:

Luke Leahy (6)

29th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Andy Cook (16)

32nd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Luke Leahy (3,943)

20th in League

Players Used:

28

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

9

21st in League

What I Said...

"From the outset, Walsall look among the weaker teams in the division, team-spirit could be crucial for their hopes."

The Manager

Vacant: With Dean Keates struggling to replicate his short-term impact last season over a longer-term period, Walsall got worse as the season progressed. Caretaker Martin O'Connor did little to reverse the overall trajectory of the club.

Star Player

Andy Cook: Despite scoring freely in the National League for Tranmere last season, there were doubts surrounding Cook's physical and technical ability to step up. However, a first season in the Football League has seen the powerful Cook establish himself as one of the more effective centre-forwards operating in the third-tier.

Overview

The Dean Smith era still lingers large over the Bescot Stadium. The current Aston Villa manager demonstrated it was possible to assemble an exciting promotion-

challenging side at this level despite Walsall's budgetary limitations. Subsequent Walsall managers have come under fire not only for poor results but also for a lack of vision.

Dean Keates, albeit with a more physical and gutsy approach, had looked like providing the kind of vision Walsall fans desired. What was most disappointing about Keates' reign was how he deviated from the principles that had made Walsall entertaining underdogs over the first few months of the season, robbing the side of a sense of purpose in seeking to address a few poor results.

It is no guarantee that Walsall will be back at this level anytime soon – with their current budget reportedly at mid-table level in League Two. It feels as if Walsall's next appointment is less about finding quality in the dug-out than it is finding someone who will stick to a vision regardless of results.

Wycombe Wanderers

Final Position: 17th



Top Scorer:

Joe Jacobson (8)

38th in League

Most Assists:

Joe Jacobson &
Adebayo Akinfenwa
(7)

17th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Joe Jacobson (15)

35th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Jason McCarthy
(3,960)

19th in League

Players Used:

30

11th in League

Clean Sheets:

11

14th in League

What I Said...

"Wycombe should claim a few scalps against sides not quite appeared for the bombardment they throw at opponents. They seem likely nonetheless to be among the relegation candidates this year."

The Manager

Gareth Ainsworth: Much-loved at Wycombe, less so by opposing fans for his direct brand of football and timewasting tactics, Ainsworth has done transformed Wycombe into a League One side on limited resources.

Star Player

Curtis Thompson: Unable to get into the Notts County side at League Two, Thompson has been a revelation this season for Wycombe. An industrious and tenacious midfielder, Thompson is finally delivering on the early promise that his career showed at Meadow Lane.

Overview

With one of the thinnest and oldest squads in the division, survival was always going to be the primary task for Wycombe. What they lacked in technical skill, they were going to make up for in guts, identity and sheer bloody-mindedness against the odds.

Wycombe's best period of the season came when their infamously direct and cynical style of football was largely ditched in favour of the exciting wing play of loanees Randell Williams and Fred Onyedinma. The loss of the duo at the start of January coincided with a run of form that took the Chairboys from mid-table into relegation danger lacking both creativity and goals.

Having secured survival, the summer presents something of a crossroads for Wycombe and Gareth Ainsworth. With suggestions that the manager may be looking to move on and a squad in need of fresher, younger faces, whether it's Ainsworth or a new man, it's going to be a tough task to build on this campaign and keep Wycombe at this level on their resources.

Coming Next Season



Top Scorer

Freddie Sears & Gwion Edwards (6)

Most Assists

Freddie Sears (4)

Manager

Paul Lambert

Ipswich Town – 24th in Championship

It was always going to be a difficult job for whoever replaced Mick McCarthy at Ipswich, however, Paul Hurst's move to almost completely dismantle a mid-table Championship squad and replace it with decent, but few outstanding, League One and Two players set Ipswich up for a season of struggle.

Relegation was almost certain even by the time Paul Lambert was appointed in October. Although Ipswich fans seem to believe that Lambert is the man to rebuild the club, a record of just four wins in 33 games is hardly encouraging – even if Lambert was working with a relatively weak squad that wasn't of his own choosing.

Ipswich will inevitably be favourites for promotion next season due to their resources and some promising academy players. Recruiting well over the summer and starting the season strongly will be imperative for Ipswich and for Lambert especially.



Top Scorer

Will Buckley (5)

Most Assists

Sammy Ameobi (4)

Manager

Phil Parkinson

Bolton Wanderers – 23rd in Championship

Bolton's off-field struggles have been well documented, and there remains a threat that Bolton could be liquidated over the summer. With players regularly going unpaid, that Bolton were even remotely competitive says a lot about Phil Parkinson's ability to build a siege mentality.

Provided they stay afloat, Bolton head into next season with an ageing squad of journeymen and a possible transfer embargo to contend with. With key players looking set to leave, it would be an incredible show of loyalty to a seemingly hopeless cause were Phil Parkinson to remain in place as manager.

Regardless of what form they are in; the biggest thing Bolton fans will be hoping for is that they even have a team to follow next season. Despite being one of the bigger names next season, Bolton appear to be relegation favourites already.



Top Scorer

Michael Smith (8)

Most Assists

Will Vaulks (7)

Manager

Paul Warne

Rotherham United – 22nd in Championship

Rotherham have become a club that are too good for League One but not quite good enough for the Championship, highlighting the financial disparity between the two levels.

Despite that, manager Paul Warne has injected a real sense of purpose to the Millers. Initially a fitness coach who reluctantly took the job as a caretaker with the club moored to the bottom of the Championship, Warne has built a hard-working and motivated Rotherham side that would have stayed up in the second-tier with slightly better luck in converting draws into wins.

Provided Warne stays, Rotherham will be well-set for another promotion bid at League One level – even if some of their better performers are likely to leave for bigger Championship clubs. With an energetic style of football and a threat from set-pieces, Rotherham will not be fun for anyone to play against next season.

Coming Next Season



Top Scorer

John Akinde (15)

Most Assists

John Akinde (7)

Manager

Danny Cowley

Lincoln City – 1st in League Two

Staying in League Two for an extra year has allowed Lincoln City to evolve in a more natural manner from their recent non-league days than if they had been thrust into the third-tier this season. Aside from a few hiccups along the way, Lincoln were relentless in their domination of League Two.

The Cowley brothers have attempted to evolve Lincoln's football from the red-blooded kick and rush tactics that opposing fans have tarred them with. In bringing in flair attacking players in Bruno Andrade and Shay McCartan, Lincoln had different ways to get past opponents, while also knowing they had physical batterings in their locker.

With three seasons of momentum behind them now, Lincoln are a juggernaut heading into League One. With a handful of further improvements to the squad, the imps are going to be well-set to challenge for the play-offs.



Top Scorer

Nicky Maynard (20)

Most Assists

Nicky Adams (14)

Manager

Ryan Lowe

Bury – 2nd in League Two

With players reportedly unpaid for the final two months of the season and the club facing a winding-up order in the coming week, whether there is a Bury in League One next season remains to be seen.

Overspending during their recent League One stay has led to the club's financial peril, it has also been part of the reason why they have bounced back at the first attempt. With a strong squad of players on higher wages than a lot of clubs even at League One level could afford, Ryan Lowe was able to assemble a swashbuckling attacking side that could blow opponents away when at their very best.

It seems likely that this will be a summer of budget cutbacks regardless of the outcome of the winding-up hearing. With there being a possibility of a points deduction and players being able to leave for free over the summer, like Bolton, Bury are a side entering League One in a state of financial peril.



Top Scorer

Kieran Agard (20)

Most Assists

Dean Lewington (8)

Manager

Paul Tisdale

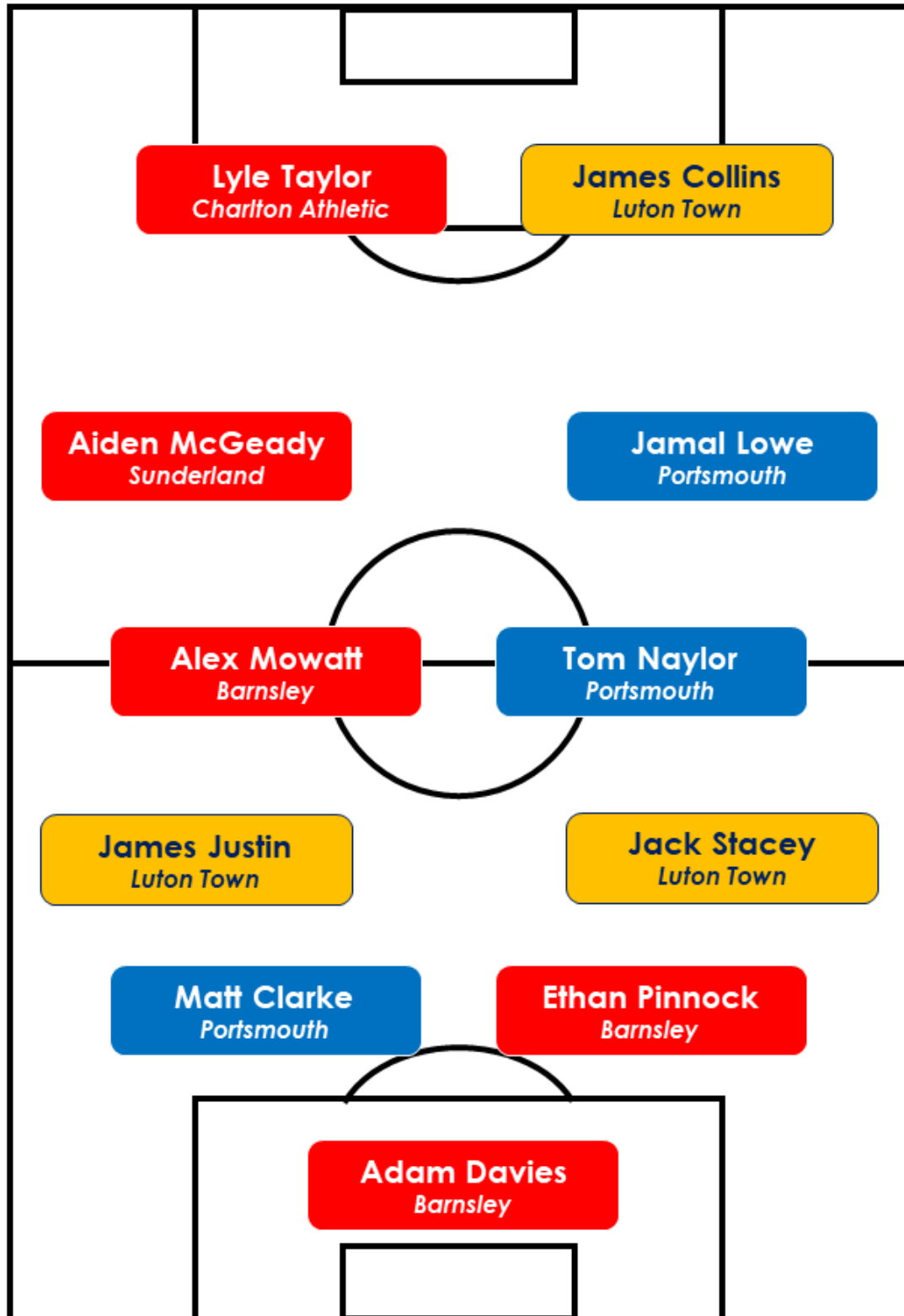
Milton Keynes Dons – 3rd in League Two

It was always going to be interesting to see what Paul Tisdale was capable of outside of Exeter City and in going to MK Dons and securing promotion in his first season, Tisdale will have proven a point to those that forced him out of Exeter.

Whether promotion with an MK Dons squad that would have competed well in League One with the attacking talents of Chuks Aneke and Kieran Agard, further bolstered by David Wheeler and Jake Hesketh in January is debatable but Tisdale has met expectations at MK Dons thus far in securing promotion in a relatively dominant manner, aside from the odd hiccup along the way.

Like Lincoln City, the expectation is that MK Dons will kick on from promotion which is likely to make for a very competitive League One play-off race in the forthcoming campaign.

Team Of The Season





Player Reviews

Lee Burge

Pos: GK

Age: 25

Apps(Goals): 41(0)



A mistake in the away game at Walsall back in December seemed to turn Lee Burge's season on its head. From being one of our most consistent players during the first half of the campaign, Burge's form and confidence disintegrated as the season wore on. While he still had some amazing saves in his locker, Burge's inability to learn from the rash decisions he makes in claiming crosses cost the team some big goals. After nearly three full seasons as number one, now appears to be the time for both Burge and ourselves to part ways.

