

The
Sideways Sammy
Season Review

2019/20



Opening Words

A first league title for Coventry City since 1967. This season has seen the team pull off a truly remarkable achievement. However, due to the premature curtailment of the campaign, that sense of achievement is diminished.

It's hard to argue that this team doesn't deserve promotion. The league table quite clearly shows us as top by a large margin. There is no-one out there disputing that Coventry City aren't deserved champions.

In this state of lockdown that we are in, it is perhaps hard to comprehend just how monumental that feeling would have been to have seen and felt those crowning moments in person. It's been 53 years since this club last won a league title, who knows when that opportunity will come around again?

Being in a higher league is only half the prize of winning promotion. Having those moments to celebrate with the players and fellow fans are so important in a pastime where there are so many draining, demoralising spells that make you question why you keep coming.

That said, it's only natural to be excited about the prospect of seeing Coventry City back in the Championship. It's been a long and hard eight years where the club has been on the verge of extinction on multiple occasions. The Championship has seemed a far and distant land.

The turnaround since that dark relegation season from League One has been remarkable. It is difficult to believe that

this is the same club as the one that limped from defeat to defeat under Russell Slade. Being a Coventry City fan no longer attracts the level of sympathy that it once did.

That is a testament to the job that Mark Robins has done since his return to the club, he has truly achieved the unthinkable. It is hard now not to look at the future of this football club in a positive light – even while we remain exiled from the city of Coventry and the impact of the pandemic is unknown.

This season review will hopefully provide a full breakdown and analysis of every minutiae of this fantastic season – or, rather, four-fifths of a season. Starting with a look at the other League One teams, then at each individual Coventry City player, the story of the season, finishing off with the prestigious Sideways Sammy Awards (known in the industry as 'The Sammys'), then a look ahead at the next chapter for this football club.

As ever, I would like to say big thanks to anyone who is currently reading this season review. A lot of work goes into this and it really means a lot to me knowing that people actually read and enjoy this. A special thanks also goes out to anyone who goes out of their way to share this via social media or word of mouth, it's really appreciated.

Enjoy!

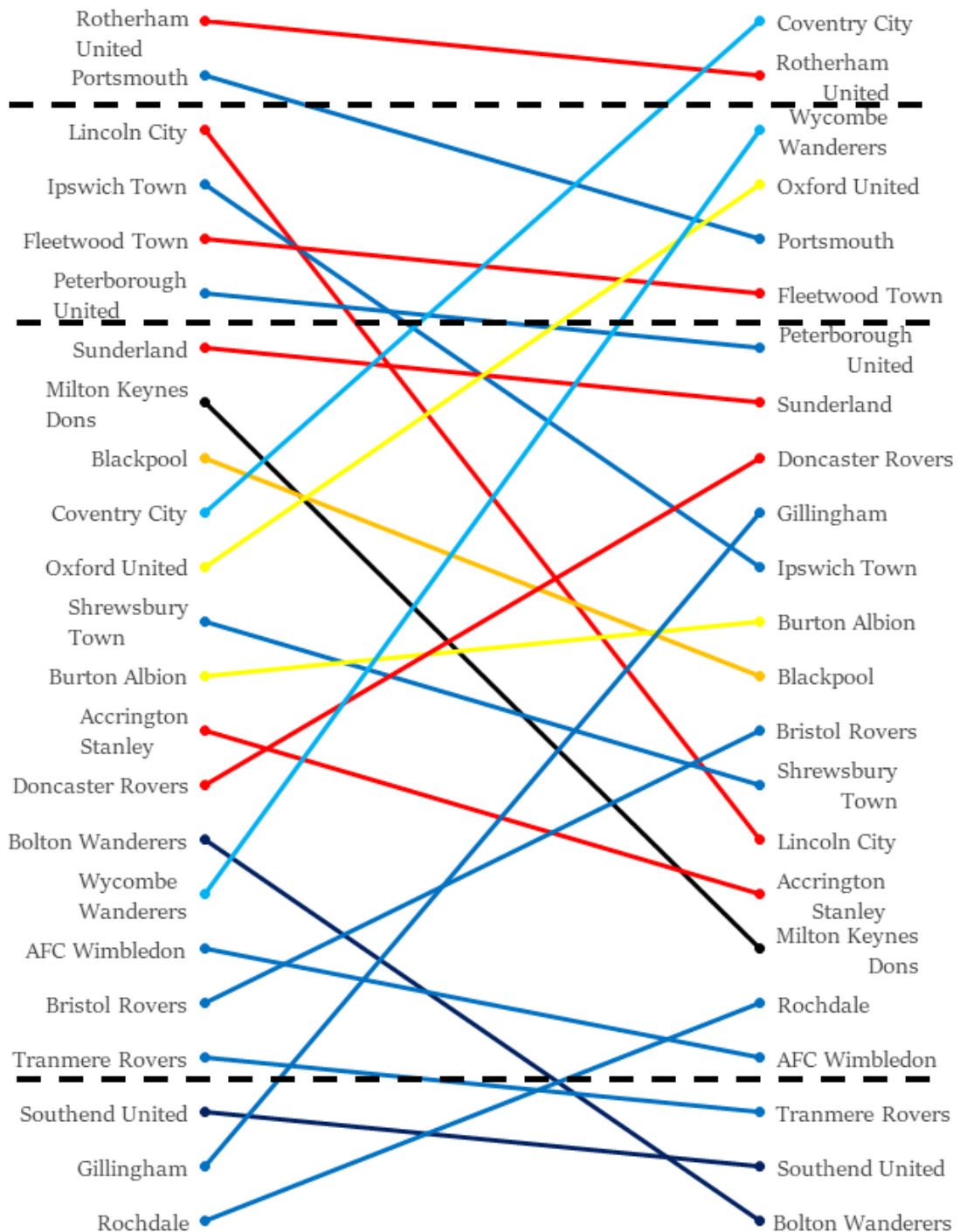
Dominic

Contents

3-30	Club-By-Club Reviews A look at the seasons of each of the League One clubs.	91-97	<i>Part Five</i> Confidence & Composure 25 th January 2020 – 7 th March 2020.
31-64	Player Reviews A look at the each of the Coventry City players who have made it onto the pitch this season.	98-99	<i>Part Six</i> Cancellation 14 th March 2020 – 9 th June 2020.
66-99	Story of the Season A part-by-part review of how the campaign unfolded.	100-102	The Manager A look at the work Mark Robins has done this season.
67-72	<i>Part One</i> New Environs 1 st July 2019 – 20 th August 2019.	103-104	Most Important Player The most prestigious Sammy award.
73-74	<i>Part Two</i> Heading To The Top 24 th August 2019 – 28 th September 2019.	105-106	Most Improved Player The second-most prestigious Sammy award.
78-84	<i>Part Three</i> Seeking Solutions 5 th October 2019 – 14 th December 2019.	107-109	The Next Chapter A look at what the future may have in store for both Coventry City and football in general.
85-90	<i>Part Four</i> Solutions Found 21 st December 2019 – 18 th January 2020.		

Club-By-Club Reviews

Predictions Against Final Standings



Accrington Stanley

Final Position: 17th



Top Scorer:

Colby Bishop (10)

18th in League

Most Assists:

Jordan Clark & Joe Pritchard (6)

10th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Jordan Clark & Dion Charles (12)

24th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Jordan Clark (3,060)

12th in League

Players Used:

27

13th in League

Clean Sheets:

7

18th in League

What I Said...

"While Accrington's squad looks among the weaker at this level, they have a manager who tends to get the best out of limited resources. They should avoid a struggle and perhaps could push on a little higher."

The Manager

John Coleman: Has regenerated the squad ably over the course of the season, integrating new stars into the side while still getting the best out of the old guard.

Star Player

Jordan Clark: A technically skilful and intelligent wide-man who has continued his improvement at the club with a productive campaign for scoring and creating chances. Out of contract heading into the summer, Clark looks set to test himself at a bigger club.

Overview

For a club of such limited resources, unexpectedly having to deal with losing their star striker, Billy Kee, to an eventual retirement could have been enough to send them on a downward trajectory. However, some smart recruitment in the transfer market has freshened things up, keeping Accrington out of relegation danger and reducing the average age of the squad.

Adding to that established core of Mark Hughes at the back,

Seamus Conneely in midfield, with the creativity of Jordan Clark and Sean McConville out wide, former Leamington forward, Colby Bishop has had a break-out season after arriving from non-league. He has been supported by the dynamic second-striker Dion Charles, the versatile central midfielder/winger Joe Pritchard and an improved Sam Finley.

While John Coleman has at times struggled to figure out his preferred XI and system, results were just about consistent enough to keep Stanley out of danger.

Although Accrington will probably lose a few key players over the summer, John Coleman's track record would suggest they can weather those potential losses fairly comfortably. While they may be particularly hard-hit were next season to begin behind closed doors, they are a club who have a habit of succeeding on limited financial resources.

AFC Wimbledon

Final Position: 20th



Top Scorer:

Marcus Forss (11)

12th in League

Most Assists:

Luke O'Neill (5)

20th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Marcus Forss (12)

24th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Joe Pigott (2,819)

39th in League

Players Used:

30

6th in League

Clean Sheets:

7

18th in League

What I Said...

"With the goals of Joe Pigott and some useful counter-attacking options, AFC Wimbledon should be a frustrating team to play against... Safety seems an achievable target."

The Manager

Glyn Hodges: Stepped reluctantly into the role as manager after the suspension, then sacking, of predecessor Wally Downes. Has helped improve results after a poor start, but it remains to be seen what he can do as a manager over a longer-term period.

Star Player

Callum Reilly: The former Gillingham midfielder has been a useful and reliable performer since his arrival at the club this summer. Energetic, technically solid, capable of scoring goals, Reilly has made contributions across a number of different positions.

Overview

AFC Wimbledon did just enough this season to ensure they would be opening their new Plough Lane home next season in League One. Having failed to build on a 'great escape' survival last year, Wally Downes' betting-induced suspension allowed the club to change things up in the dug-out, which has gone a long way to

keeping AFC Wimbledon's head above water.

A fairly porous defensive record has put pressure on AFC Wimbledon's midfielders and forwards to salvage points over the campaign. The clinical Brentford loanee, Marcus Forss, was in excellent goal-scoring form before an injury-enforced recall in January, however, Glyn Hodges has been able to find goals from a variety of sources throughout the rest of the team.

Having released a number of senior players following the curtailment of the League One season, the indications are that AFC Wimbledon will be one of several clubs for whom finances will be really stretched next season. With an inexperienced manager in charge, anything over than another brave fight against the drop seems like it will be an achievement.

AFC Wimbledon fans will be hoping that the club eventually sees the rewards of moving into a new, larger ground in the years to come.

Blackpool

Final Position: 13th



Top Scorer:

Armand Gnanduillet
(14)

4th in League

Most Assists:

Liam Feeney (15)

1st in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Liam Feeney & Armand
Gnanduillet (16)

9th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Liam Feeney (2,876)

1st in League

Players Used:

32

3rd in League

Clean Sheets:

8

17th in League

What I Said...

"The speed of the transition into a new era over the summer may have come a little too soon... It may be a slow start, but Blackpool are a side who should trouble the top six as the season progresses."

The Manager

Neil Critchley: The ex-Liverpool youth-team manager made a name for himself thanks to Jurgen Klopp's disdain for cup competitions, providing Critchley the profile to take the Blackpool job just before football was postponed.

Star Player

Liam Feeney: A previously unremarkable journeyman winger, Feeney has become an assist machine this season. Direct and industrious, Feeney's excellent delivery has contributed to a large proportion of bean-pole centre-forward, Armand Gnanduillet's goals.

Overview

Having ridden themselves of the Oyston family over the summer, it seemed like it would take time for Blackpool to recover from such a long period of boardroom negligence. Instead, a strong start to the campaign under Simon Grayson suggested that the feelgood factor – and injection of cash from local businessman Simon Sadler – would make Blackpool one of the

feelgood stories of this Football League season.

The blueprint for the early part of the season was simple and effective, give the ball to Liam Feeney, watch him cross it to Armand Gnanduillet to score. With a solid defensive unit marshalled by Ben Heneghan and Curtis Tilt, plus some further attacking flair provided by Sullay Kaikai, Blackpool seemed well-set to maintain a play-off push.

However, Simon Grayson never seemed to settle on a structure around those effective raw elements. As soon as results took a turn, he tinkered and tinkered without finding solutions. Despite being backed in the January transfer window, his reign quickly ran out of steam.

There has been little opportunity to assess what kind of impact Blackpool can expect from new manager Neil Critchley, appointed after a protracted and frustrating search. This is a team in need of organisation and an identity, but one, with the right tweaks, could well challenge for promotion next season.

Bolton Wanderers

Final Position: 23rd



Top Scorer:

Daryl Murphy (8)

28th in League

Most Assists:

Ali Crawford (5)

20th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Daryl Murphy (10)

37th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Remi Matthews (2,970)

22nd in League

Players Used:

42

1st in League

Clean Sheets:

9

15th in League

What I Said...

"Bolton may have just enough about them to overcome the 12-point deduction and ramshackle pre-season to stay up. Simply being in a state to compete next season, whatever division they are in, seems to be the chief ambition..."

The Manager

Keith Hill: A local lad and seemingly a good appointment after his years in charge of Rochdale, however, Hill has allowed the pressure of this impossible job to get to him at times where a cooler, more measured approach would have been helpful. It is not guaranteed that he will be managing Bolton next season.

Star Player

Josh Emmanuel: A right-back who is adept both defensively and going forward, Emmanuel seems one of the few Bolton players who may be staying in League One next season.