Liam O'Brien

Pos: GK

Age: 26

Apps(Goals): 8(0)



Handed an opportunity at the start of the season to claim the number one goalkeeping position, a huge error away at Blackpool confirmed that Liam O'Brien was behind Lee Burge in the pecking order. Like Burge, O'Brien's best quality was his shot-stopping ability, but he appeared to be rasher and less commanding. After spending almost his entire career as a second-choice keeper, it is time for O'Brien to move somewhere he can play regular football.

David Stockdale

Pos: GK

Age: 32

Apps(Goals): 2(0)



Having been frozen out at Birmingham City, David Stockdale spent last season as a specialist emergency loan goalkeeper – also taking in spells at Southend United and Wycombe Wanderers. Although he faced just three shots on target in his two games with the club, Stockdale's calmness and authority in the penalty area stood out – again, he did only face three shots on target. Many Coventry City fans are desperate for him to sign permanently, with a year still left on a reportedly very lucrative Birmingham City contract, he may be tough to get.

Junior Brown

Pos: LB

Age: 29

Apps(Goals): 23(0)



Brought in as a proven performer in League One in a left-back position that had been a problem area the year before, Junior Brown has been an underwhelming signing. At times, Brown's aerial ability and energy was a useful asset, however, he often undermined himself with a reckless streak that belied his supposed experience. Having been knocked down the pecking order by Brandon Mason and with Sam McCallum picking up appearances ahead of him as second-choice, it wouldn't be a surprise were Brown to leave in the summer.

Chris Camwell**Pos: LB****Age: 19****Apps(Goals): 2(0)****34**

Having made an impressive debut around two years ago and been strongly linked with a move to Stoke City, Camwell has seemingly failed to kick-on. With a younger player in Sam McCallum usurping his third-choice spot at left-back, Mark Robins publicly questioning his defensive ability and being allowed away from the club on a trial spell in January, Camwell's time at the club looks to be at end.

Tom Davies**Pos: CB****Age: 26****Apps(Goals): 25(0)****5**

Although he has enjoyed some extended spells in the starting XI over the course of the season, Tom Davies has been firmly third-choice at centre-back this year. The emergence of Dominic Hyam and the effectiveness of his partnership with Jordan Willis saw Davies drop down the pecking order. Would have been a useful member of the squad next season ahead of other priority areas of recruitment but has seemingly chosen to move elsewhere in search of regular first-team football. He will be missed.

Jack Grimmer**Pos: RB****Age: 24****Apps(Goals): 13(0)****2**

The victim of the ruthless decision by Mark Robins to bring in a prized Premier League loan player in Dujon Sterling over the summer, Jack Grimmer – who had made himself something of a hero last season as part of our promotion-winning side – was relegated to second-choice in the final year of his contract. On the odd occasions he came into the side, Grimmer did a reasonable job, although Dujon Sterling is clearly the better player. We will find out next season just how wise it was for Mark Robins to make a decision that leaves us requiring two new right-backs.

Jak Hickman**Pos: RB/W****Age: 19****Apps(Goals): 2(0)****29**

Has established himself as a regular with the under-23 side over the past couple of seasons and has picked up experience of first-team football with loans in non-league with Mickleover Sports and Hereford. An energetic presence on the right flank who can play at both full-back and winger, there is the remote possibility that Hickman could get a chance next season at right-back – which would require a very strong pre-season – although is likely to be behind two more senior right-backs in the pecking order.

Dominic Hyam

Pos: CB

Age: 22

Apps(Goals): 41(1)

15

It has been a remarkable 12 months for Dominic Hyam, who has become an incredibly reliable and important presence of centre-back having been as low as fourth-choice in his position the year before. Hyam's composure, positioning and use of the ball have quietly made him a vital presence at the back, especially as Mark Robins has looked to implement a more possession-based style of football. With there looking to be a revamp in defence next season, Hyam will play an important role as a continuity figure.

Brandon Mason

Pos: LB

Age: 20

Apps(Goals): 28(0)

3

Has endured a stop-start season due to repeated fitness issues that have seen him miss games and regularly fail to complete 90 minutes. When he has put together a run of games, Mason has shown the potential to be an effective performer at this level with his energy going forward, use of the ball and timing in the challenge. There is room for improvement in all aspects of his game – he can be reticent to cross or beat opponents, he has been targeted by opponents for his lack of height – but he looks to be getting better and that left-back slot looks to be his to lose.

Sam McCallum

Pos: LB

Age: 19

Apps(Goals): 8(0)

41

Brought in from non-league Herne Bay over the summer to play in the under-18s, Sam McCallum has developed remarkably quickly to have played senior football as early as November. Entrusted by Mark Robins to start a handful of league games, McCallum still looks a very raw talent – with the defensive and technical side of his game still developing. Could well be second-choice at left-back heading into next season, which would be a very bold call by Mark Robins at this stage of McCallum's development.

Dujon Sterling

Pos: RB

Age: 18

Apps(Goals): 40(0)

17

For the first month or so of the season, it was hard to see why Dujon Sterling was so highly-rated by Chelsea and the England set-up. Lacking conviction defensively and showing little going forward, it took a horror show at Bristol Rovers – where he was probably responsible for all three goals conceded – for Sterling to click into gear. Although he faded over the course of the season, Sterling has played with a glide and calmness that has suggested that he will go on to play at a higher level, especially in his ability to get crosses out of his feet with poise and accuracy.

Jordon Thompson**Pos:** CB/RB**Age:** 19**Apps(Goals):** 8(0)27

A regular part of the match-day squad for the opening few months of the season, Jordon Thompson has seen relatively little first-team football since a defensive lapse in the FA Cup defeat to Walsall in November. Thompson had looked a solid and composed defender with decent technical ability when called upon but appears to have fallen down the pecking order at under-23 level to Morgan Williams and January signing Declan Drysdale.

Morgan Williams**Pos:** CB**Age:** 19**Apps(Goals):** 4(0)37

Having picked up a handful of appearances in the Checkatrade Trophy, defensive injuries in March saw Morgan Williams handed his first league start against Fleetwood Town. Against an experienced striker in Ched Evans, Williams more than held his own, especially in the timing of his challenges and use of the ball. While he hasn't been called upon since then, it's good to know that we have depth at centre-back. With a strong pre-season, he could well have a bigger part to play next year.

Jordan Willis**Pos:** CB/RB**Age:** 23**Apps(Goals):** 39(1)4

This has probably been Jordan Willis' strongest and most consistent campaign in a Sky Blues shirt. Long tipped as a player of potential, Willis has often been solid rather than spectacular in his time at the club. This season, we have seen just how important Jordan Willis' recovery pace can be at the back, allowing the side to push up the pitch in the knowledge there is cover if needed. It's a shame that he is set to leave the club on a free transfer after all his years of service, it will be interesting to see how much of an impact he can make at a higher-level.

Reise Allassani**Pos:** W/ST**Age:** 22**Apps(Goals):** 6(0)14

After a bright pre-season, it appeared that Mark Robins didn't quite trust Reise Allassani enough to allow him to immediately play in league football. Injuries and a couple of loan spells to non-league where he has looked bright but hasn't been a regular suggests that Allassani faces an uphill task in earning a first-team chance next season. There is clearly the raw talent there with his pace, skill and eye for goal, but it already looks like he may need to make another move in order to get his career going at Football League level.

Tony Andreu

Pos: AM

Age: 30

Apps(Goals): 12(1)

22

Based on pre-season and an excellent free-kick on the opening day against Scunthorpe United, Tony Andreu looked set to be a key player for us this campaign. However, some quiet performances and the signing of Conor Chaplin saw Andreu quickly relegated in the pecking order and sent off on loan in January to his old club, Hamilton Academical. With his contract up in the summer, his age, and his lack of impact on loan, Andreu looks set to quietly shuffle out of the club.

Tom Bayliss

Pos: CM

Age: 19

Apps(Goals): 41(3)

20

Although Tom Bayliss has dipped in and out of form this season, he has still been one of our best and most talented players. Sometimes it has been taken for granted Bayliss' ability to glide past opponents in the centre of the park and thereby open up the game for his team-mates. He is clearly someone who will go on to play and make an impact at a higher-level, as evidenced by rumours already linking with a move to the Championship. If he can be held onto for one more year, that will be an important step towards a potential promotion bid.

Jack Burroughs

Pos: CM

Age: 17

Apps(Goals): 2(0)

50

Having been capped at youth-level for Scotland and picked up first-team experience in the Checkatrade Trophy, it has been a productive season for Jack Burroughs. A tall, forward-thinking midfielder reminiscent of Tom Bayliss, Burroughs is viewed in some quarters as one of the next academy players likely to make a breakthrough in the first-team. Still at a young age, Burroughs has next season to further hone his talents before there's too much pressure to make the next step.

Michael Doyle

Pos: CM

Age: 36

Apps(Goals): 24(1)

8

For a period this season, Michael Doyle looked like defying his age in establishing himself as an effective presence in central midfield in League One. The most prolific passer in the league during the first half of the campaign, Doyle set the tempo of the side and was a key component in our five-game winning streak in October – delivering some telling set-pieces too. A couple of mistakes cost Doyle his place in the side before he took the decision in January to move to a relegation-battling Notts County in League Two. It seems likely that he'll be back soon in a coaching role.

Josh Eccles

Pos: CM

Age: 18

Apps(Goals): 1(0)

38

A regular member of the under-23 side, Josh Eccles is often the player setting the tempo of the side at the base of midfield. Having competed fairly well against a senior Cheltenham Town side in the Checkatrade Trophy, Eccles will have been boosted by knowing he can compete in men's football. Still at a young enough age not to have pressure to make a further breakthrough, Eccles will be looking to pick up further experience next year in the Checkatrade Trophy.

Jodi Jones

Pos: W

Age: 20

Apps(Goals): 10(0)

7

Another serious injury presents a huge test of Jodi Jones' physical and mental strength to bounce back. While there have been players who have returned from the type of injuries Jones has sustained, it would be remarkable were he to return in the immediate future to the levels he was producing before injury issues set in. From what we saw of Jones this year, he was impacting games from the bench with his skill and willingness to drive at opponents and was on the verge of making an important next step in his recovering before a gut-wrenching relapse in November.

Liam Kelly

Pos: CM

Age: 28

Apps(Goals): 32(0)

6

Kelly's emergence as a leader both mentally and technically in central midfield as Doyle departed from the first-team picture has been one of the stories of the season. Last year, Kelly looked a useful cog in a solid League Two side, this season, he has become the beating heart of an energetic ball-playing League One team. Kelly's physical presence and nous in breaking up the play has been important in providing the platform for our attacking players to do what they do best, but his passing ability has been a useful attacking weapon in its own right.

David Meyler

Pos: CM

Age: 29

Apps(Goals): 5(0)

8

As someone who so recently played in the Premier League and is only just reaching 30, David Meyler looked an incredible signing in January. However, continuous injury and fitness issues have meant we haven't seen the player we hoped we had signed. Seemingly a big influence in the dressing room, Meyler showed flashes of the player he once was, however, he also looked like someone playing with a level of fear of picking up another injury, which he eventually did. In theory, he would be a reasonable permanent signing, but injury and wage issues seem to make his signing a non-starter.

Jonny Ngandu

Pos: AM

Age: 17

Apps(Goals): 1(0)

46

Having managed to get involved with the under-23 squad at a very young age, Jonny Ngandu has been marked out as a youngster with significant potential. In his one first-team appearance thus far – in the Checkatrade Trophy against Cheltenham Town – Ngandu looked very technically proficient but seemed to lack the game awareness to get himself into positions where he could hurt the opposition. Has become more aggressive and attack-minded over the course of the season at under-23 level and is set to be a key player for us at that level next year.

Abu Ogogo

Pos: CM

Age: 28

Apps(Goals): 14(0)

16

Having been one of the key players for a Shrewsbury Town side last season that narrowly missed out on promotion, the signing of Abu Ogogo last summer looked a significant coup. Although he showed very little in the appearances he made for us, that he was allowed to leave for a free in January is an indictment of the scouting work that went into his signing, with Mark Robins stating that Ogogo just didn't fit into the style of play. Has moved onto a Bristol Rovers side where he is now a regular.

Jordan Shipley

Pos: CM/W

Age: 20

Apps(Goals): 36(3)

26

Having been second-choice for the majority of the season, an injury to Tom Bayliss has allowed Jordan Shipley to demonstrate what he can do in his preferred central midfield position. Shipley's energy and desire to make things happen have proven a useful asset in the centre of the park, where he scored two of the three goals he has managed this season. Regardless of whether Bayliss stays or leaves to hand Shipley a further run in central midfield, Shipley could do with adding further goals and assists to his game in order to make the next step in his career.

Billy Stedman

Pos: AM/W

Age: 18

Apps(Goals): 1(0)

40

Had been tipped in previous years as one of our more promising younger players, Stedman has struggled this season to pick up regular minutes at under-23 level. He still has a year or so to develop, but the coming season looks to be an important one for him in taking the next step in his development and becoming a regular with the under-23 side.

Luke Thomas**Pos: W****Age: 19****Apps(Goals): 44(5)****23**

Having made a big impact in his first few months at the club, a lack of decisiveness in the final third has probably defined Luke Thomas' time at Coventry City. An incredibly hard-working wide player whose tenaciousness out of possession makes him an asset both in winning the ball high up the pitch and in covering his full-back, Thomas also possesses the skill and pace to beat defenders for fun. The problem for him has been in the final third, where he takes too long to set himself up for shots making him easy to defend against. Despite that, he has been one of our better players this season.

Charlie Wakefield**Pos: W****Age: 20****Apps(Goals): 8(0)****44**

Signed on January transfer deadline day seemingly after other targets fell through. Wakefield has been a regular on the bench as a late substitute over the second half of the campaign but has yet to really demonstrate what he's all about – aside from a tame cross that set Conor Chaplin up for the winning goal away at Sunderland. Reportedly one of the quickest players assistant manager Adi Viveash has worked with, pre-season is likely to be a key period for Wakefield to demonstrate he is worthy of a place in the first-team squad.

Dexter Walters**Pos: W****Age: 20****Apps(Goals): 1(0)****32**

One of several signings for the under-23 squad over the summer, Dexter Walters looks to have been one of the more impactful of these additions, playing regularly and picking up a decent amount of goals and assists. Walters looks to be a quick and skilful wide player and will be hoping that pre-season presents him with the opportunity to demonstrate to Mark Robins that he is worth more of a look in with the senior squad.

Zain Westbrooke**Pos: CM****Age: 21****Apps(Goals): 8(0)****25**

Having been earmarked as Tom Bayliss' replacement following a trial spell at the end of last season, Zain Westbrooke has looked a useful and tidy central midfield option when called upon this season. Less explosive than Bayliss, Westbrooke's biggest asset appears to be his remarkably accurate set-piece deliveries. Westbrooke will perhaps be slightly disappointed that Robins turned to Jordan Shipley to step up after Tom Bayliss' injury in the final month of the season, but he should have opportunities next year to build on a decent start with us.

Amadou Bakayoko**Pos: ST****Age: 22****Apps(Goals): 34(7)****21**

Looked a mystifying signing from Walsall over the summer – especially as we paid a fee for a player we could have signed for free earlier in the window – however, Bakayoko has carved a niche for himself in the side as an energetic and mad-cap presence as lone striker. What Bakayoko lacks in technical ability, he makes up for in his work-rate and surprising turn of pace for his size. His goal return is far better than most were expecting and would perhaps improve with a pre-season and full campaign as the number one centre-forward. However, he is someone we may be looking to upgrade on this summer.

Maxime Biamou**Pos: ST****Age: 27****Apps(Goals): 5(0)****9**

Made himself a fan favourite last season with his aerial ability, work-rate and some spectacular finishes, a season-ending injury in August rendered any discussion as to whether he could find his goalscoring boots and make an impact at a higher-level moot. Ahead of his return next season, Biamou faces a big challenge in not only recovering physically from such a serious injury but in reclaiming a spot in the side from Amadou Bakayoko – who is younger and a more prolific goalscorer.

Conor Chaplin**Pos: ST****Age: 21****Apps(Goals): 32(8)****10**

Having been identified as Marc McNulty's replacement over the summer, it felt as if our season rested on Conor Chaplin's form in front of goal. While he has underwhelmed – just four of his eight goals have come in open play – what has probably been more concerning for Chaplin is that our improvement in the second half of the campaign coincided a spell from him on the side-lines. There are stats to suggest that Conor Chaplin will eventually come good – especially as he has perhaps also been misused in a withdrawn role. If he doesn't make an impact early next season, he may have to drop down a level.

Jonson Clarke-Harris**Pos: ST****Age: 23****Apps(Goals): 29(6)****18**

Jonson Clarke-Harris' goalscoring form since leaving the club in January points towards a weakness in Mark Robins' man management. While certain players will benefit from different environments, Robins' failure to back Jonson Clarke-Harris to be the main man in attack suggests that he can have a tunnel vision when it comes to veering away from his main plan – which, this season, was clearly centred around Conor Chaplin. Since leaving the club, Clarke-Harris has become a confident and deadly finisher, having struggled to even get into goalscoring positions in a Sky Blue shirt.

Bright Enobakhare

Pos: AM/W

Age: 20

Apps(Goals): 18(6)

24

The signing that threatened to carry us into the play-offs, Bright Enobakhare is a true maverick who marches to the beat of his own drum. Incredibly skilful and completely unpredictable in his use of the ball, Bright Enobakhare has been a nightmare for opponents to deal with when getting the ball in advanced positions. At times, he has made wrong decisions both with the ball or in dropping too deep, but his return of goals and assists indicates that he is someone worth indulging. If rumours suggesting he is set to stay next season are true, it would be a real coup.

Jordy Hiwula

Pos: ST/W

Age: 23

Apps(Goals): 43(13)

11

Our top scorer this season, but someone who has perhaps not been fully appreciated for the impact that he has made this season. Whether it is down to the attention on Conor Chaplin being the main man, the lack of conviction at times in his finishing or some occasionally anonymous performances, Hiwula has been one of the more low-key top-scorers for the club in recent years, 13 goals for a striker who has largely been played out of position this season is a more than commendable return. If he can improve further, he could be the main goalscorer we've searched elsewhere for.

Jordan Ponticelli

Pos: ST

Age: 19

Apps(Goals): 6(0)

19

This has been a year of development lost for Jordan Ponticelli after picking up an injury early into his loan spell with Macclesfield Town. Having showed last season that he is an excellent finisher who is perhaps lacking an all-round game, a loan spell in League Two should have been a perfect platform for him to show what he could do. With the likely competition for places in attack next season, Ponticelli could do with a more successful loan spell next year to force himself back into the reckoning here.



Top Scorer

Player	All Comps	League
Jordy Hiwula	13	12
Conor Chaplin	8	8
Amadou Bakayoko	7	7



Most Assists

Player	All Comps	League
Luke Thomas	5	5
Amadou Bakayoko	5	5
Dujon Sterling	4	4
Jordy Hiwula	4	4



Most Goal Involvements

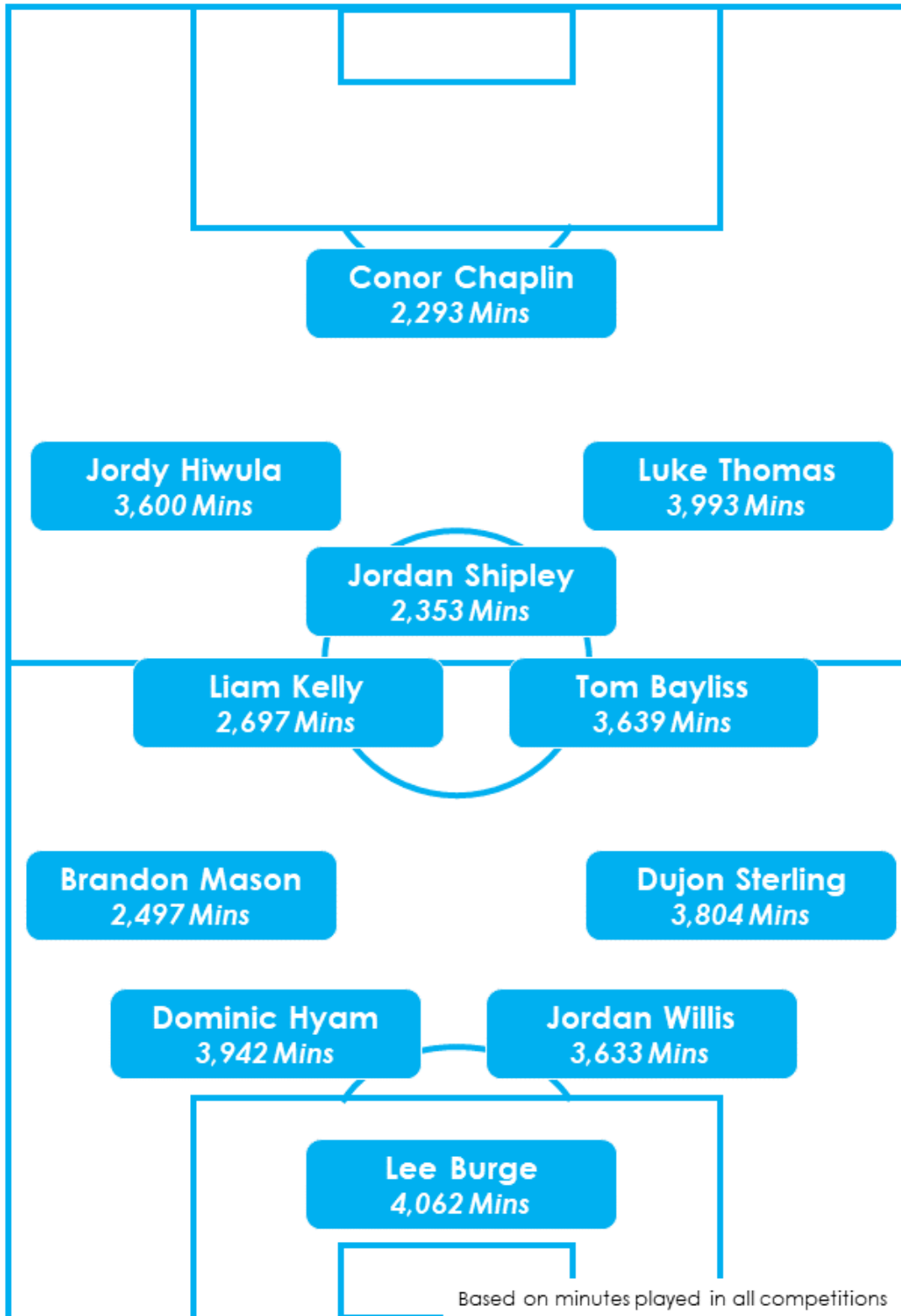
Player	All Comps	League
Jordy Hiwula	17	16
Amadou Bakayoko	12	12
Conor Chaplin	11	11



Most Minutes Played

Player	All Comps	League
Lee Burge	4,062	3,960
Luke Thomas	3,993	3,918
Dominic Hyam	3,942	3,646

Most Used Team







Settling In To League One

Most Coventry City fans headed into this season in a position unprecedented in their memories of supporting the club – after a promotion. Although many had seen their club adapting to a newer, lower, level of football, not many had experience of knowing what it was like in adapting to a step up in quality.

Following victory at Wembley on a glorious early summer afternoon against Exeter City to secure promotion in an emphatic fashion, there was a growing sense of pride around the club. A sense that Coventry City was finally ready to realise its untapped potential was growing around the club. Capped-off by a glorious open-top bus tour where the city paid tribute to their Wembley heroes, fans were looking ahead to a season playing host and travelling to clubs such as Sunderland, Barnsley and Portsmouth, in place of Forest Green, Morecambe and Crawley Town.

Securing the signings of two players in Junior Brown and Abu Ogogo from a Shrewsbury Town side that had finished third in League One the previous season further emphasised the position of strength that this club had now in. Everything looked to be falling in place for another promotion challenge.

That was until the news emerged that top-scorer Marc McNulty was set for a move to Championship Reading.

From looking like the complete opposite of the typical Coventry City supporters were accustomed to, the sale of McNulty was a depressing reversion to the typical Coventry City that allowed star players to leave at the first sign of interest.

The sale of McNulty had an undeniable impact on how the rest of the summer unfolded. The young Portsmouth forward Conor Chaplin had been quickly identified as McNulty's replacement, however, it became apparent over the following weeks that he would only leave on Portsmouth's terms.

With the clock ticking until the end of the transfer window – which was to fall just over three weeks earlier than in previous seasons – the club appeared to panic in bringing in the desperation to fill the gap in the squad in attack. Strikers Jordy Hiwula – a serial loanee at League One level to varying degrees of success – and Amadou Bakayoko – a decidedly non-prolific forward reviled by Walsall fans – were brought in ahead of the closing transfer window with neither appearing to be the kind of goalscorer who could carry the team forward in the manner Marc McNulty did.

It had been the shortest pre-season most Coventry City fans had known. The team felt undercooked and missing at least one or two key ingredients as an opening day contest with Scunthorpe United came around. Somehow, just five of the starting XI for the game had played in the play-off final a little over two months ago.

In a scrappy first-half showing against a similarly under-baked Scunthorpe United side, the popular French centre-forward Maxime Biamou displayed just why he had struggled in front of goal at a lower-level the previous season, lacking the pace and composure when played through one-on-one. Similarly, the pacey Jordy Hiwula lacked conviction when sent through on goal, while a dual-defensive midfield pivot of Michael Doyle and Abu Ogogo offered little dynamism in the centre of the park.