Overview

When looking back on the annals of their history, the 2019-20 season for Bolton Wanderers will go down as an unmitigated disaster. A 12-point deduction for beginning the season in administration was exacerbated by a lack of transfer activity that meant a skeleton squad of youth-team players were routinely thrashed over the opening month of the campaign.

While Keith Hill's arrival as manager, along with a raft of hastily acquired new signings, eventually brought relief, it took too long for the new manager to make an impact to salvage the season. Bolton were effectively three months behind the rest of the division from the start and didn't perform well enough after that period to make up for that lost time.

There have been a few bright sparks, with right-back Josh Emmanuel and striker Daryl Murphy the best signings, and youngsters Ronan Darcy and Dennis Politic occasionally shining. However short-term nature of the squad-building this year – a result of the desperation for bodies to fill out the squad – means Bolton will have especially little to show for this campaign at the start of next year.

While the responsibility for this season is well above Keith Hill's pay grade, he has become tarnished by his association with the catastrophe that this season has been. It may be best for all parties if Bolton start next season with a completely clean slate.

Bristol Rovers

Final Position: 14th



Top Scorer:

Jonson Clarke-Harris
(13)

7th in League

Most Assists:

Liam Sercombe (4)

36th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Jonson Clarke-Harris
(15)

14th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Tony Craig (3,050)

17th in League

Players Used:

31

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

10

10th in League

What I Said...

"With an inexperienced manager and key elements of the squad that have changed over the summer, it is hard being all that confident about Bristol Rovers' hopes this season."

The Manager

Ben Garner: A well-regarded youth coach, Garner arrived when the club were around the play-offs, a poor start to his managerial career has seen his side drop to 14th. Has attempted to change the style of football a little too quickly and will begin next season under pressure.

Star Player

Jonson Clarke-Harris: Has relished being the main man at Bristol Rovers, not just scoring more freely than ever in his career but being the talisman of the side with his physically aggressive and cynical style of play. With his contract up over the summer, he looks set to test himself in the Championship again.

Overview

It's been a strange season for Bristol Rovers. Starting with low expectations, they surprisingly found themselves around the play-offs in December, then lost their manager, Graham Coughlan, to League Two Mansfield Town. They then arguably reverted to the mean by

dropping down the table after Coughlan's successor, Ben Garner, was appointed. Just when it looked like Garner was close to the chop for a disastrous start, results picked up before the season was prematurely ended.

Over the first half of the season, Rovers had been a team that played within their limitations well. With a physical defensive unit marshalled by Tony Craig at centre-back and the reactions of Anssi Jaakkola in goal, the plan was to keep things tight and nick something from set-pieces or via Jonson Clarke-Harris' brilliance in attack.

Replacing the manager who'd made it all work with some with a very different approach in Ben Garner was a radical move from those in charge, perhaps in the belief that such a style wasn't sustainable – particularly in light of the imminent departure of Jonson Clarke-Harris.

While results initially nosedived under Garner, there were belated signs of the new manager's impact. Having invested in younger, more dynamic players in January, Garner could make a more dramatic impact next year.

Burton Albion

Final Position: 12th



Top Scorer:

Lucas Akins (9)

22nd in League

Most Assists:

Scott Fraser (11)

2nd in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Scott Fraser (16)

9th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Lucas Akins (3,142)

7th in League

Players Used:

25

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

9

15th in League

What I Said...

"The opening few weeks or so of the season may be difficult as Clough finds the best combinations out of his available options but is hard to see Burton dropping off too much from the mid-table finish they secured last season."

The Manager

Jake Buxton: Steps into his first managerial posting after the surprise – financially-driven – departure of club stalwart, Nigel Clough. A leader on the pitch, Buxton will face a difficult task at the Pirelli Stadium on limited financial resources.

Star Player

Scott Fraser: The Scottish midfielder is a vital cog in Nigel Clough's side. His energy, creativity and physical presence gives the side a big threat in the centre of the park. Out of contract this month, he looks to be the next Burton star to be plucked away by a bigger club.

Overview

Having ended last season strongly, any hopes of Burton kicking on from there were dashed over the summer when several key players were lured away by bigger clubs – including two in Kyle McFadzean and Jamie Allen who lined up in Sky Blue this year. It meant it would be another rebuilding job for Nigel Clough, which has led to an inconsistent campaign.

While they have retained a strong core of senior pros such as defenders Jake Buxton, and John Brayford, along with forward Lucas Akins, the combination of a lack of a reliable goalscorer – exacerbated by the January departure of Liam Boyce – and inconsistent form of their defenders has been why Burton have finished mid-table.

The form of Scottish midfielder Scott Fraser, along with the dynamic energy of summer addition Ryan Edwards in the centre of the park, has been the major positive to come from this campaign. However, in the wake of Nigel Clough having to step down due to financial pressures at the club, it seems likely that Burton again will have to find new stars to build around.

Nigel Clough had been the calm figurehead at the club who could build and re-build teams despite the constant outward flow of talent, heading into an uncertain new campaign without him in place is especially troubling.

Doncaster Rovers

Final Position: 9th



Top Scorer:

Kieran Sadlier (11)

12th in League

Most Assists:

James Coppinger (8)

5th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Kieran Sadlier (17)

6th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Brad Halliday (3,060)

12th in League

Players Used:

29

8th in League

Clean Sheets:

10

10th in League

What I Said...

"In a worst-case scenario... Doncaster could well struggle... If Darren Moore can retain what was good about the side last season... mid-table should be the minimum expectation."

The Manager

Darren Moore: Stepped into a relatively tough challenge at Doncaster this season in having to rebuild a squad that made the play-offs last year, has done so reasonably effectively despite arriving relatively late in the summer.

Star Player

Ben Whiteman: The industrious and talented central midfielder has further established himself as one of the best in his position outside the Championship with a commanding campaign supplying the drive in Doncaster Rovers' midfield.

Overview

Having lost almost half the team that finished 6th last year – most notably, including manager, Grant McCann, and top-scorer John Marquis – Doncaster could have fallen to pieces with the wrong man in charge. They took a punt on the relatively inexperienced Darren Moore and have been rewarded with a solid campaign that could lay the foundations for a better one to come.

With relatively little time to operate in the transfer market, Darren Moore's success rate has been especially impressive. Seny Dieng in goal, Cameron John in defence and Ben Sheaf in midfield have all stood-out – although, all three have been loan players who'll need to be replaced. Importantly, Moore has been able to retain a similar, possession-focused, style of play despite the player turnover.

Another tick in Moore's box this season has been the improvements he has made to the games of players already at the club. Ben Whiteman in central midfield has flourished under the freedom Moore has handed to him, while wide-forward Kieran Sadlier has had a break-out campaign.

The one area that has let Doncaster down has been goalscoring – perhaps inevitable after the loss of John Marquis last summer – with Darren Moore struggling to find a reliable centre-forward. If that key issue can be resolved, Doncaster will easily kick-on next season.

Fleetwood Town

Final Position: 6th



Top Scorer:

Paddy Madden (15)

2nd in League

Most Assists:

Lewie Coyle (6)

10th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Paddy Madden (18)

4th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Danny Andrew (3,083)

10th in League

Players Used:

29

8th in League

Clean Sheets:

10

10th in League

What I Said...

"Fleetwood have to be considered to have one of the strongest squads in the division currently. It is all on Joey Barton's shoulders to meet the expectations that the strength of his squad demands."

The Manager

Joey Barton: Has built a team at Fleetwood that combine both aggression and talent side who can beat teams in different ways. Still getting to grips with life as a manager, Barton has a tendency to become slightly erratic in his team selections during poorer runs of form.

Star Player

Harry Souttar: The giant Stoke City loanee has been the rock at the heart of Fleetwood Town's defence this season. The kind of dominant central defender that projects confidence from the back.

Overview

Having invested in further experience and quality over the summer, Fleetwood Town had one of the strongest squads heading into the new season. However, they looked to have stuttered around the half-way stage following an injury to star midfielder Jordan Rossiter.

A re-organisation of the squad in January, involving the key additions of Glenn Whelan in midfield and Lewis Gibson in

defence, proved to be the turning-point in Fleetwood's campaign. Joey Barton's side rallied impressively, threatening to enter the automatic promotion race just before the curtailment of the campaign.

While that attacking axis of Ched Evans' work-rate and Paddy Madden's finishing ability has remained key for Fleetwood, they have become a more threatening side due to their defensive resilience and a step-up in creativity provided by the likes of Paul Coutts and Kyle Dempsey in midfield and the energy and quality of full-backs Lewie Coyle and Danny Andrew.

Finishing in 6th, Fleetwood's form since the turn of the year makes them one of the favourites for the play-offs. Still, there remains something slightly unconvincing about Joey Barton's managerial style, a vague sense that his teams lack the composure to win games that matter the most. If Fleetwood can make it through the play-offs, one of the remaining criticisms of Barton's burgeoning managerial careers can be dismissed.

Gillingham

Final Position: 10th



Top Scorer:

Alex Jakubiak (6)

36th in League

Most Assists:

Olly Lee & Max Ehmer
(4)

36th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Olly Lee (8)

52nd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Max Ehmer & Jack
Bonham (3,150)

1st in League

Players Used:

24

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

13

4th in League

What I Said...

"Gillingham look to be side that will have a lot of energy but look to be lacking in attacking quality and defensive solidity, which isn't a good combination at all."

The Manager

Steve Evans: Has quietly got on with the job at Gillingham this season in a manner few were anticipating given his recent track record. For a manager associated with big spending and constant player turnover, the ability to work with a small, settled squad has been most impressive about Evans' first season at the club.

Star Player

Connor Ogilvie: Had been seen as most effective at centre-back heading into the campaign, the former Spurs youngster has taken his game to a new level since being moved to left-back – which had been his position at youth-team level.

Overview

It was a big call from Gillingham chairman Paul Scally to get rid of Steve Lovell after a solid two seasons in charge and replace him with the combustible Steve Evans. Scally has been rewarded for that boldness with a productive campaign where the Gills have gone from perennial

relegation contenders to play-off outsiders.

Having lost top-scorer, Tom Eaves, on a free transfer over the summer, expectations were especially low for Gillingham this season. Instead, Steve Evans has managed his resources at Priestfield intelligently to go some way to prove some of his doubters wrong.

With Jack Bonham's shot-stopping prowess, a settled defensive unit that has allowed youngsters Connor Ogilvie and Jack Tucker to shine, and a hard-working set of midfielders and forwards, Gills are a side that can really grind down teams with their resilience. The major missing piece has been a reliable goal threat up front, epitomised by top-scorer, Alex Jakubiak, leaving in January after failing to build on a decent start.

If they can hold onto one or two of their brighter lights and address that situation in front of goal, Gillingham have many of the ingredients in place to take that next step up the league table and challenge more concertedly for the top six next season.

Ipswich Town

Final Position: 11th



Top Scorer:

James Norwood &
Kayden Jackson (11)

12th in League

Most Assists:

Kayden Jackson (7)

6th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Kayden Jackson (18)

4th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Luke Woolfenden
(2,790)

44th in League

Players Used:

29

8th in League

Clean Sheets:

13

4th in League

What I Said...

"All signs point towards an awkward opening few months to the season, if they can learn some important lessons during that time, this is a squad with the potential to play some very exciting football and win promotion."

The Manager

Paul Lambert: Very fortunate to still be in a job after a run of four wins in 21 that took Ipswich from the top to mid-table. Has done little to implement a clear style of play and constantly tinkered with the squad to little effect.

Star Player

Flynn Downes: The youngster has stepped up to become a commanding general in Ipswich's midfield this season. Capable of moving the ball around and getting stuck in, Downes' energy and game awareness mark him out as someone who has a long career ahead of him.

Overview

After a disastrous campaign last year, Ipswich raced out of the traps impressively this time around, putting them in a seemingly commanding position in the promotion places by November. However, the stand of performances never quite matched up with the good results, when things started to take a turn for the worse, Paul Lambert seemed unable to address the deficiencies in the team.

With Kayden Jackson and James Norwood in attack, the creativity of Alan Judge, Emyr Huws and Jon Nolan, the experience of Luke Chambers and Cole Skuse, along with the rapid development of youngsters Luke Woolfenden and Flynn Downes, Ipswich should have had too much quality for the division. Instead, they have looked a disparate assembly of their various pieces.

It is only the bizarre decision to have handed Paul Lambert a five-year deal during the midst of a horrendous run that has kept the manager in the job. While Lambert has bemoaned a lack of transfer funds to regenerate the squad, that strong start to the season suggested there was the talent to mount a promotion bid regardless.

There is little indication that Paul Lambert is capable of turning things around from the state things are currently in. While some hope has been found in the performances of young forward Tyreece Simpson and Armando Dobra towards the end of the campaign, it seems it would take something more dramatic for things to turn around next season at Portman Road.

Lincoln City

Final Position: 16th



Top Scorer:

Tyler Walker (13)

7th in League

Most Assists:

Jorge Grant (7)

6th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Tyler Walker (17)

6th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Neal Eardley & Josh Vickers (3,150)

1st in League

Players Used:

28

11th in League

Clean Sheets:

10

10th in League

What I Said...

"This is a side that now has several individual matchwinners to call upon while looking solid further back. Lincoln City looked to have a lot of the ingredients quite a lot of other sides at this level currently don't have."

The Manager

Michael Appleton: Stepped into the difficult task of replacing the hugely successful Cowley brothers at Lincoln. While results have been mixed, Appleton has quickly set about injecting the squad with younger, more dynamic talents that should set the team up well for seasons to come.

Star Player

Joe Morrell: The Welsh midfielder's energy and dynamism in the centre of the park has often been the difference between Lincoln playing well or poorly. Another very talented Bristol City loanee central midfielder.

Overview

There looked to have been several of the ingredients in place over the summer for Lincoln to attack this season with momentum following promotion from League Two last year. Under the charge of the popular Cowley brothers, a promotion-winning squad had been upgraded with extra creativity and goals via the likes of Jorge

Grant, Jack Payne and Tyler Walker. However, the departure of that managerial team has engendered a transitional campaign.

Michael Appleton has taken a while to get a grip on the squad at his disposal, with the team in the middle of a process of rebuilding from their non-league days under the Cowleys. There was a mix of grizzled veterans such as Neal Eardley, Michael Bostwick and Jason Shackell along with more nimble-footed players in Jorge Grant, Jake Hesketh and Jack Payne. Under a different manager, those two pieces didn't quite fit together.

Losing top-scorer, Tyler Walker, in January wasn't helpful, but any hopes of achieving something this season had already passed Lincoln by. It handed the opportunity for Appleton to advance his restructuring of the squad, bringing in the kind of young and improving talents from higher divisions – such as midfielder Tayo Edun and forward Anthony Scully – that he'll now be hoping to build his version of Lincoln City around next season.

Milton Keynes Dons

Final Position: 18th



Top Scorer:

Rhys Healey (10)

18th in League

Most Assists:

Rhys Healey & Conor McGrandles (3)

58th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Rhys Healey (13)

20th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Lee Nichols (3,150)

1st in League

Players Used:

26

16th in League

Clean Sheets:

7

18th in League

What I Said...

"As a solid defensive unit that should keep games low-scoring affairs, MK Dons may not need too much flair to keep the points ticking over regularly this season. I would view them as outsiders for the play-offs this season."

The Manager

Russell Martin: A bold choice as manager in the midst of a relegation battle, Martin – who had been on the club's books as a player at the start of the campaign – has injected fresh life and energy to an MK Dons side that had lost it entirely towards the end of Paul Tisdale's reign.

Star Player

Rhys Healey: The former Cardiff City youngster has been a revelation since recovering from injury around the time of Russell Martin's appointment. A quick forward, it is Healey's intelligent movement and use of the ball that marks him out as being capable of soon playing at a higher level.

Overview

The implosion of Paul Tisdale's reign at MK Dons, having won promotion last season, was something few could have seen coming. Albeit hampered by a horrendous injury list in attack, Tisdale very quickly ran out of ideas and projected a strangely serene, almost apathetic, image of himself while results deteriorated.

Appointing an inexperienced manager in Russell Martin carried shades of MK Dons' last relegation from this division, when Dan Micciche was parachuted in from the England under-16 team to ill-effect. However, Martin – ably supported by talented assistant manager Luke Williams – has not only turned around results, but produced a more exciting, attacking brand of football.

Retaining that care of possession from the Tisdale era, MK Dons are more energetic with and without the ball. Results haven't quite matched performances, but it's been enough of an improvement to push MK out of danger. In particular, the forwards – Rhys Healey, Joe Mason and Carlton Morris – have benefitted from the more up-tempo style of football.

MK Dons look a side who'll benefit from a pre-season to sort out the squad and work together on the training pitch. They seem firmly in the category of potential dark horses.

Oxford United

Final Position: 4th



Top Scorer:

Matty Taylor (13)

7th in League

Most Assists:

James Henry (9)

3rd in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

James Henry (21)

2nd in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Rob Dickie (3,102)

8th in League

Players Used:

25

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

15

1st in League

What I Said...

"The hope is that Oxford will have the wherewithal in the opening weeks to keep things ticking over while they finish their business. As it stands, mid-table would be a good finish for the U's."

The Manager

Karl Robinson: Has continued to do an impressive job at Oxford United despite often having to rely on loan players. Robinson has built an attractive, attacking side that consistently dominate games with their ability to move the ball around into dangerous areas and sustain spells of pressure.

Star Player

James Henry: Henry has quietly had a sensational campaign while others around him have come in for bigger plaudits. A calm presence in possession, Henry scores and creates goals at a reliable rate, making him the man others turn to in key moments.

Overview

Another slow summer of recruitment threatened to undo last season's belated progress at the Kassam Stadium. However, a key difference was that Karl Robinson managed to get some early results before the team had properly gelled to avoid his side getting sucked into the relegation scrap they were in last year.

Once again, Karl Robinson has assembled a cavalcade of exciting attacking players. The likes of Tariqe Fosu, Ben Woodburn, Marcus Browne, Shandon Baptiste, Nathan Holland, Cameron Brannagan and James Henry have all lit up the Kassam Stadium at various points of the campaign. Importantly, having a goalscorer in Matty Taylor (when fit) to call upon has taken Oxford over the edge.

Had it not been for a difficult January period where key attacking right-back Chris Cadden left, before star midfielders Tariqe Fosu and Shandon Baptiste were suddenly sold, Oxford may have found themselves in a top two position instead of the play-offs.

Karl Robinson has demonstrated at Oxford United that he can consistently build exciting teams despite a constant churn of players. Victory in the play-offs would cap off an impressive spell over two-and-a-bit seasons that has reinvigorated by the manager and the club.

Peterborough United

Final Position: 7th



Top Scorer:

Ivan Toney (24)

1st in League

Most Assists:

Marcus Maddison &
Siriki Dembele (7)

6th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Ivan Toney (30)

1st in League

Most Minutes Played:

Christy Pym (3,150)

1st in League

Players Used:

24

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

15

1st in League

What I Said...

"Having been burned in previous years backing Peterborough... I'm reticent to tip them for automatic promotion. It is hard though not to see Peterborough being at least in the race for the top six."

The Manager

Darren Ferguson: Returning to the club for a third spell in charge, Ferguson has quietly done an effective job, limiting the traditional dramatic bipolar rollercoaster of a Peterborough United season, albeit falling slightly short.

Star Player

Ivan Toney: Has taken a huge leap forward in his consistency in front of goal this season. A tall, bustling and competitive forward it is the level of pace, skill and game awareness that make Toney a near-impossible prospect to play against when in top form.

Overview

In many ways, it has been a typical season for Peterborough United. A talented squad has often looked the most exciting in the division but has struggled to find the consistency required to put itself in the automatic promotion race. However, there has been something a little different about Posh this campaign.

With the joint-best clean sheet record in the division,

Peterborough have been atypically stern at the back. After a wobbly start, the combination of Christy Pym in goal and the defensive qualities of Frankie Kent and Mark Beevers, Peterborough have been a tough team to score against.

That is a particularly terrifying prospect given the quality Peterborough have been able to call upon further forward. Ivan Toney has been the constant this season in a forward line that started off with him partnered by Mohamed Eisa and with Marcus Maddison the supply line just behind, then evolved after January with Toney leading the line on his own, supported by the more dynamic Siriki Dembele and Sammie Szmodics.

That mid-season re-calibration has been the most impressive element of Peterborough's campaign. However, had it not been for the wobble that forced a re-think, Peterborough would have at least made the play-offs, if not the top two. These are the fine margins that can decide a league season, especially one rendered 20% shorter through unexpected external circumstances.

Portsmouth

Final Position: 5th



Top Scorer:

Ronan Curtis (11)

12th in League

Most Assists:

Ronan Curtis & Marcus
Harness (5)

20th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Ronan Curtis (16)

9th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Tom Naylor (2,970)

22nd in League

Players Used:

24

21st in League

Clean Sheets:

13

4th in League

What I Said...

"Having one of the more settled squads in the division allied with a safe pair of hands in the dug-out should see Portsmouth at least maintain their position in the promotion equation this campaign."

The Manager

Kenny Jackett: After a poor start to the season, Jackett's calm and consistent approach has helped Portsmouth recover and gradually move up the table. However, a lack of variation in his tactics saw his team lose key games.

Star Player

Ronan Curtis: The Irish forward has been Portsmouth's most consistent attacking player this season. A skilful and direct wide-man who loves to cut inside, he has benefitted from Portsmouth's ability to get the ball forward quickly and play off second balls.

Overview

Portsmouth looked the one of strongest teams at this level heading into the season. While key players in Jamal Lowe and Matt Clarke had been lost, Kenny Jackett had swept up a number of leading talents from other clubs, with ex-Doncaster centre-forward John Marquis being the most eye-catching piece of business.

Marquis' struggles in front of goal have highlighted where

Portsmouth have gone wrong this season. Kenny Jackett has seemed unwilling to adapt his tactical system to suit individuals, meaning Marquis has had to plough a furrow to bring others into play, rather than his team-mates servicing him. This has been replicated in a number of other new signings having either started slowly or struggled to get into the team.

That said, take out the first six games of the season and Portsmouth would be four points clear at the top. While Kenny Jackett deserves to be criticised for a campaign that has seen the team perform just below expectations, that statistics is another demonstration of how fine the lines in a promotion race can be.

There is at least an opportunity to save face by advancing in the play-offs. While there may remain quibbles about Kenny Jackett's style of play, promotion would be a deserved reward for a manager who has gradually evolved this side from its League Two days.

Rochdale

Final Position: 19th



Top Scorer:

Ian Henderson (15)

2nd in League

Most Assists:

Callum Camps (6)

10th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Ian Henderson (17)

6th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Eoghan O'Connell

(2,734)

1st in League

Players Used:

28

11th in League

Clean Sheets:

7

18th in League

What I Said...

"Rochdale look to be overdue a return to League Two and this may be the year that happens. For Brian Barry-Murphy's sake, any battle against the drop has to be with character... to ensure he has a career as a manager longer-term."

The Manager

Brian Barry-Murphy: Has had a promising first full (ish) season as a manager, albeit characterised by some spells of poor form. An idealist who wants his team to build from the back no matter the circumstances, Barry-Murphy has made Rochdale a pleasing team to watch on limited resources.

Star Player

Ian Henderson: Has made it into double-figures for scoring for a seventh season on the bounce, Henderson has been as good as ever this year. Pushed further forward by Barry-Murphy, Henderson has been more of a goal threat and less involved in the build-up play.

Overview

Rochdale looked certain to be one of the relegation strugglers this season after two consecutive near-misses and a rookie manager in charge. While the club have occasionally been looking over their shoulder this campaign, it has been a year of largely plain sailing as Brian Barry-Murphy has stamped his mark on the club.

Playing one of the most ideologically-committed brands of passing football in the division, Rochdale have excited and frustrated in equal measure. A focus on possession has led to some memorable passing moves but has also cost the team the defensive solidity to push away from danger.

A key move this campaign has been to push Ian Henderson into a more advanced role with Callum Camps operating just behind him. The duo have been a key creative hub, aided by rampaging full-backs Rhys Norrington-Davies and Luke Matheson.

Having stamped his mark on the team in his first season in charge, Brian Barry-Murphy should be a better manager than he was 12 months ago. It won't be easy for Rochdale to press on within their noted financial restrictions but having a clear playing identity could be an area of advantage for them going forward.

Rotherham United

Final Position: 2nd



Top Scorer:

Freddie Ladapo (12)

10th in League

Most Assists:

Ben Wiles (6)

10th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Freddie Ladapo (13)

20th in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Daniel Iversen (3,060)

12th in League

Players Used:

27

13th in League

Clean Sheets:

10

10th in League

What I Said...

"With one of the stronger squads and a clear sense of purpose, Rotherham are likely to be challenging once again for another tilt at the Championship this coming campaign."

The Manager

Paul Warne: An emotionally intelligent motivator and man-manager, Rotherham are a club united under Warne's management. Prefers an intense style of play that can consistently overwhelm teams from open-play and set-pieces.

Star Player

Daniel Barlasier: The skinny midfield schemer has made himself the most important cog in the Rotherham machine this season with his ability to both dictate play and break things up at the base of midfield. A player who looks ready to make that next step in his career.

Overview

Rotherham were well-fancied to bounce-back to the Championship this season but a relatively slow start almost threatened to put popular manager Paul Warne under pressure. However, Warne maintained his faith in his players and style of play, which has eventually seen Rotherham rise into an automatic promotion position, looking to be one of the

best-balanced sides in the division.

With a powerful defence marshalled by Michael Ihiekwe and the excellent shot-stopper Daniel Iversen in goal, Rotherham are powerful and creative in midfield through the likes of Daniel Barlasier, Ben Wiles and Matt Crooks. They have pace out wide via Chidozie Ogbene and Hakeeb Adelakun, a reliable target-man in Michael Smith, a powerful goal poacher in Freddie Ladapo and the quick Kyle Vassell up top. There haven't been many teams that have looked forward to playing the Millers.

While there has been an issue at times in putting teams away when on top, Rotherham have consistently dominated teams throughout the season and are deservedly in the one of the two automatic promotion places. Whether they are better-placed to stay in the Championship than before remains to be seen.

Shrewsbury Town

Final Position: 15th



Top Scorer:

Callum Lang, Dan Udoh
& Jason Cummings (4)

61st in League

Most Assists:

Scott Golbourne, Shaun
Whalley & Sean Goss
(3)

58th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Callum Lang, Dan Udoh
& Jason Cummings (5)

93rd in League

Most Minutes Played:

Max O'Leary (2,700)

54th in League

Players Used:

30

6th in League

Clean Sheets:

12

9th in League

What I Said...

"The jury remains out on Sam Ricketts as a manager, with a large squad and a reputation as a tinkerer, it is a potential area where things could come a cropper... A mid-table finish should be eminently achievable."

The Manager

Sam Ricketts: While he has frustrated fans with his conservative brand of football, Ricketts has had a useful habit of winning games just when the pressure on him can build.