Inspiration was to come in the form of Tony Andreu, and an accurate free-kick approximately 25-yards

from goal; to put the Sky Blues deservedly in the lead and stoke the sense of optimism around the club. The French midfielder had missed most of the previous season but looked set to play a key role this campaign, that goal was a promising indication of intent.

For an introduction back into League One football, it looked like we had done enough to secure victory, however, the turning-point of the game came via the substitutes' bench.

Whereas Scunthorpe United were able to introduce the ball-playing midfielder Funso Ojo alongside the creative number 10 Duane Holmes, Mark Robins was forced into a disruptive triple-substitution due to the lack of fitness of several of the starting XI. The most notable change was in unsettling the back four by bringing on the young centre-back Jordon Thompson for his debut in place of a fatigued Jordan Willis.

Scunthorpe quickly wrested control of the midfield as we began to tire, space opening up in the area covered by Michael Doyle and Abu Ogogo. The young Chelsea loanee Dujon Sterling was caught out of position as Holmes played Stephen Humphrys in for a well-taken finish past Liam O'Brien. With 10 minutes remaining, Sterling was again exploited positionally as Scunthorpe scored the game's decisive goal.

Scunthorpe United

League One
08/08/18
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Andreu

AFC Wimbledon

League One
11/08/18
Score: 0-0
Scorer: None

Oxford United

League Cup
14/08/18
Score: 0-2
Scorer: None

The disjointed and slap-dash feeling to the team dynamic was further underlined the following week during a turgid 0-0 draw against another lacklustre opponent, this time AFC Wimbledon. The Sky Blues struggled to get going and were lucky not to lose the game late on as a rash Junior Brown challenge in the penalty area wasn't picked up by the referee.

A mid-week League Cup defeat away at Oxford United in which the team finished with four forwards on the pitch and had switched between at least three different formations further indicated that Mark Robins had little idea as to his strongest side or formation. A sloppy start was in danger of becoming a poor one, with tension rising as to whether this side could handle the step-up in league status.

With the gangly and technically-lacking Amadou Bakayoko playing as a lone striker, the Sky Blues lacked any rhythm, threat, or dynamism to their play in the following league game against Plymouth Argyle. It was

Plymouth Argyle

League One

18/08/18

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Bakayoko

Blackpool

League One

21/08/18

Score: 0-2

Scorer: Bakayoko

Gillingham

League One

25/08/18

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Clarke-Harris

all a far cry from the quick-witted, fluid football that had been produced during the play-off campaign. So many of the changes over the summer appeared not only to have not improved the squad but needlessly disruptive to the team dynamic – most clearly characterised by the ineffective Dujon Sterling's usurping of Jack Grimmer's right-back spot.

A Bakayoko penalty that trickled over the line in the first-half did little to remedy the sense that it would be weeks, if not months, before a functional team-unit would be formed from the constituent parts that Mark Robins had assembled over the summer. Things reached a nadir during a dire 2-0 defeat the following Tuesday at Blackpool – epitomised by Amadou Bakayoko's consistent failure to stay onside.

It wasn't so much the lack of wins thus far but the quality of performances that was starting to see panic stations set in among the fan-base. A big performance was needed quickly to galvanise the players and fans, it so nearly came away at Gillingham.

The Sky Blues dominated much of the game at what had so often been a difficult ground to get a result. As Jonson Clarke-Harris nodded in a Brandon Mason cross just after half-time, there looked perhaps to be a developing cohesion with the physical presence and mobility of Clarke-Harris up front adding a missing dimension to the side.

A familiar issue over the opening weeks of the season began to rear its head as the side tired towards the closing stages and allowed Gillingham into the game. That dip in energy levels was punished when Jack Grimmer was caught flat-footed at right-back by Gillingham's Elliot List as the winger scored an impressive goal to earn his side a share of the points.

With the loan window closing the following week, Mark Robins finally secured his man in attack in Conor Chaplin, having seemingly moved on from him via the additions of Amadou Bakayoko and Jordy Hiwula in the weeks prior. Along with the addition of the dynamic Derby County winger Luke Thomas, it suddenly left the squad looking stacked in attacking areas – albeit, seemingly in quantity rather than quality.

Rochdale
League One
01/09/18
Score: 0-1
Scorer: None

With the squad now finally in place, the following home game against Rochdale looked to be something of a reboot for the season.

The first-half was promising enough as the Sky Blues created numerous chances to take the lead. However, that failure to put the ball in the net was swiftly punished in the second-half as Rochdale took the lead and were able to easily see the game out – something that would become a continuing theme at the Ricoh Arena over the course of the season.

Ahead of a Sky TV clash with fellow slow-starters Oxford United, it felt like the start of the season was approaching a key turning point. A defeat – considering a difficult run of fixtures ahead against several of the promotion favourites – would likely place us in a relegation battle for the opening few months of the campaign, a victory would stave off that threat for a few games at least.

Against a strong-looking Oxford United side, the opening stages of the game played out in a predictable manner as the U's dominated possession and stretched our back-line. Although the Sky Blues carried a threat on the counter, forwards Luke Thomas and Conor Chaplin spurned good chances in the first-half, with Oxford looking likeliest to make the breakthrough.

A heavily deflected goal from a Jordan Shipley strike proved the game's decisive moment. All of a sudden, Oxford's domination of possession looked tame and sterile, while the Sky Blues were looking comfortable holding fort and dangerous on the counter.

Jordan Shipley then made another decisive contribution, forcing Oxford's goalkeeper, Jonathan Mitchell, into a rash challenge in his penalty area after challenging for a loose ball and winning a penalty.

As Conor Chaplin confidently converted the spot-kick to secure the three points, it completed the kind of solid, if unspectacular, win that had helped win promotion the previous season – albeit, with Jon Obika's late consolation goal making the closing stages relatively panicky – this was perhaps an indication that we were starting to settle into life in League One.

Oxford United
League One
09/09/18
Score: 2-1
Scorer: Own Goal, Chaplin



Hitting Our Stride

Arsenal Under-21

Football League Trophy

12/09/18

Score: 0-3

Scorer: None

A surprising, if inconsequential, defeat at home in the Checkatrade Trophy to a young Arsenal side boasting the talents of Joe Willock, Emile Smith-Rowe and Eddie Nketiah – who would go on to play for the first-team later in the season – came before we faced our next game, at home to a Barnsley side that had started the season in imperious form.

In an energetic first half performance against a Barnsley side perhaps playing below the standard they had set in previous weeks; the Sky Blues failed to take advantage and move into a deserved lead. Conor Chaplin in particular was the guiltiest of missing big chances, although he had a strike disallowed seemingly incorrectly in the second-half for offside.

Barnsley

League One

15/09/18

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Willis

Just when fans were reflecting that a point against a strong Barnsley side was a decent result at this stage of the season, Jordan Willis pounced on a Junior Brown nod-back from a set-piece to secure all three points and banish any doubt that the step-up in quality would be too much for this side.

It was with this confidence with which we travelled to Bristol Rovers and dominated much of the early stages of the game. While we again lacked a killer touch,

Bristol Rovers
League One
22/09/18
Score: 1-3
Scorer: Hyam

there was every reason to believe this would be a game we would win regardless of that deficiency.

However, this was a game that was soon to be defined by the horror showing of young Chelsea loanee Dujon Sterling at right-back.

Having arrived at the club in the summer with a big reputation as an England youth international and with first-team experience with Chelsea under his belt, Sterling had not only underwhelmed as a footballer but had epitomised the loss of identity of the team in taking Jack Grimmer's right-back spot.

With there being a suspicion that the club were forced to play Sterling due to a preferential clause in his loan contract, three defensive lapses in the Bristol Rovers game to hand the game to a struggling opponent hardly helped his cause.

As the division's big boys, Sunderland, prepared to raid the Ricoh Arena with a considerable travelling hoard, there was a nervousness that this side wasn't equipped at this stage to stand the pressure of possibly the biggest home game of the season.

In a first half broken up by injuries sustained by both teams, it was Sunderland who struck the first blow when defensive midfielder Lee Cattermole ghosted into the penalty area to give the Black Cats the lead and send their bumper away following into raucous celebration.

It was hard to see the Sky Blues getting back into the game from that point, but it was the reviled Dujon Sterling – forced to play out of position at left-back – who forced the equaliser, demonstrating a tremendous turn of pace to pounce on a defensive error and tee up Jonson Clarke-Harris for an equalising goal.

The game then became a frantic cat and mouse between Sunderland's domination of possession and the Sky Blues' threat on the counter. Lee Burge made an excellent save from Sunderland's George Honeyman late-on, before Conor Chaplin was sent through one-on-one with Sunderland's goalkeeper Jon McLaughlin.

If ever there was a moment for the summer's big signing to announce himself as a Sky Blue hero, this

Sunderland
League One
29/08/18
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Clarke-Harris

was it. However, Chaplin's effort was cleared off the line and the game finished 1-1.

Once again, our finishing had prevented the season from truly taking-off. Still, it was early enough in the campaign to feel that players would become more clinical as their confidence and understanding within the side developed – after all, Marc McNulty had endured a horrifically slow start to life at Coventry City the previous year.

Portsmouth
League One
02/10/18
Score: 0-1
Scorer: None

That sense of our finishing being our biggest weakness was further underlined during a dull home defeat to league leaders Portsmouth, with Jonson Clarke-Harris the one to fluff a one-on-one chance this time around, which rendered an excellent strike from Portsmouth's Ronan Curtis just before half-time the game's decisive goal.

As Charlton Athletic were running rings around us in the first-half at The Valley the following Saturday, concerns were rising that the confidence of the side was being drained by our poor finishing. Although it was only a Lyle Taylor penalty that separated the two sides, there was a clear gulf in quality and belief on display.

The second-half followed a similar pattern as Charlton dominated without quite finding a second goal that would wrap up the points. A double change from Mark Robins in introducing Jordy Hiwula and Amadou Bakayoko – both of whom had been well down the pecking order in recent weeks – seemed like a desperate move to coax something out of the team.

The changes proved to be slow-acting, at first, they did nothing, but then they completely changed the balance of the game. Jordy Hiwula's pace and directness on the wing began to stretch a tiring Charlton defence, which meant that Amadou Bakayoko was able to do what few believed he was capable of doing, score goals.

With less than ten minutes to go, Luke Thomas was played into space and crossed for Bakayoko to tap-in from inside the six-yard box. It felt scarcely deserved, less down to ourselves and more down to Charlton's failure to kill-off the game.

Even more remarkably, the game was then completely turned on its head when Conor Chaplin and Jordy

Charlton Athletic

League One

06/10/18

Score: 2-1

Scorer: Bakayoko (2)

Hiwula combined down the left flank for the former to plant a cross onto a diving Bakayoko's head and spark scenes of dazed delirium in the away end as Sky Blues fans attempted to acknowledge the absurdity of one of the most remarkable, unexpected and frankly undeserved comebacks from their side in recent years.

Forest Green Rovers

Football League Trophy

09/10/18

Score: 1-1 (4-2 on Pens)

Scorer: Hiwula

With a Checkatrade Trophy penalty shoot-out victory over Forest Green Rovers sandwiched between that Charlton win and a rare opportunity at that stage of the season to take on a side we were expected to beat in Wycombe Wanderers, there was a sense that we could start to look to build momentum in what had been a stop-start season up until that point.

The expectation of victory against a Wycombe Wanderers side that had clearly set their stalls out to hang onto anything they could get seemed to drag the side down. Almost all of the team's victories thus far had been against stronger opponents who had come out to attack us, Wycombe were posing the opposite challenge and were looking like successfully obtaining the point they had come for.

Wycombe Wanderers

League One

13/10/18

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Chaplin

That was until Dujon Sterling further underlined his newfound confidence at right-back as he, almost casually, marched up the right flank in the closing stages of the game and expertly placed a cross onto the head of Conor Chaplin – one of the shortest players on the pitch – to ensure the Sky Blues got the win they deserved – a late hooked volley from the underwhelming former Sky Blues keeper Ryan Allsop notwithstanding.

The growing confidence of this team was in full flow at Southend as the players rallied from a controversially disallowed header from Tom Davies that had appeared to have crossed the line as Jordy Hiwula netted from another corner-kick routine soon after to give the Sky Blues the lead their control of the first-half deserved.

The game looked set to be playing out in comfortable fashion for Mark Robins' side, before a lapse in Jordan Willis' concentration allowed Tom Hopper to pull Southend level. With time running out, it looked set to be a frustrating point, especially when Mark Robins withdrew strikers in Jordy Hiwula and Conor Chaplin in favour of midfielders Jordan Shipley and Jodi Jones.