Star Player

Aaron Pierre: The powerful centre-back has further bolstered a strong, no-nonsense back-line at Shrewsbury Town. An entertaining player to watch for his sheer uncompromising nature and threat from set-pieces.

Overview

There were outside hopes for a tilt at the play-offs for Shrewsbury Town this season which have occasionally come close to being realised, only for the team's cautious nature to rear its head. Sam Ricketts has built a side that loves to defend but can be very timid going forward.

There is just about enough attacking quality in this Shrewsbury Town side to be a more proactive threat. It's not a stretch to say that Jason

Cummings is potentially a 20-goal a season striker at this level, while loanee Callum Lang and the pacey Dan Udoh have shown they can contribute to the goals scored column too. With Josh Laurent and Shaun Whalley also capable of grabbing goals from further back and some ball-playing talent in midfield in Sean Goss and Ollie Norburn, there were the makings of a decent attacking unit at Shrewsbury this season.

Instead, the emphasis has been on defence, where the Ro-Shaun Williams, Aaron Pierre and Ethan Ebanks-Landell have formed an imposing unit ahead of shot-stopper Max O'Leary. The problem has been that Shrewsbury have been so focused on stopping opponents that they don't know what to do when they need to chase games, which has led to a handful of really open-ended games.

By the time Ricketts seemed to have figured out the balance between attack and defence, Shrewsbury's hopes for the play-offs had extinguished. If he doesn't take this season's lessons into this, he is likely to lose the patience of Shrewsbury fans.

Southend United

Final Position: 22nd



Top Scorer:

Charlie Kelman &
Stephen Humphrys (5)

43rd in League

Most Assists:

Sam Mantom (6)

10th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Stephen McLaughlin (9)

41st in League

Most Minutes Played:

Sam Mantom (3,048)

18th in League

Players Used:

40

2nd in League

Clean Sheets:

2

23rd in League

What I Said...

"Having a settled squad is probably the biggest advantage the club has over others heading into the new season. However, it is hard to shake the feeling that Southend are a club that is likely to drift into another relegation battle."

The Manager

Sol Campbell: Arrived into a tougher situation than he probably accounted for, Sol Campbell has improved performances at a marooned Southend United side but hasn't had the quality in his squad to convert it into results.

Star Player

Stephen McLaughlin: The wide-man can be a frustrating figure with his inconsistent end product, but McLaughlin has been one of the few senior players at Southend to have stepped up to the plate at a difficult time for the club.

Overview

After years of paying players and other creditors late, this is the year that Southend chairman, Ron Martin's, chickens have come home to roost in what has been an utterly disastrous campaign.

Southend's struggles last season were due in part to a horrendous injury list, there had been some hope for improvement once those players returned. However, a sense of apathy seemed to have

taken hold of the club from last season, setting the tone for a horrendous start under a manager in Kevin Bond who didn't cut a particularly motivated figure.

After dallying over a replacement for Bond, that poor start was allowed to degenerate into a full-blown crisis. Sol Campbell was eventually appointed with seemingly the promise of being able to completely rebuild the squad in January. However, a transfer embargo meant Campbell was forced to offload senior players without the ability to replace them.

The final months of the campaign have seen Campbell lead a skeleton squad packed out with energetic, but raw, youngsters. Performances have improved, but results have remained poor. It is a fully deserved relegation for a club that looks to have rotten from the inside to out.

Sunderland

Final Position: 8th



Top Scorer:

Lynden Gooch (11)

12th in League

Most Assists:

Chris Maguire (11)

2nd in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Chris Maguire (21)

2nd in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Luke O’Nien (3,101)

9th in League

Players Used:

27

13th in League

Clean Sheets:

11

9th in League

What I Said...

“Sunderland enter the new campaign with a sense of anxiety... A slow start could ratchet up the pressure to unbearable levels, it will take a strong mentality to be able to maintain a promotion bid through that.”

The Manager

Phil Parkinson: Appointed as a safe pair of hands, Parkinson endured a torrid start to life at Sunderland, winning two of his first ten games before eventually turning things around and nearly getting Sunderland into the automatic promotion race.

Star Player

Chris Maguire: A frustrating player of supreme talent who can be completely anonymous for long spells before suddenly flickering into life and winning games on his own. Revitalised under Parkinson, Maguire was in sensational form after the turn of the year.

Overview

Sunderland have continued to drift this season, failing to learn the lessons of last year’s play-off final defeat and threatening to completely implode before Phil Parkinson finally turned results around at the turn of the year.

Having played a slow brand of possession football under Jack Ross, Parkinson gradually moved the team towards a more physical, direct and outright

cynical style. While it points to the lack of ambition currently at the club, it eventually proved effective with the current set of players.

With an experienced and physically-strong squad, the return to form of playmaker Chris Maguire proved to be the catalyst for Sunderland’s turnaround. This was further aided by goalkeeper Jon McLaughlin and January centre-back signing Bailey Wright also stepping to the plate under Phil Parkinson’s management.

Having fallen short of promotion for the second season running, where Sunderland go from here is crucial. Underachievement has become more than a habit at the club and they could do with some fresh dynamism and excitement to lift the place. The current set-up feels a sticking plaster over deep wounds at the Stadium of Light.

Tranmere Rovers

Final Position: 21st



Top Scorer:

Morgan Ferrier (5)

43rd in League

Most Assists:

Kieron Morris (6)

10th in League

Most Goals

Involved In:

Kieron Morris (8)

52nd in League

Most Minutes

Played:

Kieron Morris (2,897)

30th in League

Players Used:

31

4th in League

Clean Sheets:

5

22nd in League

What I Said...

"Tranmere will have to rely on every ounce of momentum they have built up. They may be fairly solid in defence, but the seeming lack of creativity and goals looks to be a major concern."

The Manager

Micky Mellon: Has struggled to find an effective combination of the players at his disposal but has occasionally seen his side produce some spirited performances. Mellon probably took Tranmere too far, too fast with a squad this season still featuring several who played for the club in non-league.

Star Player

Manny Monthe: The powerful centre-back is a huge influence in both boxes for Tranmere Rovers. Monthe looks to be one of few Tranmere players that other clubs at this level will covet this summer.

Overview

Entering a campaign after back-to-back promotions having lost their talismanic goalscorer in James Norwood meant that safety was the only goal at Prenton Park this season. It was a task made all the more difficult by struggles with injuries throughout the campaign which have prevented the manager, Micky Mellon, from settling on a line-up or system.

Without a reliable goalscorer and with a defence that leaked goals at an often-alarming rate, it is clear why Tranmere have struggled this season. Micky Mellon's attempts to replace James Norwood have led to a seemingly scatter-gun transfer policy of misfits such as Morgan Ferrier, Stefan Payne and Corey Blackett-Taylor who have flattered to deceive.

While Tranmere feel aggrieved to have been relegated after a belated turnaround in form fuelled by the January additions of Peter Clarke in defence and James Vaughan in attack that left them three-points behind AFC Wimbledon with a game in hand, it's hard to argue that they were not the third-worst team in the division.

In the grander scheme of things, relegation for Tranmere could prove to be the step back that they've needed to take two forward. Having advanced so quickly from non-league, some extra time to build up the core of quality in the squad may have been beneficial in their attempts to eventually establish themselves in League One.

Wycombe Wanderers

Final Position: 3rd



Top Scorer:

Adebayo Akinfenwa
(10)

18th in League

Most Assists:

Adebayo Akinfenwa (5)

20th in League

Most Goals Involved In:

Adebayo Akinfenwa (15)

14th in League

Most Minutes Played:

Anthony Stewart
(3,060)

12th in League

Players Used:

25

18th in League

Clean Sheets:

13

4th in League

What I Said...

"Having a settled manager in Gareth Ainsworth feels like the advantage Wycombe have on the other weaker sides in the division. They may flirt with the relegation places, but they should have enough about them to stay up."

The Manager

Gareth Ainsworth: Has squeezed every possible drop out of his squad this season. Which resulted in Wycombe leading the league for an extended period of the campaign. A good man-manager who knows what he wants from his players, Wycombe are a highly-effective team unit under Ainsworth.

Star Player

Joe Jacobson: The set-piece wizard has taken a step up this season in what he can do with a dead-ball. A hat-trick of set-piece goals against Lincoln in September demonstrated there is no-one at this level who strikes a sitting ball as accurately as Joe Jacobson.

Overview

It has been a remarkable campaign for Wycombe that began inauspiciously with the club starting pre-season with just 14 players and seemingly without the funds to add too many to those numbers. The arrival of investment from the American businessman, Rob Couhig, has proven the injection of positivity

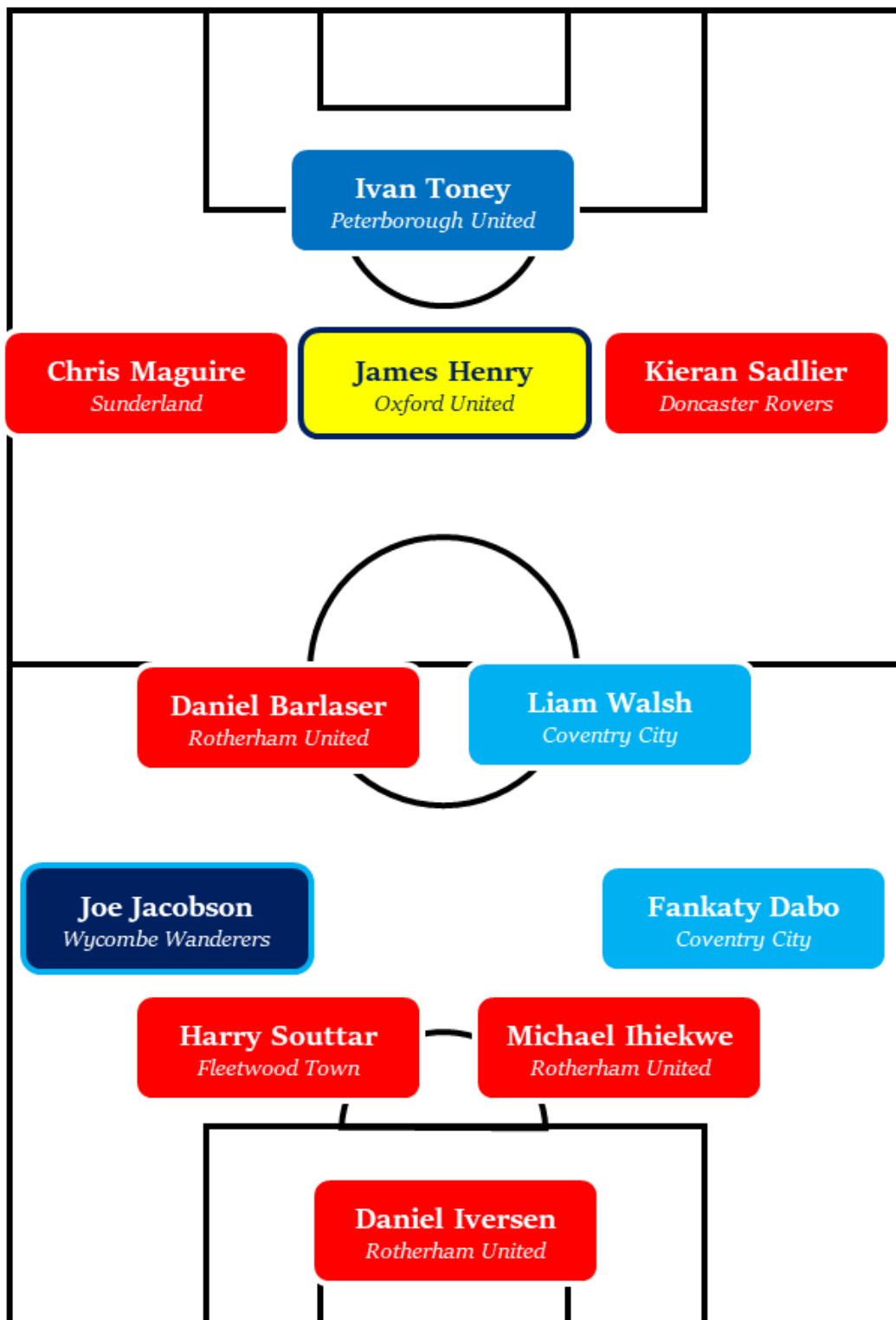
that has taken Wycombe to the next level.

What has been most incredible about this season for Wycombe has been that the strongest performers weren't necessarily the players signed after Couhig's investment arrived but the old guard, in particular, Joe Jacobson at left-back and Adebayo Akinfenwa in attack.

A well-organised and motivated team-unit where players know their roles and can adapt to playing a few different systems, Wycombe were relentless during October-November of this season before teams started to draw them back in to the promotion race from their league-leading position at half-way.

Just in what shape they enter play-offs in remains to be seen. Despite finishing the campaign third on Points Per Game, they enter the denouement of the campaign as outsiders. Getting into the Championship would cap off an incredible season.

Team of the Season



Daniel Iversen**Rotherham United****Pos: GK****Apps(Goals): 34(0)****1**

The Leicester City loanee has been the most reliable and consistent goalkeeper in the division. A tall shot-stopper who can command his area, Iversen's mistakes this season have been few and far between. With a powerful kick on him to boot, Iversen has been integral to Rotherham's powerful and athletic style of play. With competition for first-team football at his parent club likely to be congested, Iversen looks set to step up next season to the Championship – whether with Rotherham or another club.

Fankaty Dabo**Coventry City****Pos: RB****Apps(Goals): 32(0)****23**

After a clumsy first few games at Coventry City, Fankaty Dabo soon found enough confidence to become a force going forward. A quick and intelligent carrier of the ball, Dabo can not only burst past defenders but picks his moments to do so well. Has gradually developed confidence with the defensive side of his game as the season has progressed, Dabo is a committed and energetic player with incredible reserves of stamina. Like others in this team, Dabo looks more than ready to test himself at a higher level.

Michael Ihiekwe**Rotherham United****Pos: CB****Apps(Goals): 33(2)****20**

Ihiekwe has stepped up to the plate this season at the heart of Rotherham's defence following the departure of the influential Semi Ajayi – who is now a regular at Premier League-bound West Brom. One of the most dominant defenders in the division, Ihiekwe projects a confidence across his defence that allows Rotherham to play on the front foot. With Rotherham as a team a big threat from set-pieces, Ihiekwe's height and physicality has been used as a consistent weapon in the opposition box too.

Harry Souttar**Fleetwood Town****Pos: CB****Apps(Goals): 34(3)****6**

Returned to Fleetwood after a successful half-season loan spell last year, Souttar has further developed his game thanks to regular first-team football. Standing at six foot six, there has been almost no possibility of attackers besting Souttar in the air, which means opponents have to completely re-think the way in which they look to attack Fleetwood. A decent defender on the ground and with the ball at his feet, Souttar has all the attributes to establish himself at a higher-level, most likely with his parent club, Stoke City.

Joe Jacobson**Wycombe Wanderers Pos: LB****Apps(Goals): 30(9)****3**

The veteran has taken a huge step-up this season with his productivity from his already deadly set-pieces. A hat-trick of goals from dead ball situations back in September against Lincoln City demonstrated the sheer danger Jacobson can pose with his left foot. The left-back has been instrumental in Wycombe's surprise battle for promotion this season, either through his scoring and assisting or via his ability to put the ball into dangerous areas. Had the season not ended prematurely, the left-back would have reached double-figures for scoring.

Liam Walsh**Coventry City****Pos: CM****Apps(Goals): 26(3)****20**

An inspired loan signing late in the summer transfer window for Coventry City, Walsh has steadily improved his game to the level where he can easily impose his will in the centre of the park. A technically-gifted ball-playing midfielder, Walsh had initially struggled with the physical side of League One football, before developing the steeliness that now characterises his game. Capable of dictating most games, it is Walsh's ability to spot moments to up the tempo and get forward that have made him a consistently decisive player.

Daniel Barlasier**Rotherham United****Pos: CM****Apps(Goals): 27(2)****11**

The skinny Newcastle United loanee perhaps seemed an odd fit for a bustling, physical Rotherham United side – especially in a nominal defensive-midfield role. However, Barlasier has established himself as the vital cog in the Millers machine, sitting at the base of midfield, breaking play up, before opening the game out with his wonderful range of passing - his set-piece delivery has also been highly valuable. It is no coincidence that Rotherham's slight dip in form before the close of the campaign came when Barlasier picked up an injury.

Kieran Sadlier**Doncaster Rovers****Pos: W/ST****Apps(Goals): 33(11)****7**

Having been a bit-part player after arriving at Doncaster Rovers last January, Sadlier stepped into the void left by top-scorer John Marquis at the start of the campaign in leading the line and chipping in with some important goals. Moved into his more natural position out wide as the campaign progressed, Sadlier continued to step up with decisive contributions for Doncaster with his energy and attacking instincts. While not the most eye-catching, Sadlier's consistent output in front of goal earned him a place in my Team of the Season.

James Henry**Oxford United****Pos: CM/AM/W Apps(Goals): 30(12)**

The experienced midfielder has been a mainstay of an Oxford United attacking unit that has often been in flux this season. Capable of playing anywhere in midfield, Henry has continued to be a highly influential player at Oxford through his consistent ability to drive the team forward and step up with goals and assists. Having previously been seen as an orthodox, direct winger, Henry has added greater subtlety to his game in recent years while retaining the close control and delivery skills that all great wingers have.

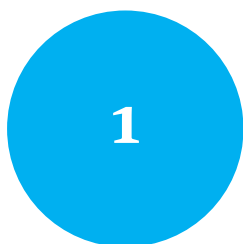
Chris Maguire**Sunderland****Pos: AM/W Apps(Goals): 35(10)**

While Maguire has frustrated for stretches of this campaign, his output justifies his more difficult tendencies. A spiky character who can find himself wound up by opponents and referees, Maguire's peerless ability to strike a ball with accuracy from both set-pieces and open play makes him a risky opponent to attempt to rub the wrong way. Maguire's form around the turn of the year was instrumental in Sunderland's revival under Phil Parkinson. If it wasn't for him, the Black Cats could really have found themselves in the mire.

Ivan Toney**Peterborough United****Pos: ST****Apps(Goals): 32(24)**

After a solid, if slightly inconsistent, first season at Peterborough United, Ivan Toney has proven himself to be of the class of other star strikers in Peterborough's recent history – such as Britt Assombalonga and Dwight Gayle – with a dominant season both in front of goal and in his all-round play. A tall and awkward opponent to deal with, Toney's turn of pace and skill marks him out as a player capable of possibly even reaching Premier League level very soon.

Player Reviews

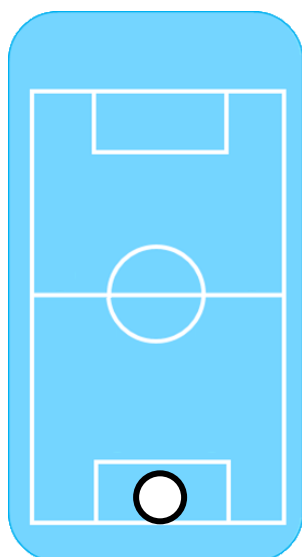


Marko Marosi

2019/20

Appearances	40
Starts	40
Minutes	3,974
Conceded	36
Clean Sheets	16

Position Map



It's never easy for a goalkeeper settling into a new team, however, Marko Marosi has done so relatively seamlessly. While he has been aided by playing behind a strong defensive unit, Marosi deserves praise for his contribution to our excellent record at the back this season.

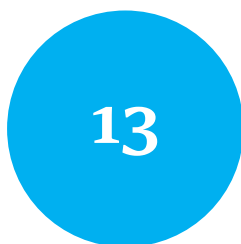
Our defensive strength has meant the biggest impact Marosi has made this season has been with the ball at his feet rather than in notable shot-stopping performances. While not quite a sweeper-keeper, Marosi's composure when receiving the ball has been a great aid in our ability to play around opponents attempting to disrupt our passing rhythm.

Over the course of the season, Marosi has had opportunities to demonstrate his prowess as a shot-stopper. His reflexes and height can make him a tough goalkeeper to beat on the rare occasions our defence has been gotten past.

If there is one criticism to be had of Marosi, it's his ability to claim crosses. However, the understanding he has with his defenders has meant that we've been able to navigate around this deficiency effectively.

Heading into the challenge of the Championship next season, Marosi has at least benefitted from a season where he's been able to settle into the team and bolster his confidence. Next season is likely to be a better indication of his ability as a goalkeeper than this season was.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Clean Sheet	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Clean Sheet	Ipswich Town (a)	League One

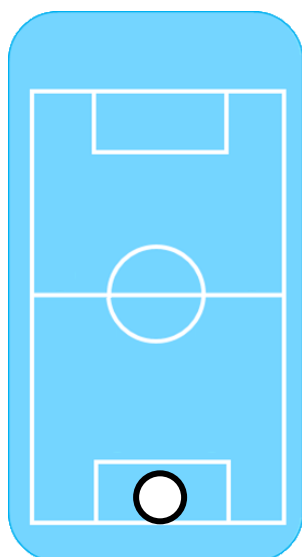


Ben Wilson

2019/20

Appearances	7
Starts	7
Minutes	680
Conceded	8
Clean Sheets	3

Position Map



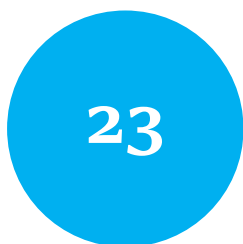
Clearly brought in as a back-up goalkeeper, Ben Wilson's only first-team action this season has come in the cup competitions due to Marko Marosi's strong form and evasion of injuries.

With such limited evidence to assess Wilson on, it is hard to gauge just how confident we can be should he be forced into the limelight for an extended period sometime in the future.

Wilson looks reasonably confident with the ball at his feet and communicates with his defence well. However, he is similar to Marosi in not seeming overly confident in dealing with crosses.

It still seems strange though to have signed a keeper of Wilson's age and lack of experience on a three-year deal. Were Marosi to lose form or not make the grade at a higher-level, it seems unlikely that Wilson would be of a high enough calibre to come into the team.

First Appearance	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
First Clean Sheet	Walsall (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Clean Sheet	Colchester United (a)	FA Cup

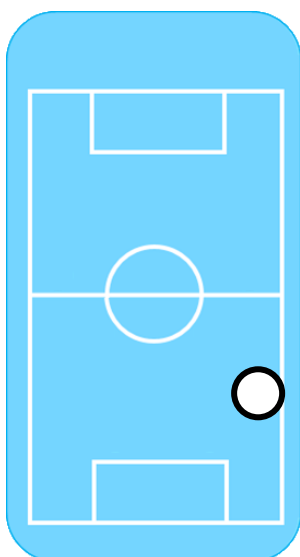


Fankaty Dabo

2019/20

Appearances	41
Starts	40
Minutes	3,926
Goals	0
Assists	4

Position Map



A fundamentally entertaining player to watch, Fankaty Dabo quickly progressed this season from a potential weak link into an integral part of the team.

Dabo's early displays were clumsy and undisciplined, lacking even the attacking surges that would soon characterise his game. A key turning-point in Dabo's Coventry City career was a storming assist for Jordy Hiwula in a League Cup tie against Exeter City in August that seemed to immediately bolster his confidence.

While there was still a sense that Dabo could be targeted by opponents, the timing of his runs and his use of the ball made him an increasingly reliable attacking outlet. Because of that set of strengths and weaknesses, Dabo was a key beneficiary of the switch to a back three and wing-backs a third of the way into the season.

A determined and intelligent player on that right side of the pitch, his ability to find space and drive at the opposition has made him a key part of our ability to stretch teams.

With the defensive side of the game having markedly improved as the season progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the signing of Dabo over the summer was a serious coup. He is one of the players in this squad who should make the step up to the Championships with ease.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-



Tennai Watson

2019/20

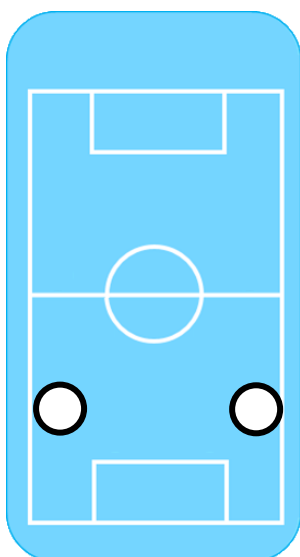
Appearances	7
Starts	5
Minutes	460
Goals	0
Assists	0

Brought in as injury cover for back-up right-back Josh Pask, Tennai Watson was a solid performer when called upon during his half season at Coventry City.

An energetic yet sturdy right-back who could also cover at left-back, there wasn't much of a noticeable drop-off when Watson came into the side in Fankaty Dabo's place.

Although he was a player who was allowed to leave with little afterthought, Tennai Watson looks a player with a reasonable future in the game. Wherever he ends up next season, I hope that he finds himself some regular first-team football to kick-start his career after a year as a back-up player.

Position Map



First Appearance	Oxford United (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

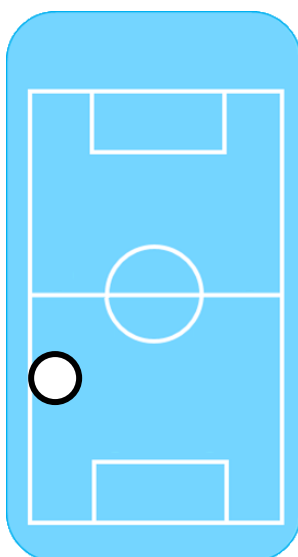
18

Ryan Giles

2019/20

Appearances	1
Starts	0
Minutes	12
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map



The premature ending to the 2019/20 season makes the decision to sign Ryan Giles as a third player who could play at left wing-back look especially strange.

Limited to just a 12-minute cameo appearance late on in the 1-1 draw against Rotherham United, it seems we'll never learn just what Mark Robins was hoping to get from Ryan Giles.

Our best indication of Giles' ability came when he lined up against the Sky Blues back in December for Shrewsbury Town. Playing in a more advanced role, Giles' pace and directness stretched our defence, contributing to our final league defeat of the campaign.

That seems exactly what Mark Robins had been looking for, however, the manager was unable to find a situation that called for it in the five weeks Giles was at the club. While the team had seemed to have been wanting for a pacey outlet at times during that period, the results demonstrated that Robins' compact system was our best method to victory.

First Appearance	Rotherham United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Rotherham United (h)	League One
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

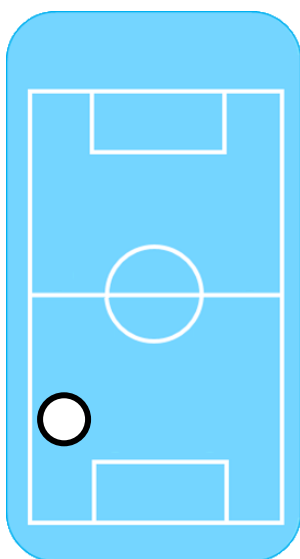


Brandon Mason

2019/20

Appearances	17
Starts	15
Minutes	1,491
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map



Having started the season with his best run of form for the club, Brandon Mason did little wrong to warrant having his place taken in the side by Sam McCallum.