Southend United

League One

20/10/18

Score: 2-1

Scorer: Hiwula, Own Goal

Those changes proved to be inspired as Jodi Jones, returning to the side after nearly a year out with a serious injury, saw his effort heavily deflected into the back of the Southend net in stoppage time. A third win in a row and a third late winner in a row with goals coming from different scorers on each occasion.

Usually, three wins in a row tends to be the high-water mark for Coventry City sides over the past decade or so. Even as we prepared to face a struggling Bradford City side, there was a sense that this run was slightly too good to be true, that this was a somewhat limited side playing to the absolute maximum of its ability.

As the Sky Blues moved comfortably into a two-goal lead early on at Valley Parade, expectations of just what this side was capable of were starting to be reassessed. First, Jonson Clarke-Harris nodded in a corner-kick – an area we were becoming increasingly strong in – to put us ahead, then Conor Chaplin scored a spectacular free-kick to encapsulate the increasing confidence and belief within the Sky Blues' ranks.

Bradford rallied for the rest of the first-half but were looking to be held comfortably at arm's length. They were then second-best for much of the opening period of the second-half, until they claimed a goal back from their defender Anthony O'Connor, who fortuitously backheeled a cross into the back of the net.

As nerves started to fray, Conor Chaplin sent Jordy Hiwula through on goal as we counter-attacked from a corner-kick and the former Bradford forward's blistering pace was too hot to handle, putting him in the blink of an eye in position to clip a finish into the back of the net to seemingly kill the home side off.

The game really looked to be up when Tom Bayliss rolled the clock back to May 2018 as he pea-rolled in a deflected effort from outside the penalty area to make it 4-1.

Somehow, the drama continued, as Bradford again got lucky with a hopeful effort from defender Anthony O'Connor and soon built a head of steam. Bradford hopes of an unlikely comeback rose when their forward George Miller bundled in an effort that would have made it 4-3, but the Sky Blue panic was quickly quelled when the referee adjudged Miller to have

Bradford City

League One

23/10/18

Score: 4-2

Scorer: Clarke-Harris,
Chaplin, Hiwula,
Bayliss

handled the ball and showed him a second yellow card.

Although the game had ended nervily, it was a thoroughly deserved victory at what had typically been a difficult place for Coventry City to win at. A fourth win in a row put us to within a point of the play-offs and, for the first time this season, had fans starting to believe that we could genuinely challenge for the top six.

The following game against fellow play-off contenders Doncaster Rovers would be an acid test of this side's form and quality as we sought to win five league games in a row for the first time in 20 years.

A strong first-half performance was capped off by Jordy Hiwula and Luke Thomas scoring spectacular efforts as Doncaster tried to clear our threatening set-pieces.

The full extent of that two-goal cushion was required as Mark Robins grew increasingly negative over the course of the second-half, replacing the defensive midfielder Liam Kelly for an attacking one in Tom Bayliss, then a central midfielder in Abu Ogogo for the attacking wide forward Jordy Hiwula, and then a striker in Conor Chaplin for winger Jodi Jones.

Doncaster Rovers

League One

27/10/18

Score: 2-1

Scorer: Hiwula, Thomas

Doncaster pulled a goal back in the 69th minute during a period in which we were penned back in our own half. They maintained that dominance of the game for the rest of the contest but were unable to make it count as we held on for an incredible fifth league win in a row.



Hitting A Wall

Five league wins in a row was an incredible achievement, six in a row, in the same season, would match a club record set in 1907-08. Perhaps more remarkable was that this was not a particularly swashbuckling or dominant Coventry City side, simply one where players were sticking to their roles, winning their individual battles, and surfing those tight margins to victory.

Starting from Lee Burge in goal putting together his best run of form since breaking into the first-team, a solid back four of the increasingly confident Dujon Sterling at right-back, all three of our centre-backs seeming to form effective partnerships despite occasional injuries preventing a settled centre-back pairing forming, and the experience and manic energy of Junior Brown at left-back.

With Michael Doyle not only protecting the defence but setting the tempo with his passing and delivering of some telling set-pieces, it allowed Tom Bayliss the platform to push forward and get into areas where he could hurt the opposition. On either flank, there was an attacking threat from the energy and skill of Luke Thomas on the right and the pace of Jordy Hiwula on the left.

In attack, Jonson Clarke-Harris and Conor Chaplin were working hard and seemingly opening up space for their team-mates, even if they were yet to hit prolific form in front of goal.

Even if this run wasn't going to last, the sense that this team was yet to truly demonstrated what it was fully capable of was fuelling the sense that the play-offs were an increasingly realistic proposition.

When the run finally came to an end, in a home game at the start of November against Accrington Stanley, it did so in a relatively encouraging fashion against opponents who had firmly schooled us on two occasions the previous season. After a bright first-half showing, it was Stanley who took the lead slightly against the run of play as they pounced on a loose Michael Doyle pass.

Accrington Stanley

League One

03/11/18

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Doyle

Whereas a typical Coventry City side would have folded against determined and physical opposition after falling behind at home, this side stuck at it and earned an equaliser when Michael Doyle turned in a weak parry from Accrington Stanley's otherwise impressive goalkeeper Connor Ripley to earn a share of the points.

A trip in the FA Cup to struggling semi-local rivals Walsall looked set to be an opportunity to recapture the cup glory that had taken us to the Fifth-Round last season, with a large travelling contingent expecting the Sky Blues to build on recent form.

Despite the Sky Blues starting the stronger of the two sides, it was Walsall who took the lead after pouncing on some loose defending in the penalty area. Things went from bad to worse when the youngster Jordon Thompson sent a soft header back towards Lee Burge, failing to notice Walsall's winger Josh Ginnelly – born in Coventry – breathing down his shoulder, ready to pounce on the mistake to make it 2-0 for his side.

With the game looking to have slipped through our fingers before we could find a rhythm, it was a loose back-pass from Walsall that allowed us a route back into the game, with Jonson Clarke-Harris racing through on goal and slotting past Liam Roberts in the Walsall goal to halve the deficit.

Walsall
FA Cup
10/11/18
Score: 2-3
Scorer: Clarke-Harris,
Thomas

The turnaround had seemingly been completed when Luke Thomas' weak effort trickled under Roberts, cueing scenes of delirium in a packed away end as the Sky Blues yet again pulled a result back from a losing position.

Strangely, the momentum of the game swung back in Walsall's favour after the equaliser as they quickly built a head of steam and scored the game's winning goal as their right-back Nicky Devlin smashed home a powerful effort to hand the Saddlers the final say in the game.

Although exiting the FA Cup was a disappointment, it wasn't necessarily a huge blow to the momentum of the campaign, it merely placed the emphasis back on the league.

Cheltenham Town
Football League Trophy
13/11/18
Score: 0-2
Scorer: None

That was especially the case after a youthful Coventry City side limped out of the Checkatrade Trophy to a more experienced Cheltenham Town side the following Tuesday.

Those cup exits would look particularly inconsequential were the Sky Blues to return to winning ways as they returned to league action away to a mid-table Burton Albion side, with a top six position well within our grasp.

In the event, the Brewers were the dominant side in the contest with the Sky Blues only posing a threat on the counter via the dynamic Tom Bayliss and Luke Thomas.

Burton Albion
League One
17/11/18
Score: 0-1
Scorer: None

With Luke Thomas missing a big chance in the first-half, Burton were able to take a lead they never looked like surrendering when Jordan Willis diverted a free-kick somewhat unfortunately into his own net.

The winning run over, out of the cups, and now no longer unbeaten, we appeared to have hit a wall. However, we were also level on points with sixth place after 18 games. This was a side still in a very good position with plenty of the season left.

A familiar theme of being unable to take our chances almost proved to be our undoing against a languidly dangerous Peterborough United side in a Friday night game at the Ricoh Arena.

When another loose Michael Doyle pass allowed the opposition to skip through on goal – this time in the game's 90th minute – this team demonstrated once

Peterborough United

League One

23/11/18

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Chaplin

again a strong mentality to score straight from the resulting kick-off, with Amadou Bakayoko teeing Conor Chaplin up for a tap-in.

Things nearly got even better when Tom Bayliss danced through the Peterborough midfield, but couldn't find a final pass and the game ended in a reasonable, but disappointing, draw against strong opposition.

Fleetwood Town

League One

27/11/18

Score: 0-3

Scorer: None

It was to be the following game in which the Sky Blues were most cruelly punished for their poor finishing. After multiple good chances against Fleetwood in the first-half for Jordy Hiwula and Luke Thomas, our opponents rattled in three unanswered goals in the second-half to knock the stuffing out of our young side. The night and drained confidence in front of goal was summed up late-on when Conor Chaplin blazed a penalty for a consolation goal over the cross-bar.

Poor finishing was fast becoming the story of the season. Mark Robins' gambit over the summer of replacing a star striker in Marc McNulty with three middling-to-mediocre players in Amadou Bakayoko, Conor Chaplin and Jordy Hiwula looked to have been misguided. With players from midfield such as Tom Bayliss and Luke Thomas not stepping up with goals either, we were looking rather toothless. Only once had this side scored more than two goals in a game, meaning that there was an increasing sense that any goals conceded would translate to dropped points.

Something needed to change, which led Mark Robins to make the bold decision to drop his captain Michael Doyle – who was becoming increasingly error-prone and immobile – and switch from a 4-4-2 to a 4-3-3 system as we travelled again to Walsall, as we also sought revenge for that dramatic defeat in the FA Cup a month prior.

Those changes looked to have been justified when Luke Thomas capped off a dominant first-half by turning in a Junior Brown cross into the back of the net after being given time and space in the Walsall penalty area.

The first of two decisive moments came when Jonson Clarke-Harris was played through on goal in the second-half and drilled a powerful effort agonisingly past the far post.

Walsall
League One
08/12/18
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Thomas

The second decisive moment was a rare error, up until that point of the campaign, from Lee Burge as he was beaten to a long punt forward to allow Luke Leahy – another Coventry-born Walsall player – to equalise in the first minute of stoppage time.

Those two points dropped became three as Walsall's Nicky Devlin took a tumble in the penalty area in the final minute of stoppage time to allow Leahy and Walsall to win the game and secure the bragging rights in what was becoming an increasingly heated local derby.

It was a cruel blow which particularly appeared to haunt the previously confident and commanding Lee Burge for the rest of the campaign. From that point onwards, Burge's form and confidence in goal almost completely deteriorated.

Taking into account the cup games, this was now seven games without a win. A remarkably sudden reversal in fortune for a side that had recently won five in a row. There really is no room for resting on one's laurels in football.

Luton Town
League One
15/12/18
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Clarke-Harris

As Luton Town marched to a confident victory at the Ricoh Arena, seven became eight, as the Sky Blues looked increasingly like a side that no longer believed it could win.

Shrewsbury Town
League One
22/12/18
Score: 0-1
Scorer: None

Eight was then nine – and a fourth defeat in a row – when Shrewsbury's Aaron Holloway nodded home a set-piece to hand his side a vital three points in their relegation battle. If this continued much longer, we would be joining Shrewsbury in that scrap.



Hitting Another Wall

If there was to be a turnaround, it looked like it would have to wait until after the Boxing Day visit of a well-oiled Charlton Athletic side that had gone from strength-to-strength since Amadou Bakayoko's brace at The Valley two short months ago.

With Mark Robins making yet another re-adjustment of his starting line-up – most notably, dumping Junior Brown at left-back and pairing Jordy Hiwula with Conor Chaplin in attack – the Sky Blues were surprisingly energetic and convincing in the first-half, with Hiwula heading in a Chaplin cross to make it 1-0.

That one goal never looked like being enough, underlined by Charlton equalising matters via a set-piece – something looking increasingly like an area of weakness from the side – early in the second-half.

What was set to be a disappointing but possibly fair draw was changed late-on when Tom Bayliss strode forward into the box to turn in a Luke Thomas pass and end the nine-game winless streak.

It was a performance and victory that appeared to give the side the shot in the arm it was in desperate need of. The following home game against Southend

Charlton Athletic

League One
26/12/18
Score: 2-1
Scorer: Hiwula, Bayliss

Southend United

League One

29/12/18

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Hiwula

United fixture three days later saw a confident Sky Blues control much of the proceedings.

Although the side lacked the penetration that the injured Luke Thomas provided on the right side of midfield, the points were deservedly secured via a slick passing move early in the second-half with Tom Bayliss sending Jordy Hiwula clean through to score the game's only goal.

The revitalised mood around the team was epitomised further during a routine away victory at Wycombe Wanderers to start off 2019.

During an even first-half, Dujon Sterling was felled in the penalty area by a clumsy Wycombe challenge, which allowed Conor Chaplin step up to the spot and convert the penalty with a level of confidence that had been absent just over a month ago at Fleetwood in his previous spot-kick.

Wycombe Wanderers

League One

01/01/19

Score: 2-0

Scorer: Chaplin,
Clarke-Harris

With there being little sign of Wycombe getting back into the game, Jonson Clarke-Harris was slipped through on goal by Tom Bayliss and converted a powerful finish past Ryan Allsop in the Wycombe goal – almost a carbon copy of his glaring miss against Walsall, this time with a different end result.

From looking completely devoid of confidence and of even a plan a few short games ago, the Sky Blues had quickly settled back into a winning formula. From the season slipping away to now being able to look forward to what the rest of the campaign had in store.

Scunthorpe United

League One

05/01/19

Score: 1-2

Scorer: Chaplin

An away trip to a struggling Scunthorpe United held little fear, but the loss of Liam Kelly in central midfield highlighted the influence that our new captain now exerted on our performance levels. As Michael Doyle laboured across the pitch at Glanford Park, a physical yet limited Scunthorpe side started to eye a route to victory, scoring two goals from outside of the area in quick succession to render a poacher's effort from Conor Chaplin a mere consolation.

It was a blow, but with Liam Kelly returning to the side for a home game against rock-bottom AFC Wimbledon, there was the opportunity to return immediately to winning ways ahead of a presentable run of fixtures on the horizon as we looked to re-assert ourselves in the play-off race.

AFC Wimbledon

League One

12/01/19

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Thomas

That optimism was quickly punctured when AFC Wimbledon's Jake Jervis scrambled in a goal after just 72 seconds – his second goal in 12 months – with the game then becoming impotent Sky Blues attacking versus determined Dons defending.

The familiar issue of poor decision-making and execution in the final third was rearing its head once again, made tougher by AFC Wimbledon packing the penalty area with defenders and throwing bodies on the line in grim desperation – rarely even making the impression of a side that was looking to add to its lead.

As desperation gave way to frustration, Luke Thomas' hopeful effort deflected past AFC Wimbledon's Aaron Ramsdale – with Conor Chaplin cheekily attempting to claim the goal for himself – to level matters.

The Sky Blues nearly completed their first come-from-behind victory at the Ricoh Arena in over two-and-a-half years when Tom Bayliss was sent clean through on goal with a minute remaining, squared to an open Jordy Hiwula, who then stumbled, gave the ball back to Bayliss, who was then tackled by the keeper, the ball landed back to Hiwula, who agonisingly spooned his shot wide of a gaping goal. A period of play that encapsulated the attacking incompetence of this Sky Blue vintage.

By the time we took on Plymouth Argyle, the feeling of revitalisation was beginning to slip away. A win would put things straight, but a defeat could place us almost equally as close to the relegation zone as the play-offs with the league season beginning to approach a key phase.

With the maverick new loan signing from Wolves, Bright Enobakhare, dominating the first 45 minutes, the only thing stopping the Sky Blues from running away with the contest was our utter inability to convert the chances that were being created.

That profligacy didn't seem like mattering when Conor Chaplin curled in a superb free-kick 10 minutes after half-time to make it 1-0 against a Plymouth side that had shown very little in an attacking or defensive sense.

The game was completely turned on its head by Argyle's Ruben lameiras, a former Sky Blue, as he

Plymouth Argyle

League One

19/01/19

Score: 1-2

Scorer: Chaplin

benefited from uncertain defending to curl in an equaliser from a ridiculously acute angle. Lameiras then produced another laser-guided finish as he latched onto a poor clearance from a corner to put Argyle ahead completely against the run of play.

Although the quality of performances had remained consistently dominant, the lack of confidence and decisiveness in front of goal was looking like killing our play-off hopes and could even see us among the relegation strugglers if it continued much longer.

Conor Chaplin – although on a run of three goals in four appearances – was showing little sign of becoming the confident goalscorer that his predecessor Marc McNulty had become after a similarly difficult start to the previous season.

Chaplin's failure to develop a killer instinct in front of goal was epitomised as he missed a big chance to equalise against Plymouth late-on and then a complete sitter in another completely one-way first-half in the following game, at home to a Blackpool side that failed to register a shot in the opening 45 minutes.

Somewhat predictably, Blackpool were able to take advantage of our profligacy, as another former Sky Blue, Nathan Delfouneso, nodded in a simple finish from a set-piece. Before the home fans could really get over the shock of an away side that had been so utterly second-best scoring from their first shot on goal, Blackpool added another from their second shot, when Dominic Hyam misread a long punt forward and was then outmuscled by Blackpool's giant centre-forward Armand Gnanduillet.

As unlucky as our performances over this spell had been, the lack of fluency and decisiveness in attack was starting to cause problems for our defence. It placed immense pressure on the side to keep clean sheets knowing that just one lapse in concentration would almost certainly cost us points.

That fragility was certainly on display as the Sky Blues once again dominated the following home game against a struggling Gillingham side, but were only able to take the lead after an incredible pitch-length run from Bright Enobakhare set Amadou Bakayoko to

Blackpool

League One

26/01/19

Score: 0-2

Scorer: None

Gillingham
League One
02/02/19
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Enobakhare

hit a tame effort that was saved but landed fortunately back into the path of Enobakhare to power home.

That one-goal lead never looked decisive, particularly with such a young side that began to fire over the course of the 90 minutes.

The defence eventually cracked under the pressure of their drained belief and energy when Jordan Willis made the wrong decision to head a back-pass to Lee Burge with Gillingham's Brandon Hanlan waiting with glee behind him. As the forward raced through, our keeper was almost forced to bring him down, allowing Gillingham's Tom Eaves to register a late equaliser from the spot after a long pause as Burge was treated for an injury.

Playing well and not winning can be acceptable for a short period, but this was now an extended period of failing to convert dominance into goals and points, clearly impacting the confidence of the team. With the side now positioned one point closer to the relegation zone than the play-offs, it looked like it was time for results to take precedence over performances.



Hitting Another Stride

Few were confident that an away trip to a Rochdale side whom we had never beaten at their Spotland home would represent the positive turning-point of the season that was required.

Heading into the game, Mark Robins was forced to draft in an emergency loan goalkeeper in Birmingham City's David Stockdale – who had spent much of the season training with Blues' youth-squad after being frozen out reportedly for budgetary reasons.

In the event, a keeper of the experience and calibre of Stockdale wasn't really required as Rochdale were surprisingly powderpuff and lacking in ideas – especially when compared to their previous iterations that had bloodied Sky Blues noses on multiple occasions in recent years. The only problem was that the Sky Blues weren't playing much better either.

Rochdale
League One
09/02/19
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Hiwula

Mid-way through the second-half, Jordy Hiwula raced onto an Amadou Bakayoko flick-on to score the game's winning goal. It was hardly the most convincing of performances but one to stave off the tension for another week or so.

A third clash of the season against a Walsall side that had taken great delight in twice beating us in

dramatic circumstances earlier in the campaign looked set to be another home game against a determined defensive side against whom we would have problems opening up.

The decidedly non-prolific former Walsall striker Amadou Bakayoko took this game as an opportunity to demonstrate to his former employers just what they were missing with an energetic and bustling performances in attack – exactly the qualities that we had been missing for much of the season – capped off with a thumping header from a Dujon Sterling cross to put the Sky Blues in the lead. From that point onwards, it looked like being our day.

The second goal came from another former Walsall player as Jordy Hiwula again demonstrated his devastating pace as he left Walsall's defender Jack Fitzwater on the floor to move clear on goal and finish calmly to make it 2-0 and put us in control of the contest.

In contrast to our previous meetings with Walsall, there was absolutely no spirit to their performance as they accepted defeat, mustering just one shot on David Stockdale's goal. It was a case of how many more we wanted to win by.

Walsall

League One

16/02/19

Score: 3-0

Scorer: Bakayoko,
Hiwula, Enobakhare

The answer to that question was three. It came from the penalty spot as Bright Enobakhare tempted the Walsall defence into tripping him up and he slotted home the resulting spot-kick to seal a most convincing victory.

It was just the second win of the season by more than one goal and the first such win at the Ricoh Arena. If this was a sign that Mark Robins' revamp of the squad and style of play post Michael Doyle's departure from the starting XI was finally paying-off, Sky Blues fans could look forward to the rest of the season with optimism.

That optimism and nascent cohesion would be put under the microscope during a much tougher test than recent games, away at runaway league leaders Luton Town.

The opening stages of the game proved to be a reminder of just how far away this Sky Blues side still was from reaching the level of the best teams in the

division. Luton's pressing and purpose in possession made us look ponderous and sloppy, with that pressure eventually telling as the Hatters took the lead from a poorly-defended corner – with the fit-again Lee Burge in goal inevitably, and harshly, taking the blame.

The momentum of the game flipped on its head when Amadou Bakayoko chased a loose ball that Luton's goalkeeper James Shea was favourite to win. Bakayoko's pace caught Shea off-guard leading to what proved on the television replays to be a clear foul that should have resulted in a penalty.

That moment suddenly made an imperious Luton Town side look fallible, with the Sky Blues then taking more risks in pushing forward, which soon led to an equaliser as Jordy Hiwula's pace and skill once again cut through an opposition defence as he teed Jordan Shipley up to level the game.

That momentum continued until half-time, before Luton regained control over a tiring Sky Blues side who appeared to have settled for the point they were now holding onto for dear life.

Luton Town
League One
24/02/19
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Shipley

That provided Lee Burge with the opportunity to demonstrate his worth in goal, pulling off some important saves – including one from point-blank in stoppage time – to earn the side the point, further engendering the sense that the Sky Blues were now on an upwards curve.

An away trip to Accrington Stanley looked set to be another test of this side's mettle. In the event though, Stanley were rather toothless and devoid of the purpose they had shown in recent meetings against us.

Accrington Stanley
League One
02/03/19
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Enobakhare

In a similar performance to the recent away trip to Rochdale, the Sky Blues looked similarly unlikely to make the breakthrough, only for the improving Bright Enobakhare to curl home an excellent effort from just outside the penalty area to decide the game.

With a five-point gap from the play-offs but with momentum increasingly on our side, a home game against Burton Albion seemed like a further opportunity to put wind in our sails and pressure on the top six.

The realisation that there was suddenly something to play for in a season that had looked like petering out as recently as a few weeks ago seemed to burden our

young side with pressure, leading to a sloppiness that an energetic and well-organised Burton Albion were only too keen to prey upon.

It was little surprise when Burton capitalised on sloppy defending to race in behind our defence and tee up their make-shift centre-forward Lucas Akins for a tap-in.

The Sky Blues, somewhat surprisingly, lacked any flow or confidence in their play having looked so convincing and in control in recent wins. Any pressure that we mounted only served to provide Burton further opportunities to hit us on the counter-attack, with half-time arriving with the score fortunately at only 1-0.

An encouraging rally came at the start of the second-half as the Sky Blues played on the front foot and soon levelled via good play between Tom Bayliss and Luke Thomas with the former putting the ball into the back of the net.

As Luke Thomas then raced through on goal swiftly after that equaliser, it looked set to be a long-awaited come-from-behind win at the Ricoh Arena. In a depressingly familiar manner by this stage of the season, Thomas deliberated over his finish for too long and missed the target.

Before we knew it, the game then slipped away from us as Bright Enobakhare picked up a red card for a second bookable offence and soon after Lee Burge under-hit a clearance right into the path of Burton's Jamie Allen who lobbed the Sky Blues keeper, underlining Burge's complete loss of form in recent months.

Just when hope was starting to build, a nervous defeat appeared to confirm that this side was not quite ready to make the step-up required to make it into the play-off positions.

As Fleetwood Town travelled to the Ricoh Arena the following Tuesday with injuries and suspensions forcing Mark Robins into naming a makeshift side with the youngster Morgan Williams handed a debut at centre-back, it appeared that our play-off hopes were set to be delivered a decisive blow.

Optimism was in particularly short supply as Fleetwood dominated the contest from the very first minute. Somehow, Amadou Bakayoko managed to open the

Burton Albion
League One
08/03/19
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Bayliss

Fleetwood Town
League One
12/03/19
Score: 2-1
Scorer: Bakayoko,
Hiwula

scoring for the Sky Blues in a truly bizarre manner as he demonstrated once again his desire to chase loose balls, this time tackling Fleetwood's goalkeeper Alex Cairns as he attempted a clearance from a back-pass, with the ball dribbling into the back of the net at a perpendicular angle to Bakayoko's momentum.

The freakish goal did little to alter the pattern of the game as Fleetwood dusted themselves off and proceeded to further exert their dominance over proceedings with the Sky Blues barely able to get out of their own half. When that increasingly familiar deficiency in defending set-pieces provided Fleetwood with a deserved equaliser, it appeared that our fortune had expired.