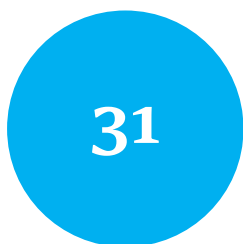
That he did seems to have been down to Mark Robins' desire to accelerate McCallum's development than a reflection on Brandon Mason's performances, per se. However, the situation may well have stunted Mason's development at a critical juncture of his career.

Mason is quietly tenacious defender who can support attacks intelligently. While he doesn't exactly bomb forward on the overlap and hammer crosses into the box, he links up with his team-mates well and can provide moments of quality in his final pass.

Just what happens next season with Mason will be interesting. While it is expected that he will return to being first-choice once Sam McCallum heads over to Norwich City, the step up to Championship is likely to see Mark Robins look to add quality wherever he can get it and there is a space in the squad to fill at left-back.

It is a demonstration of how ruthless an industry football is that a player like Mason can lose their place in a side without ever playing particularly poorly.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Birmingham City (a)	FA Cup
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

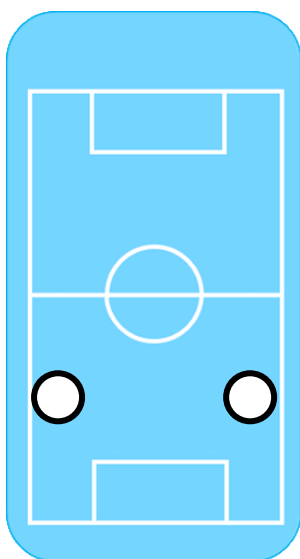


Sam McCallum

2019/20

Appearances	35
Starts	33
Minutes	3,270
Goals	3
Assists	1

Position Map



It has been an incredible upwards trajectory for Sam McCallum since his debut for the club 18 months ago, not long after signing from non-league Herne Bay.

Having looked nervous and uncertain last season, McCallum appeared much more ready for first-team football this time around. With Mark Robins' backing behind him, McCallum was very quickly promoted into the starting XI despite the form of Brandon Mason ahead of him in the pecking order.

While a more direct runner from left-back, strong in the air and with a decent long throw, it wasn't quite clear what McCallum was doing that made him a better option than Brandon Mason. Even stranger were the links with a move to a higher-level.

That was until his display away at Wycombe Wanderers, where he suddenly demonstrated a poise and certainty in his actions that suggested maybe the hype was justified. An excellent run of form from that point onwards made a January transfer increasingly inevitable.

While his form tailed off from that peak around the Christmas period, it was to be expected of a young player in his first full season as a first-choice player. Just what makes him so highly-rated remains somewhat unclear, but he is clearly a fast-learner and a good athlete. I am intrigued to see where his career takes him over the next few years.

First Appearance	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Colchester United (a)	FA Cup
Last Goal	Milton Keynes Dons (h)	League One

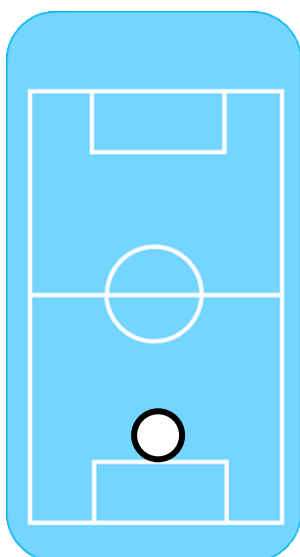
35

Declan Drysdale

2019/20

Appearances	3
Starts	3
Minutes	292
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map



With three strong senior options at centre-back, it was always going to be tough for anyone from the under-23 side to break into the side in the position Declan Drysdale plays.

It took a suspension to Kyle McFadzean to provide Drysdale his opportunity to make his league debut for the club, with the lanky, ball-playing centre-back providing a reasonable account of his ability.

Caught a little cold by playing on the left side of a back three, Drysdale was targeted by Rochdale on his debut back in November, leading to the team falling behind. However, the youngster recovered from that early wobble to put in several important challenges while demonstrating the confidence on the ball that has made him a key part of the under-23 side.

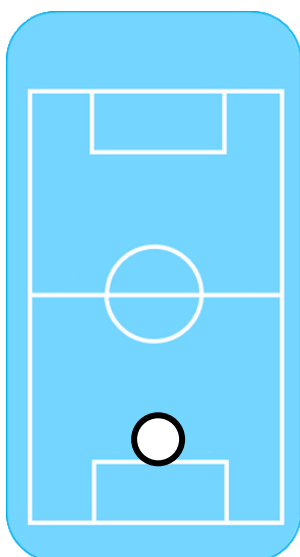
There is clearly the talent there, it's just about whether Drysdale gets the opportunities to show what he can do while there are more senior options ahead of him in the pecking order, which could be added to over the summer.

First Appearance	Southampton U-21s (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

15

2019/20

Appearances	37
Starts	36
Minutes	3,520
Goals	2
Assists	0

Position Map

Dominic Hyam

An incredibly reliable and unfussy performer, Dominic Hyam has again been one of the most consistent players in the side.

With Kyle McFadzean and Michael Rose arriving at the club over the summer, the position in the side of last year's player of the season was by no means certain. It is telling of Hyam's reliability that he was eventually handed the most difficult position in a back three without a natural left-footer, that left-sided berth.

Composed and positionally intelligent, Hyam has very rarely been caught out in that new position. It was a task made even more challenging by having to provide cover for a young, attacking, left wing-back in Sam McCallum, but Hyam's calm head has deftly aided McCallum this campaign.

Hyam's longer-range passing is probably the main area of his game in need of improvement. While he is more than comfortable passing the ball around at short distance, if he was capable of opening the game up with more destructive balls over the top, he would have just about every string to his bow.

Another player in the squad who we shouldn't be too worried about making that step up to the Championship.

First Appearance	Exeter City (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Gillingham (h)	League One
Last Goal	Sunderland (a)	League One

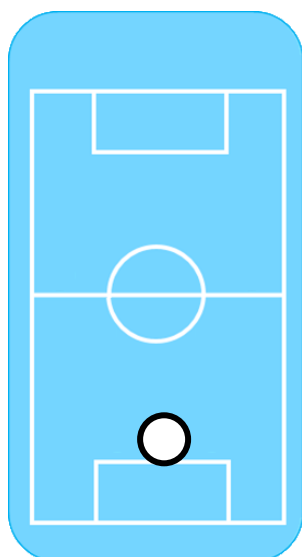


Kyle McFadzean

2019/20

Appearances	40
Starts	38
Minutes	3,779
Goals	0
Assists	1

Position Map



Kyle McFadzean eventually grew into an important figure for this team after an incredibly poor start to life at Coventry City.

While his physicality was a welcome addition to the backline, McFadzean's lumbering presence with and without the ball was costing the team goals left, right and centre. From misjudged passes to lunging into tackles against players who had already beaten him for pace, there was little justification for his continued inclusion in the side.

With a different make-up of defensive options, those poor early performances would have been the last we'd seen of McFadzean. However, Michael Rose and Dominic Hyam's lack of aggression combined with the attacking instincts of our full-backs caused Mark Robins to turn to a back-three system which has helped cover McFadzean's deficiencies and brought his battling qualities to the fore.

Having the legs of Hyam and Rose to cover for him enabled McFadzean to retain his natural aggressiveness in the challenge, helping the team withstand physical opposition. While he was still occasionally caught-out, those moments were much more infrequent than before.

It will be interesting to see what Mark Robins does with him next season. Given the manager's lack of sentimentality in the transfer market, it wouldn't be a surprise to see him relegated to a back-up role.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

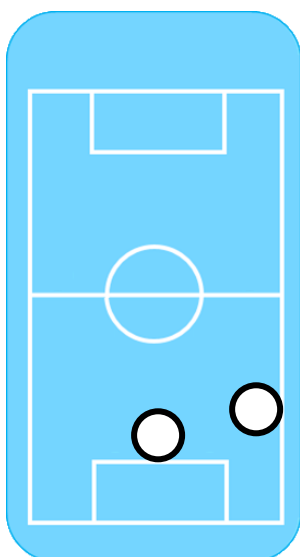
16

Josh Pask

2019/20

Appearances	4
Starts	2
Minutes	262
Goals	1
Assists	0

Position Map



Having not played a senior game in nearly three years, Josh Pask has had a frustrating first season away from the bubble of academy football, with injury curtailing his opportunity to stake a claim.

After missing the entirety of the first half of the campaign, Pask finally got onto the pitch in January as Mark Robins rotated the team for the FA Cup replays. Albeit based on limited minutes, Pask has looked an assured presence whenever called upon.

Capable of playing at both centre-back and right-back, Pask's calmness and athleticism has made him a useful option for the side in either position.

With the first-choice players in both those areas of the team looking nailed-on at this point in time, Pask's versatility at least enhances his opportunity to pick up experience wherever that comes available. However, there's always a risk, like Jordan Willis in his early career, that he gets caught between two positions.

Nonetheless, Josh Pask looks set to be a useful option for the team heading into next season who may well have the opportunity to be a little better than that if he gets a run in the side somewhere.

First Appearance	Bristol Rovers (h)	FA Cup
Last Appearance	Southend United (a)	League One
First Goal	Bristol Rovers (h)	FA Cup
Last Goal	Bristol Rovers (h)	FA Cup

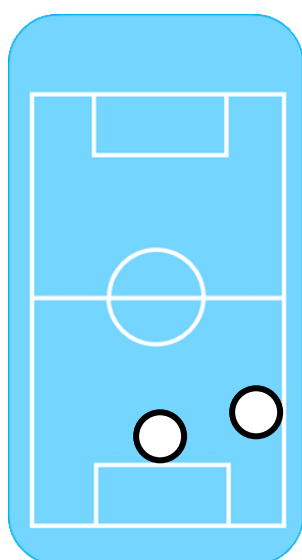


Michael Rose

2019/20

Appearances	40
Starts	39
Minutes	3,868
Goals	2
Assists	3

Position Map



Brought in over the summer with a decent reputation from his time in Scotland, Michael Rose has been a reliable presence at the back who has shown at times that he may already have been capable of playing at a higher-level.

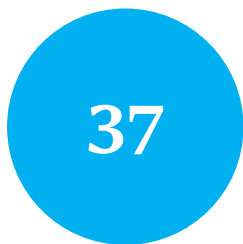
A solid defender who is comfortable in possession without being overly showy, Michael Rose has been an important part of a strong defensive unit this season. It is only occasionally that he has looked troubled by opposing attackers and has generally looked a defender who really relishes the opportunity to dig in and battle for the team.

Rose is the best passer of our three first-choice centre-backs, mainly focusing on making shorter passes into midfield after being guilty early in the season of attempting longer passes that he wasn't quite capable of pulling off.

It was in the FA Cup ties against Birmingham City that Michael Rose provided the best indication that he is capable of kicking on at a higher-level. While he wasn't noticeably outstanding, the calm manner in which he dealt with a higher standard of opponent was impressive.

Stepping up the Championship is going to provide the opportunity for Rose to demonstrate that he can perform to that higher standard on a weekly basis.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Portsmouth (a)	League One
Last Goal	Rochdale (a)	League One



Morgan Williams

2019/20

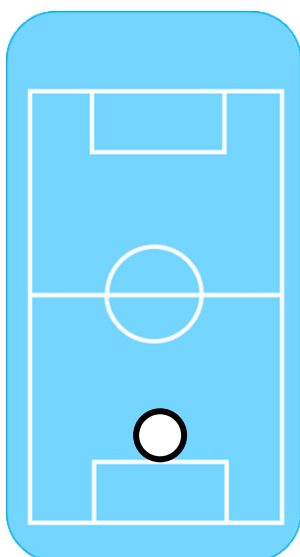
Appearances	2
Starts	2
Minutes	193
Goals	0
Assists	0

Captain of the under-23 side, Morgan Williams' first-team experience this season has come via the cup competitions and a brief loan spell at Yeovil Town.

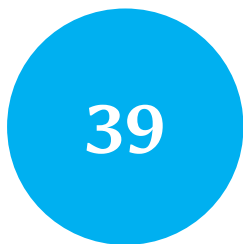
A physical centre-back, Williams' progression has been hampered partially by the number of senior players in his position ahead of him and partially by the change towards a possession-based style of football.

Having made a reasonable impression on his league debut last season, Williams looks a decent prospect, but it appears as if Declan Drysdale is the likeliest to come into the team should a vacancy arise.

Position Map



First Appearance	Walsall (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-



Dan Bartlett

2019/20

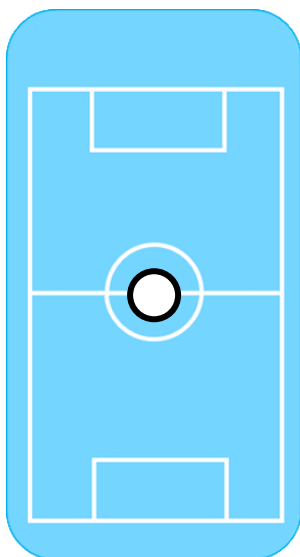
Appearances	1
Starts	1
Minutes	96
Goals	0
Assists	0

Brought in over the summer after impressing on trial, Dan Bartlett made his debut for the club in the EFL Trophy tie against Walsall back in September.

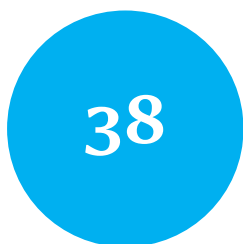
The youngster looked reasonably composed in possession, albeit not entirely assertive off-the-ball against a more experienced Walsall side.

Suffering an unfortunate cruciate ligament injury not long after that debut must have been incredibly frustrating. It would be some achievement for the youngster to come back stronger next season.

Position Map



First Appearance	Walsall (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Walsall (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

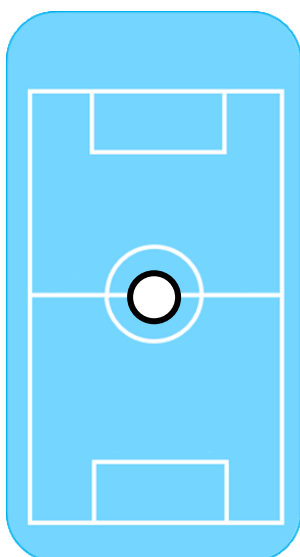


Josh Eccles

2019/20

Appearances	11
Starts	6
Minutes	614
Goals	0
Assists	1

Position Map



One of only three players from the under-23 squad to step up to gain their first league minutes for the club this season, Josh Eccles has been the one to feature the most.

Generally coming on as a late substitute to add fresher legs in midfield, Eccles only league start came in November in the 2-1 victory over Rochdale.

While Eccles showed some good touches and made some decent passes, he struggled to impose himself on the game. Developing an extra level of physicality and assertiveness will be important for Eccles in the next stage of his development that is the difference between youth-team and men's football, particularly in the centre of the park.

With a strong pre-season, Eccles could well push himself a little higher up in Mark Robins thinking for the first-team squad. The next year or so could well be an important one between Eccles stepping up into the first-team or having to find a loan move to gain further experience.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Bristol Rovers (h)	FA Cup
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

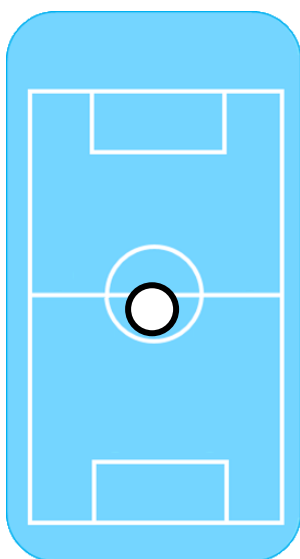


Liam Kelly

2019/20

Appearances	37
Starts	35
Minutes	3,552
Goals	0
Assists	3

Position Map



Liam Kelly is one of the few players who remain from our League Two promotion-winning campaign and is probably the most important first-team member of that select group.

Kelly's experience and physical presence in central midfield provides the platform for our more skilful players to excel. While he has shown moments of quality of his own, it's fair to say that others are better capable of providing match-winning moments.

The arrival of Liam Walsh late in the summer threatened Liam Kelly's position in the side, however, the two have dovetailed nicely in that area of the pitch ever since Mark Robins settled on them as his preferred central midfield pairing.

There were signs towards the end of the season that Kelly's form had tailed-off slightly. Not quite providing that same level of calm assuredness that had seen him step into Michael Doyle's shoes so ably, however, he has shown enough throughout the course of the past 18 months that the drop-off in form is only a temporary one.

A steady, solid performer, it would be a huge help to the team were he to make the step up to the Championship. This is a young side that needs a calm head to help them through games, the worry is that the greater pace and intensity of that level of football could force Mark Robins into looking at alternatives in his position.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

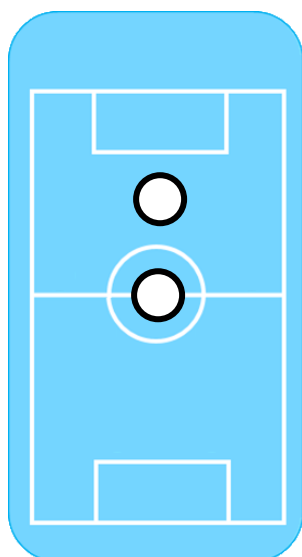
26

Jordan Shipley

2019/20

Appearances	42
Starts	32
Minutes	2,890
Goals	7
Assists	5

Position Map



In the wake of the summer departure of Tom Bayliss, this looked set to be a season where Jordan Shipley would have to step up from being a useful squad player to a reliable starter.

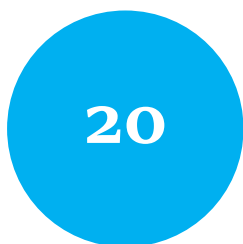
His goals and assists return demonstrate that this is exactly what he has been able to do. Starting off the season as part of a three-man central midfield, Shipley then adapted successfully to playing in an even more advanced position once Mark Robins switched to the 3-6-1 shape that has been effective this campaign.

It is in that more advanced role that we have seen Shipley's tactical intelligence in his ability to assess when to drop deep and when to make supporting runs around and ahead of the centre-forward. Shipley appeared to develop a deadly relationship with Matt Godden around the Christmas period that aided our surge up the table.

That said, Shipley is the kind of player who fades in and out of games. While there is quality in his passing, he can often go through phases where he can barely pick out a team-mate. Cutting out that occasional sloppiness is the next step he needs to make.

A player who has grown in time with our rise up the divisions, it wouldn't be a surprise to see Jordan Shipley kick on further next season.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Bristol Rovers (h)	League One
Last Goal	Doncaster Rovers (a)	League One

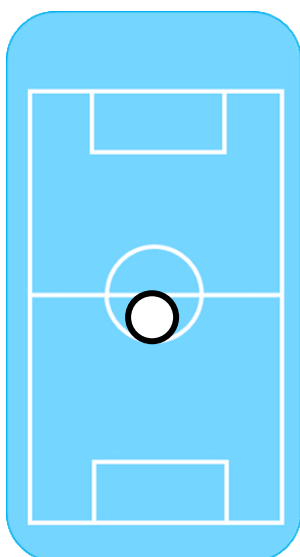


Liam Walsh

2019/20

Appearances	34
Starts	32
Minutes	3,067
Goals	4
Assists	8

Position Map



Brought in on transfer deadline day as seemingly something of an afterthought to cover an injury to Liam Kelly, Liam Walsh has proven to be the best piece of business the club has done over the campaign.

A central midfielder who can orchestrate games with his range of passing, Walsh starting off his time at the club looking a talented player who struggled with the physicality of the division. However, he quickly adapted his game, developing a physical toughness of his own, that provided him the platform to demonstrate his full technical skill-set.

Not just a ball-playing midfielder who'll sit and watch their own passes, Walsh can beat opponents for skill and drive forward with the ball. He doesn't always do so but seems to pick the moments when they'll be most impactful in games, which has led to him contributing to a number of match-winning moments this season.

As the campaign has progressed, it has become increasingly apparent that Walsh is one of those special players that come around every year or two who are a class or two above the team's current level.

He's clearly benefitted from finally playing regular football this season, it will be a crime if Bristol City don't find a space for him in their team next year.

First Appearance	Blackpool (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	AFC Wimbledon (h)	League One
Last Goal	Bristol Rovers (a)	League One



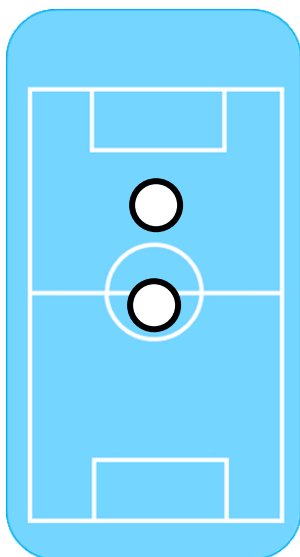
Zain

Westbrooke

2019/20

Appearances	32
Starts	29
Minutes	2,425
Goals	4
Assists	5

Position Map



Having looked a reasonable talent in the few appearances he'd made in his first season at the club, this year was set to be an important one in Westbrooke's development.

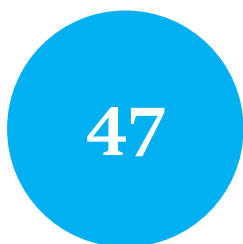
A first goal for the club on the opening day of the season set Westbrooke up nicely to nail down a starting spot in the side, however, he hasn't quite managed to find a way to consistently impose himself on games.

Intelligent with the ball and an accurate set-piece taker, Westbrooke fits in well with our style of play and has stepped up with some important and well-taken finishes.

A return of four goals and five assists is more than adequate for a central midfielder who also learned how to play in a more advanced role over the second half of the campaign – demonstrating a level of tactical intelligence.

With the club holding the option to extend his contract for one more season, Westbrooke seems likely to have the opportunity to demonstrate if he can make the step up to the Championship. It possibly comes a year or two too early in Westbrooke's career, if he does get chances to play, he'll really have to seize the bull by the horns.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Goal	Lincoln City (h)	League One



Jordan Young

2019/20

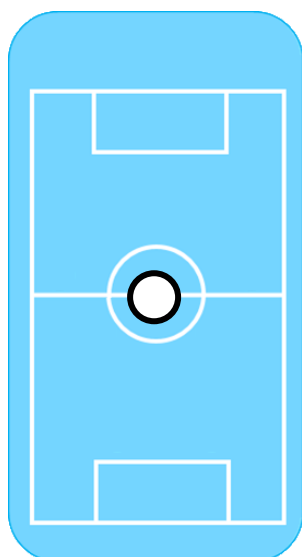
Appearances	1
Starts	0
Minutes	8
Goals	0
Assists	0

Brought in to help fill out numbers in the under-23 side, Jordan Young came on as a late substitute in the EFL Trophy win over Southampton under-23s as his senior debut for the club.

Having previously been considered a bright prospect during his time at Swindon Town, Young looks a reasonable low-cost, low-risk investment by the club. By all accounts, he has been a decent performer for the under-23 side.

With his contract up this summer, his fate is likely to rest on just how financially healthy the club is and whether we can justify funding the under-23 side to the extent that we have done this season.

Position Map



First Appearance	Southampton Under-21 (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Southampton Under-21 (h)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

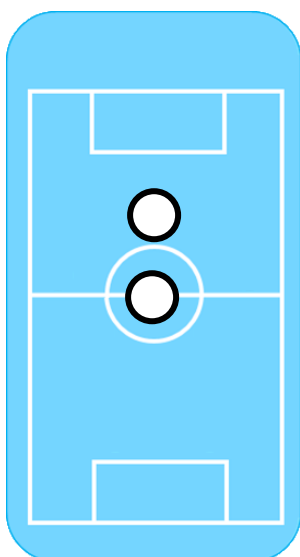


Jamie Allen

2019/20

Appearances	16
Starts	10
Minutes	1,020
Goals	1
Assists	4

Position Map



One of the most notable pieces of summer transfer activity, a niggling injury meant that Jamie Allen was kept out of most of the first half of the campaign and thus allowed him to slowly work his way into the team away from the pressure of being perceived to be a big signing.

An incredibly industrious midfielder who likes to close opponents down and drive forward with the ball, the directness that Allen offers made him perfect for the role as one of the more advanced midfield players in Mark Robins' 3-6-1 system.

With a decent return of goals and assists during the relatively limited period in which he could play, the frustration with the premature close to the season for Jamie Allen is that it felt that he was yet to quite develop a proper understanding with his team-mates.

Heading into next season, Allen will be hoping that extra time on the training pitch will allow him to hit the ground running, providing a better indication of the extent of his ability.

Allen feels like the kind of honest, committed and versatile player who could well establish himself as an important part of the team for the years to come.

First Appearance	Sunderland (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Bristol Rovers (a)	League One
Last Goal	Bristol Rovers (a)	League One

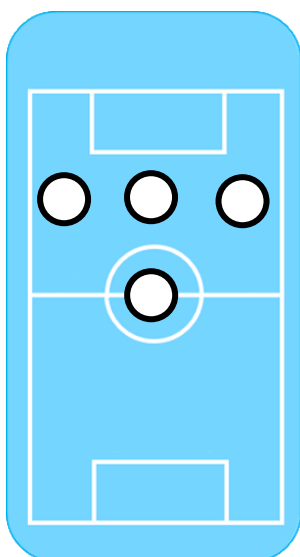


Callum O'Hare

2019/20

Appearances	40
Starts	23
Minutes	2,646
Goals	4
Assists	6

Position Map



A key loan signing brought in to fill the creative void left by Bright Enobakhare, Callum O'Hare has largely been used as an impact player.

A technically skilful and surprisingly physically committed player, O'Hare looked capable of setting the league alight in his first appearances for the club where he was regularly producing match-winning moments borne out of that electric combination of skill and determination.

A big issue in O'Hare taking that next step up has been figuring out his best position. Not quite a central midfielder, winger, or a number 10, O'Hare is at his best driving forward with space to attack and playing quick one-twos with his team-mates.

Furthermore, as an inexperienced player, O'Hare has at times been guilty of trying a little too hard to force things, running himself into dead ends, when a calmer head would use his energy and skill more productively.

There were signs before the season was halted that O'Hare was starting to learn when and where to best use his talents, but he wasn't quite able to develop an understanding as part of the attacking unit to grab the goals and assists he could have had.

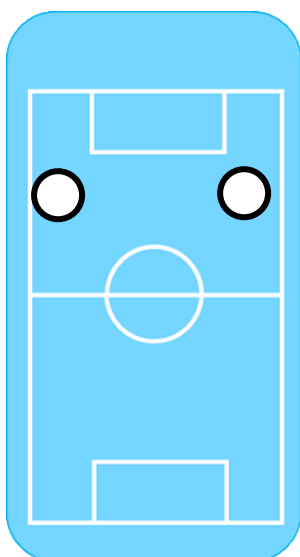
The talent and determination is there for all to see, it is about refining it into something productive that will allow O'Hare to make that next step in his career.