The game's winning goal, just before half-time, was in stark contrast to the fluky manner of Amadou Bakayoko's opener. Jordy Hiwula picked up the ball around the half-way line and drifted past the Fleetwood defence with a sudden surge of pace and skill, before curling the ball spectacularly into the top corner from just inside the penalty area. A goal worthy of winning any game, and so it proved in a gutsy but solid defensive showing in the second-half.

With fellow play-off contenders Peterborough United next up, there was an opportunity to further build on this victory and assert ourselves in the play-off race. With key players returning from injuries, suspensions, and traffic – Liam Kelly had missed the previous game after misjudging his commute from Milton Keynes – Mark Robins could name his strongest team again.

It wasn't enough to prevent Peterborough from completely dominating the first half of the game, with the mercurial Marcus Maddison running proceedings from a free role. The Sky Blues defence was constantly stretched, with Lee Burge having to be at his best to make a key save from Peterborough's Matt Godden when the striker was played clean through by Maddison.

In a rare foray into Peterborough's half, Luke Thomas slipped Amadou Bakayoko through with an expertly-weighted pass for the striker to produce a finish of remarkable composure and poise given the complete lack of it he had demonstrated for much of the season.

As the teams emerged for the second-half, it was apparent that Peterborough had been completely knocked out of their rhythm by that blow.

On an incredibly windy March afternoon, a long Lee Burge goal-kick caught the Posh defence off-guard, with Bright Enobakhare sent clean through on goal for a composed and accurate finish.

An off-rhythm Peterborough United became a Peterborough United in complete disarray as the energetic and skilful Sky Blues forward line found themselves in behind almost at will. On one such occasion, Peterborough's Jason Naismith committed a cynical foul on Luke Thomas as he was set to race through on goal, from the resulting free-kick Liam Kelly rattled the cross-bar and Amadou Bakayoko poked home the rebound only for the assistant referee to almost mercifully, in the face of Peterborough's collapse, disallow the goal for an incredibly soft foul.

As the Sky Blues mounted even more pressure on Peterborough's ragged defence, Posh midfielder Lee Tomlin lazily swung a leg high in the penalty area as Luke Thomas attempted to control the ball with his head, striking the winger on the eye socket and leading to a nine-minute delay to proceedings for the referee to stew on a decision not to award a penalty-kick right in front of a baying away end.

The delay did little to reverse the momentum of the game, the entire pitch seemed to be sloping towards Peterborough's goal – aided by the prevailing wind on the day – but the rampant away side were unable to press home their advantage further.

During the 12 minutes of stoppage time, Peterborough mustered a fortunate consolation goal as a hopeful effort from outside the penalty area as the Sky Blues defended a corner-kick took a heavy deflection past Lee Burge in the Coventry City goal. It did little to alter the impression of this being a thoroughly convincing away victory – in the second-half especially – for the Sky Blues.

As the exuberant away support gleefully reflected at full-time, this was a side that was now genuinely in the play-off hunt.

Peterborough United

League One

16/03/19

Score: 2-1

Scorer: Bakayoko,
Enobakhare

After an agonising wait for things to click into gear, this side was now looking like a well-oiled and effective team-unit.

From a solid defensive line that had the pace of Jordan Willis to allow it to push forward and the composure of Dominic Hyam – who had miraculously recovered from a recent, serious car-crash – to bring the ball out of defence.

Liam Kelly in central midfield not only protected that back four with composure but his passing provided the platform for the five attack-minded players ahead of him to strut their stuff.

There was no longer pressure on just Tom Bayliss and Luke Thomas to make things happen as the January loan signing of Bright Enobakhare in the attacking midfield position added to the creativity of the side. With Jordy Hiwula and Amadou Bakayoko pacey forwards who were finding form, this was a forward line with the ability to be devastating at their very best.

Whether we would make the play-offs or not, there was now something to chase heading into the final weeks of the season.



Sixth-Place Dangling

With some difficult away games to see out the season, it appeared that our hopes of finishing in sixth-place would rest upon our ability to put away opposition below us in the table at home, with some presentable fixtures at the Ricoh Arena lying in wait.

During a bright opening five minutes in the first of those presentable fixtures, against an Oxford United side still in the relegation battle, the front four of Amadou Bakayoko, Luke Thomas, Bright Enobakhare and Jordy Hiwula buzzed around the pitch with determination and purpose. This looked a supremely confident side that had just clicked into gear.

The Sky Blues were soon sucked into the scrappy contest that Oxford United were determined to turn the game into. Ironically, a complete reversal of roles from the meeting between the two sides back in September that Oxford had dominated in toothless fashion.

It was becoming clear that the game would be defined by the opening goal, with it increasingly likely that it was to be Oxford who would get it. The weakness from set-pieces was once again exposed as Oxford United's centre-back Curtis Nelson bundled home a corner.

Oxford United

League One
23/03/19
Score: 0-1
Scorer: None

Barnsley

League One
30/03/19
Score: 2-2
Scorer: Hiwula, Thomas

Bristol Rovers

League One
07/04/19
Score: 0-0
Scorer: None

Just when things looked to have changed for the better for this side, it was a snap back to reality with another failure to break through an organised and determined away side at home.

That the Sky Blues earned a creditable draw away at a rampant Barnsley side the following week felt like scant consolation for a season that now looked to have slipped away from us.

Any lingering hopes of making the play-offs looked to have been killed-off in a 0-0 draw against another relegation struggler at the Ricoh Arena in Bristol Rovers.

In a game that was there for us to win against an opponent that demonstrated little attacking ambition, the best chance of the game fell to the feet of centre-back Dominic Hyam, who somehow sent an effort over the cross-bar from metres out.

With hope of achieving something this season more or less gone, the increasingly desperate off-field situation between SISU, Coventry City Council, and Wasps ramped up further, with the club issuing a statement seemingly confirming that Coventry City would be playing the following season, and most likely for the foreseeable future, outside of the city.

What should have been one of the highlights of the season, an away trip to a big club in Sunderland – who were only too keen to remind us just how much they despised our club – felt like a side-show to the in-fighting that most had hoped the club had left behind on that hill in Northampton three years ago.

Football can have a wonderful habit at times of reminding you just why you bear with it all – the cold afternoons, the money spent, the often-terrible football, losses, cheating, terrible referees, sitting alongside people you would otherwise cross the street to avoid – with a wonderful demonstration of what is best about following a football club in full display during a gloriously mad-cap 90 minutes at the Stadium of Light.

Bright Enobakhare was the one to really step up to the plate and produced a near-perfect display that afternoon – albeit against a Sunderland side that chose to leave him the freedom of the pitch as they set-out to lay onslaught on our goal. It was the Wolves

loanee who curled an expertly placed low effort from just outside the penalty area to bring to life what would become a manic game of football.

As Sunderland soon equalised, it seemed as if the Black Cats were set to continue their unbeaten home record, as well as a remarkable habit of recovering points from losing positions.

That was before the electric Sky Blues counter-attack ran rampant during the following ten minutes, with Amadou Bakayoko slotting a confident finish past Sunderland's Jon McLaughlin to restore the lead and Bright Enobakhare then disguising a perfect through-ball for Jordy Hiwula to deflect into the back of the net.

Even the most hopeful of Sky Blues fans couldn't have anticipated this kind of performance and scoreline, especially at this ground, against this opposition and at this juncture of the season.

The sense that this was just too good to be true was seemingly confirmed as Sunderland restored parity by half-time. First, Lee Burge flapped at a cross in the box to hand Sunderland's Charlie Wyke a tap-in, then another Sunderland cross caused defensive chaos and it was Will Grigg's turn to put the ball into an empty net.

As Sunderland took control of the second-half, that 3-1 lead already looked like a distant memory. However, Jordan Shipley took the opportunity to level matters 10 minutes after the break and re-affirm the sense that this was going to be our day.

Even though Sunderland equalised yet again, with another fortunate effort, this time a deflected shot from central midfielder Max Power, there was an odd sense of inevitability as Conor Chaplin made the most of the time afforded to him in the penalty area to rifle home the game's final goal.

Although it was a result that appeared to do little to boost our short-term prospects of making the play-offs and was almost utterly inconsequential in the face of our longer-term future as a club in exile playing in front of a reduced fan-base, with a smaller budget, and a lesser squad, it was at least a glorious addendum to a

Sunderland
League One
13/04/19
Score: 5-4
Scorer: Enobakhare,
Bakayoko, Hiwula,
Shipley, Chaplin

season that had seemingly trickled away from us with few notable memories.

The sense that the season was effectively at this point over was reflected in a low-key performance on Good Friday at home to a Bradford City side that were on the verge of relegation. After the visitors made a surprisingly good start, a Jordy Hiwula finish from a Liam Kelly through-ball killed off Bradford's spirit.

There were chances to further extend the lead, but none were taken as the Sky Blues played with the conviction of a side that felt it had nothing to play for.

Bradford City

League One

19/04/19

Score: 2-0

Scorer: Hiwula,
Enobakhare

After Bradford were reduced to ten-men, the second-half was almost entirely one-way traffic – aside from the typical hairy moments from defending set-pieces. Liam Kelly further underlined his status as one of the most important players in the starting XI as he again played an accurate through-ball, this time to Bright Enobakhare, to seal the win.

Seemingly unbeknownst to the players, those back-to-back wins had suddenly revived our hopes of making the play-offs.

An away trip to an automatic promotion-chasing Portsmouth would be a huge test of the credentials of this side to deliver a memorable end to the season, but an impressive first-half – with Bright Enobakhare again in dazzling form – saw Jordy Hiwula fire the Sky Blues into the lead and truly ignite hope of making the top six.

A key moment proved to be when Luke Thomas was sent clean through on goal in the first-half but yet again deliberated over his finish at a key moment, allowing Portsmouth's defence to recover and clear a tame effort off the line.

The second-half saw the energy levels from the Sky Blues dip and Portsmouth take control of the game, although the defence was doing a decent job at limiting Portsmouth's chances on goal.

Portsmouth

League One

22/04/19

Score: 1-2

Scorer: Hiwula

That was until Portsmouth's Tom Naylor was allowed a free header in the penalty area from a set-piece situation to level matters, then yet another goalkeeping mistake from Lee Burge gave Brett Pitman the opportunity to score the game's winning goal.

It would have been depressingly fitting had our play-off hopes died as a result of failing to take our chances and sloppiness in defending set-pieces. As a result of results from play-off rivals Doncaster Rovers and Peterborough United though, there was still an incredibly remote hope of making the top six with two games left – although it required the Sky Blues pulling off back-to-back 5-0 wins.

In a week where hope of remaining at the Ricoh Arena had been restored, club legend Steve Ogrizovic's retirement was announced, and there were suggestions that star loan players Bright Enobakhare and Luke Thomas may stay for another year, it all looked to be set-up for a positive afternoon to celebrate the past and future of this football club.

As Jordan Shipley drove through the defence of a passive Shrewsbury Town side, everything looked set for Mark Robins' side to further chip away at mission probably impossible.

However, the intensity of the performance dipped to a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park for the remainder of the game. The problem was that the Sky Blues lacked the latent attacking skill and defensive poise to hold onto a win at such low energy levels. Shrewsbury, who looked content with a 1-0 defeat were forced to equalise as a poorly-cleared set-piece landed at the feet of their top-scorer Fejiri Okenabirhie to tuck home from a few metres out.

It made what had looked like a decisive final day clash away at 6th-place Doncaster Rovers an inconsequential game for us against opponents still needing a win to secure their play-off place.

Despite a reasonably spirited first-half performance, as soon as Doncaster took the lead, there was little doubt as to the final result of the game, allowing the season to finish on a rather limp note.

Shrewsbury Town

League One

28/04/19

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Shipley

Doncaster Rovers

League One

04/05/19

Score: 0-2

Scorer: None



Mark Robins

You have to go back a long way to find a Coventry City manager with a better record than Mark Robins. Only George Curtis and Eric Black have a winning percentage better than Mark Robins across his two spells at the club. Along with his achievements in winning promotion and the Checkatrade Trophy, only Jimmy Hill and John Sillett outstrip Robins as Sky Blues managerial heavyweights.

While Mark Robins has some his weaknesses as a manager – his use of substitutions, the occasional signing of players without a clear sense of their purpose in the squad, and a poor track record at recovering points from winning positions – it cannot be argued that he is doing a far better job than most would at this football club.

Going back to his re-appointment in 2017, the club was falling apart at the seams with relegation to League Two all but confirmed, regular match-

disrupting protests and a general feeling that this football club was sliding irretrievably into oblivion. What Mark Robins has demonstrated during his return to the club is that it is perfectly possible to achieve success within the current framework within which this club operates.

That the most disappointing thing about his reign thus far has been falling short of making the League One Play-Offs would have seemed ridiculous on the day he returned to the club. His re-appointment felt like a face-saving move from those in charge, it has proven to be so much more than that.

Not only has Mark Robins brought on-field achievement via a Checkatrade Trophy win and promotion, there is a genuine sense that he is building a something that could be kept going for years to come regardless of whether he stays in charge.

It was a bold move last summer to put resources into recruiting a lot of young players for both the first-team and under-23s, but in success stories such as Dominic Hyam and, to a lesser extent, Sam McCallum and Morgan Williams, we are seeing the fruits of a longer-term view to recruitment.

Of course, this change is being judged following a largely positive league season. It cannot go without mentioning that some of the recruitment this season in terms of the more experienced players hasn't made the expected impact.

Players such as Abu Ogogo and Junior Brown were signed but never really fit in with the squad. Amadou Bakayoko was brought in for a fee when he could have been signed for free earlier in the transfer window. Robins also wasted a lot of time and expense in bringing in Conor Chaplin, who hasn't proven yet to be the man to replace Marc McNulty.

Furthermore, Jonson Clarke-Harris' goalscoring form since leaving the club in January raises further questions of Mark Robins' ability to bring the very best out of the players he sees in training every day.

Home games have undoubtedly been boring this season, with just two wins by more than a solitary goal. Robins has struggled to put together a plan to break down solid defensive sides at the Ricoh Arena, with players appearing to run out of ideas relatively quickly. That this has remained the case despite countless opportunities to learn from it over the course of the season is a cause for concern.

While the overall defending of the side has been solid, set-piece defending

has been a huge issue. As most of our games have been tight this season, that fragility from dead-ball situations has often tipped level games, or ones we've been better than the opposition in, against us. While this is a relatively short side, too often the goals conceded from set-pieces have been down to poor marking or individual errors.

The caveat to all of that though is we've still had a positive season on the pitch. Only Luton Town, of the promoted League Two sides from last season, finished higher than us, while we vastly outperformed clubs such as Oxford United, Scunthorpe United and Bradford City who have appear to have had higher budgets to work with.

With such clear areas for improvement heading into next season, Mark Robins will surely now know what to target over the summer, both in terms of the transfer market and what needs to be done on the training pitch.

Mark Robins has a knack of finding teams that work. Whether that involves the players he has specifically wanted to bring in or players already within the squad that he has found roles for, during both his spells at this football club he has been able to put together sides that have hit hot spells of form.

If Robins struggles to build sides that can break down the supposedly lesser, or perhaps simply the more defensive-minded, sides, his key strength has been against the bigger sides and often on the bigger occasions.

As a rather pragmatic manager who builds his teams around organisation, he has been able to work in a fair amount of dynamism and enterprise into our bigger performances this

season, with the away win at Sunderland perhaps the greatest demonstration of what a good Mark Robins side is capable of.

The success stories this season have been the development of Dominic Hyam into an incredibly composed centre-back, bringing the best out of Liam Kelly as the central midfield leader of the side, Jordy Hiwula and Amadou Bakayoko having their best-ever goalscoring seasons and the loan signings of Bright Enobakhare, Luke Thomas and Dujon Sterling who have undoubtedly elevated the squad with their individual quality.

Over the course of the season, Mark Robins has upgraded upon an effective League Two squad, changed the style of play to a more possession-based brand of football, and developed a number of individual players.

Although there is a rebuilding job for Mark Robins to deal with over the summer in some key areas, it feels like there are positives to take out of this campaign that can be carried into next season. Robins' ability to build on the positives from this season and address the failings will ultimately be how the campaign is judged in years to come having failed to achieve a top six finish this time out.

Although football is a highly changeable industry that has a habit of uprooting preconceived notions, it feels as if we can look forward to further progress with Mark Robins in charge next season. He is the proverbial safe pair of hands.

As the records currently show, a safe pair of hands counts for a lot at this football club.



Most Important Player

Although he wasn't first-choice until December, Liam Kelly's contribution to the season has been, I would argue, the most important of any other individual player.

Kelly signifies the evolution of this team from a newly-promoted League Two side into an established League One team that is now looking towards further progress. From a side not sure of its identity into a proactive, ball-playing team capable of taking on the division's very best.

What has been most remarkable about Liam Kelly's emergence as the beating heart of the side this season was that he has become a player few thought he was capable of being based on his first season at the club.

As a leader, Kelly was stepping into the considerable vacuum left by Michael Doyle. Last season, we had seen that without Doyle, we were a side that lacked character and impetus – which

Kelly was very much a part of. This season, Kelly's calmer head and qualities as a footballer have made a much larger contribution than Doyle's aggression and bloody-mindedness.

Liam Kelly's ability to both break up the play and distribute the ball from the base of midfield has transformed the nature of the side.

While Mark Robins had attempted to play out from the back with Michael Doyle this season – as evidenced by Doyle being League One's most prolific passer during the first half of the campaign – the additional quality and range of passing Kelly offers allows us to play quicker and more accurately than in our previous incarnation with Doyle dictating play.

Mark Robins is looking to build a young, proactive side that will improve over the course of years to come, which has made Kelly's experience and leadership even more important.

Having shed the more experienced squad members of the League Two promotion winning campaign, Kelly is effectively the only experienced member of the squad, which places a huge responsibility on his shoulders.

It is a responsibility that Liam Kelly seems to have relished and he is now looking more like the kind of leader that he showed himself to be at Oldham Athletic and Leyton Orient than he had previously demonstrated in a Sky Blues shirt.

Now approaching 30 years old, there is still plenty of good years of football left in Kelly's legs provided he can avoid injuries. He looks set to be the main leader on the pitch at this football club for a few years to come, with this season being an important year in establishing himself as the beating heart of this side.



Most Improved Player

The fourth-choice centre-back last season and third in the pecking order heading into this campaign, there can't have been many expecting Dominic Hyam to emerge not only as a first-choice player this season but as someone who could well develop into a Championship-level centre-back within the next year if he can maintain his current level of improvement.

Hyam is a calm head in central defence, both in competing with more physical centre-forwards and in bringing the ball out from the back. Whether he has benefitted from stepping up to a more technical standard of football this season or has simply developed quickly as a result of exposure to first-team football, Dominic Hyam has become a key player for us this season.

Hyam's development is a feather in the cap for Mark Robins, both in identifying him as a free transfer two years ago

after some relatively unimpressive loan spells and in developing what was a very raw talent into the player we see today. It's easy to forget that in his first appearances for the club, Hyam looked slow, lacking in authority and frankly a bit of a nervous wreck. It was impossible seeing that player becoming the one that we see today.

Looking ahead to next season, Hyam looks set to be the key player in defence with there set to be new signings at right-back, centre-back, in goal and possibly even a new left-back as well. It is likely to require Hyam to be more of a leader at the back than already is in order to allow his new colleagues to integrate into the team.

While that loss of familiarity will be a challenge, Hyam has demonstrated already that he can adapt to playing with different defensive partners.

Alongside Jordan Willis, Hyam can act as the more proactive centre-back in

challenging opponents, alongside Tom Davies, Hyam has shown he can cover for a slower colleague. Playing with new and different team-mates appears unlikely to be a challenge for him.

With the club looking to bring in young players with the potential to improve in order to either carry the club forward or to sell, Dominic Hyam is one of the key shining lights in this policy that Mark Robins can now utilise to demonstrate to prospective new signings that this is a club where they can fulfil their potential.



Looking Ahead...

The most over-riding feeling as thoughts now turn to next season is cautious optimism. Especially with the club seemingly set to stay at the Ricoh Arena, it feels as if the club is gearing up to build on a reasonable first season back in League One.

Although we will lose some key loanees, along with our first-choice goalkeeper and a club hero at centre-back, there is already a solid core from which Mark Robins can build – especially if rumours suggesting Bright Enobakhare and Luke Thomas are staying.

The key weaknesses in this side – poor finishing and poor set-piece defending – feel as if they can be improved with one or two better players in key areas and a full pre-season to work with most of the squad. However, if these issues continue, then questions have to be asked of Mark Robins' management.

Looking more specifically at the squad and where Mark Robins needs to recruit, there is clearly set to be a complete revamp in goal. With Lee Burge, Liam O'Brien and Corey Addai all out of contract and club legend Steve Ogrizovic retiring as coach.

There is significant scope for change between the sticks. The key decision for Mark Robins is likely to be whether to go all out for a proven goalkeeper or bring in younger goalkeepers who may be driven to improve as they compete for the number one spot. That call depends on how ambitious Robins is to achieve promotion or whether he wants to continue the longer-term mind-set that we've approached this season's recruitment with.

Right-back is another position where there is set to be change. The loan signing of Dujon Sterling came with the benefit of providing us with a player of a higher-calibre than we would have

otherwise been able to sign but at the cost of alienating a hero from our promotion from League Two in Jack Grimmer.

Whether Robins follows a similar policy to last season's recruitment at left-back – one experienced player with a less experienced back-up who eventually takes over – seems likely but will depend upon who is available.

At left-back, it would appear that Junior Brown is on his way out of the club after effectively being frozen out of the side for the second half of this season.

Brandon Mason has stepped up very competently for a player with just three games prior experience as a senior footballer but his niggly injury issues and short stature require an able deputy. Robins is likely to face a call over whether to promote Sam McCallum to the first-team squad – where he's yet to convince – and freeing Junior Brown's wages to spend elsewhere or bringing in another senior left-back at the cost of improving in other priority positions.

With Jordan Willis and Tom Davies set to leave the club, and Ayr United's Michael Rose joining this summer, there is set to be a re-shuffle in central defence. Although Jordon Thompson, Morgan Williams and Declan Drysdale from the under-23 side appear close to first-team ready, it would be something of a gamble were Mark Robins not to add at least one experienced centre-back to the squad.

We are looking relatively strong in central midfield, with Jordan Shipley emerging as a viable option in the centre of the park alongside Liam Kelly during the final month of the season. The possibility of Bayliss being sold over

the summer may force Robins into activity, although Zain Westbrooke has proven another viable candidate in central midfield for regular football whenever called upon this season.

The key area for concern for Robins in central midfield is likely to be in finding cover for Liam Kelly. The loan of David Meyler – although reportedly a positive dressing room influence – seems unlikely to be made permanent after his lack of impact on the pitch and likely wage demands. The tricky task is finding someone who can hold midfield together like Kelly does, pass the ball like Kelly does and offer experience like Kelly does, and is also happy being second-choice to Kelly.

Perhaps the returning Callum Maycock after a toughening loan spell at struggling Macclesfield Town offers a solution as someone who can play a similar game to Kelly. While Maycock has struggled at Macclesfield, he will be returning a better player for the experience. Depending on Maycock's pre-season form Mark Robins may want to look at whether he can get a better, probably more experienced, back-up to Liam Kelly.

In the attacking positions, we are largely already covered. That would especially be the case were Bright Enobakhare and Luke Thomas to stay at the club, as is currently being strongly rumoured.

With Jodi Jones picking up another injury that puts probably another year on to the timescale we can realistically hope he can return physically and mentally to the level he was at and Reise Allassani struggling to break into the first team, bringing in another winger, in addition to Luke Thomas or

his replacement, is likely to be a priority for Mark Robins this summer.

While Charlie Wakefield has been a serial substitute since arriving in January, adding a winger who can provide goals and assists from the bench will broaden our attacking threat.

In terms of strikers, our top-scorer Jordy Hiwula is likely to remain in his left-wing berth heading into the start of next season. With Amadou Bakayoko the man in possession of the main striking position, Conor Chaplin's place in the side is under serious doubt – especially if Bright Enobakhare stays and thus takes away opportunities for Chaplin in the number 10 role.

The returning Maxime Biamou could offer a useful option on the bench, his presence around the first-team picture next season may depend upon whether we recruit a higher calibre of centre-forward over the summer. Along with Jordan Ponticelli, Biamou may be someone Robins will be considering loaning out to re-build his form and confidence.

There is a sense that this isn't going to be a summer where of as frantic transfer activity as last year but one where we look to make the three or four improvements to the squad in key areas to elevate us to at least play-off contention. As it stands, we're only a goalkeeper and a right-back short from being able to put out a side were the season to start on 1st July. It is a solid framework from which Mark Robins can build.

Knowing Mark Robins though, it wouldn't be surprising if we made a few more signings than is currently being anticipated. This is a man that

replaced one striker in Marc McNulty with three players last summer and relegated our first-choice and much-loved right-back to second-choice in order to accommodate a superior loan player. He isn't a particularly sentimental manager and will look to upgrade the squad wherever he feels is possible.

Getting away from transfer activity though, it has to be said that it is simply very relieving to be looking forward to next season as being like any other rather than the looming abyss it had looked like being when another groundshare was looking like a genuine probability.

Whatever next season brings, at least it will be another season of supporting Coventry City. Fans of most other clubs won't understand how wonderful it feels to be able to write that and nor should they. The continued existence of your football club should be the kind of thing you do take for granted.