First Appearance	Gillingham (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Oxford United (a)	League One
Last Goal	Southend United (a)	League One

41

2019/20

Appearances	4
Starts	2
Minutes	207
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map

William Bapaga

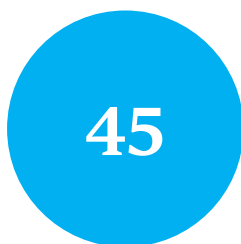
One of the youngest players to ever make their league debut for the club, William Bapaga looks a player with a bright future ahead of him.

Having generally operated out wide when handed first-team minutes this season, the reports from under-23 level is that Bapaga is yet to ascertain his strongest position, with there being a possibility he may develop into a striker rather than a winger.

Fast, technically adept and with a directness to his game, Bapaga has looked a talented prospect whenever he's been used this season, even if he doesn't appear quite ready physically for men's football.

Still at a very young age, Bapaga is under little pressure to make a breakthrough anytime soon but looks to be one of the current under-23 players with the best chances of doing so.

First Appearance	Bolton Wanderers (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Southampton Under-21 (h)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-



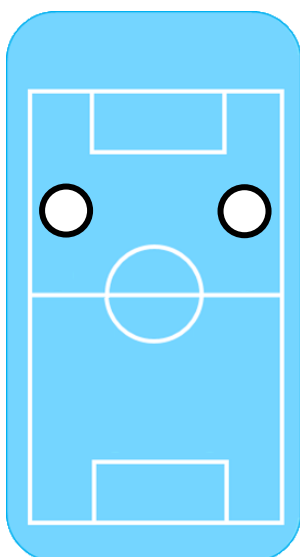
Jack

Burroughs

2019/20

Appearances	1
Starts	0
Minutes	35
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map

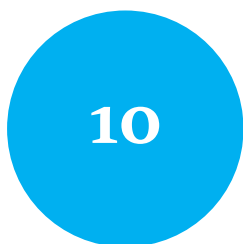


A Scotland youth international, Jack Burroughs looks to be one of the brighter prospects from the current crop of academy players.

However, an issue for the youngster looks to be settling on his strongest position. Having featured for the first-team last season as a central midfield player, it appears that the preference from the club is to develop him into a wide player. Injuries at under-23 level have even seen Burroughs fill in as a right-back.

Having looked one of the better-placed prospects to step up to the first-team last year, that lack of certainty over his position seems to have stifled his development somewhat.

First Appearance	Walsall (h)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Walsall (h)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

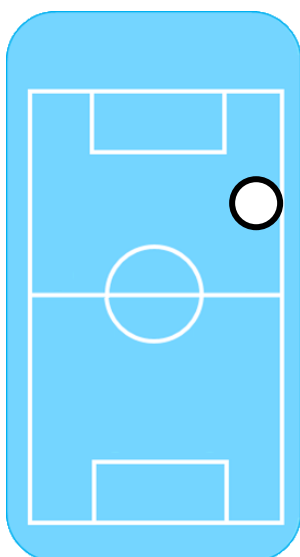


Wesley Jobello

2019/20

Appearances	11
Starts	11
Minutes	913
Goals	1
Assists	1

Position Map



There was a lot of excitement over Jobello heading into the season that I never thought was quite justified.

A lanky winger who could hold the width on the right-hand side of the pitch, it was the lack of reliability in Jobello's final ball that made me question how much of an impact he was capable of making.

Nonetheless, Jobello made himself a useful outlet for the side during the opening months of the campaign, while he struggled to beat defenders, he stretched teams by staying out wide, running in a straight line and hammering in crosses of varying accuracy

While his injury coincided with our only back-to-back defeats in the league, I'm not convinced that Jobello's absence was particularly costly to the team. Especially as there were signs in the appearances before he picked up that injury that his form was on the wane.

Jobello will do well to return from such a serious injury as the same player he was before, at the same time as we're stepping up to a level where we'll need better quality in his position. With the side having evolved away from needing a winger of his ilk, it makes it even tougher task for Jobello to get back into the team.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Doncaster Rovers (h)	League One
First Goal	Blackpool (h)	League One
Last Goal	Blackpool (h)	League One

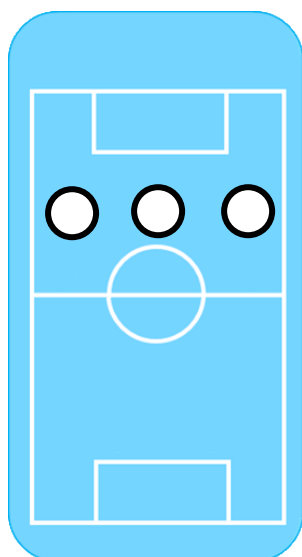


Jodi Jones

2019/20

Appearances	2
Starts	0
Minutes	52
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map



The season ended just at the stage Jodi Jones was gearing up for a return to first-team action after over two years of injury hell.

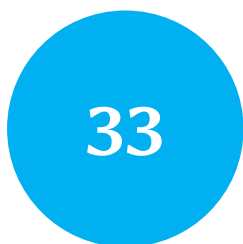
With the club taking an incredibly cautious approach with Jones' return this time around, the rest of the campaign looked to be about dipping Jones' toes gently back into the water rather than expecting him to step up with the kind of match-winning moments he was producing before his injury problems began.

In the few first-team appearances he made this campaign, Jones looked in reasonable physical condition and seemed to have retained his technical skill. While there seemed a certain tentativeness in his game, that was to be expected considering the seriousness of his recent injuries.

Like Jobello, the challenge for Jodi Jones next season will be staking his claim in a side that has evolved away from playing with wingers. However, with Jones a more technically-adroit player than Jobello, he would seemingly be better capable of adapting to playing in a more central role.

Let's hope that next year marks the true return of Jodi Jones.

First Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
Last Appearance	Bristol Rovers (h)	FA Cup
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

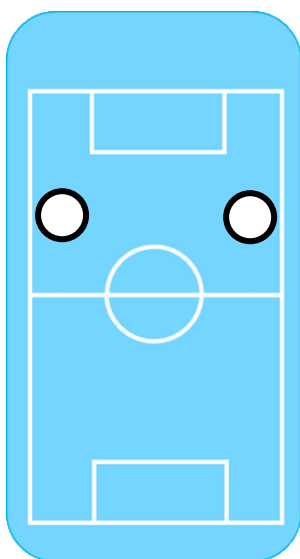


Gervane Kastaneer

2019/20

Appearances	16
Starts	5
Minutes	601
Goals	1
Assists	0

Position Map



Gervane Kastaneer looked set to be an enigma right from his very arrival at the club.

Possessing a strange combination of physical brutality and technical skill, Kastaneer looked an unruly player who could be an individual match-winner if harnessed in the right way.

In two games, against Bristol Rovers and Portsmouth, we saw the best and worst of Gervane Kastaneer. A powerful match-winning effort against Bristol Rovers suggested he could be the ace up Mark Robins' sleeve, an almost comically reckless red card against Portsmouth suggested he would be a hard player to harness within a team-unit.

That red card wasn't the end of Kastaneer's season, however, he failed to demonstrate that he had the talent to counter-balance those significant deficiencies. Worst of all, Kastaneer seems to have lacked a basic level of fitness to be relied upon to complete 90 minutes.

Unlikely to work his way back into the fold, the question now is just what we do with Kastaneer with two years still left on his contract. Whatever happens with him, you suspect the experience with Kastaneer will make the club a little warier when committing to signing players from overseas.

First Appearance	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Appearance	Shrewsbury Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Bristol Rovers (h)	League One
Last Goal	Bristol Rovers (h)	League One

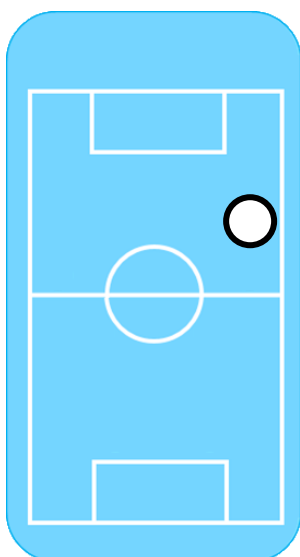
44

Charlie Wakefield

2019/20

Appearances	3
Starts	2
Minutes	129
Goals	0
Assists	0

Position Map



Charlie Wakefield looks to have been something of a panic buy on January transfer deadline day 18 months ago.

The lanky winger was brought in to fill a gap in the squad at the time, making several late substitute appearances towards the end of last season with his only notable impact being the cross that set up Conor Chaplin for the winning goal in the 5-4 win over Sunderland.

Wakefield's one league appearance this time out was, again as a late substitute, against Gillingham back in August. Since then, he has played a couple of EFL Trophy games before suffering an injury set-back just around the time that Wesley Jobello's injury could have opened up place for him in the side.

While Wakefield has looked a fairly unconvincing player in the few games he was played for the club, it would be unfair to judge him on such little evidence. Having had injury problems prior to his time at the club, Wakefield will be hoping he can find a place next season where he can overcome them with regular first-team football.

First Appearance	Gillingham (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Forest Green Rovers (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	n/a	-
Last Goal	n/a	-

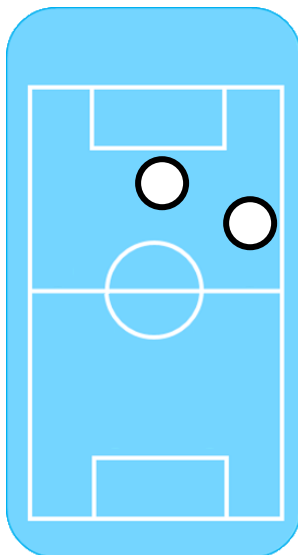
21

Amadou Bakayoko

2019/20

Appearances	33
Starts	17
Minutes	1,877
Goals	5
Assists	2

Position Map



Amadou Bakayoko has seemed a player Mark Robins has been keen to give every opportunity to develop but has never quite kicked on to the extent required to command a starting place in the side.

Bakayoko's best run of form for the club came during the back end of last season when he led an attacking unit that had the pace and skill of Bright Enobakhare, Luke Thomas and Jordy Hiwula operating just behind him. However, the addition of Matt Godden over the summer suggested Robins didn't quite trust Bakayoko as a starter for a full season.

Having made a few reasonable substitute appearances, an attacking injury crisis in November cleared the path for Bakayoko to nail down a starting role. Despite his best efforts, Bakayoko's failure to convince in front of goal cost him his place in the side.

There are the raw elements in place for Bakayoko to be an effective League One centre-forward. He is tall, strong, surprisingly quick and a hard-worker. However, he appears he lacks the intelligence and self-belief to convert those raw attributes into a consistent threat.

Even after again losing his place to Godden in December, Bakayoko has shown he can positively affect games. However, it wasn't to the level that you could imagine him taking a step-up next season in the Championship.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Goal	Bolton Wanderers (h)	League One

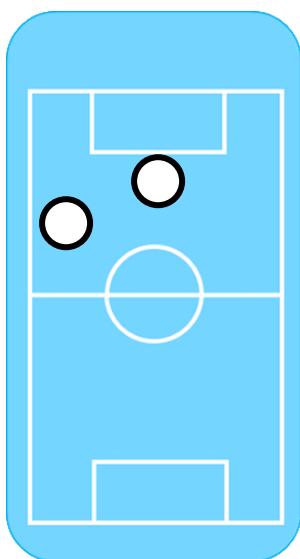


Maxime Biamou

2019/20

Appearances	26
Starts	10
Minutes	1,304
Goals	11
Assists	2

Position Map



Having recovered from a serious injury heading into the campaign, Maxime Biamou has returned to the side possibly a better player than he was before.

While he was unable to nail down a starting role in the side, Biamou has looked much more confident in front of goal, stepping up with several important strikes that have kept our promotion bid going.

In fact, Biamou has the best goals-to-minutes ratio this season of any player in the squad.

Unfortunately, the combination of the system Mark Robins has wanted to play and the signing of Matt Godden over the summer has meant Biamou has never had the opportunity to nail down a starting role in the side.

A physical centre-forward who can hold the ball up and score goals could have been an ideal foil for a team with a lot of fast, technical players. However, it is perhaps the fact that there are so many players who can take hold of the ball in dangerous areas on their own that has negated the need for an out-and-out target-man.

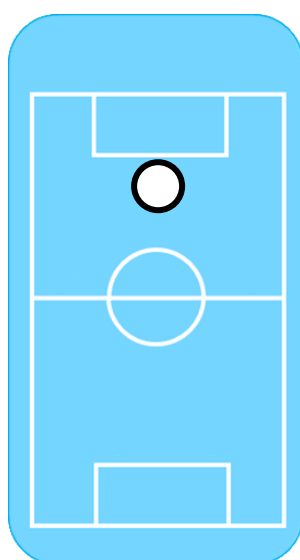
It is a demonstration of Biamou's excellent attitude that he has been content with playing a second/third-choice role in the side. He could provide a useful option next season in the Championship, however, I wonder whether Mark Robins will want to add quality up front which may end up pushing Biamou out the door.

First Appearance	Bolton Wanderers (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Rotherham United (h)	League One
First Goal	Peterborough United (a)	League One
Last Goal	Southend United (a)	League One

24

2019/20

Appearances	33
Starts	25
Minutes	2,519
Goals	15
Assists	2

Position Map

Matt Godden

Our top-scorer, Matt Godden's reliability in front of goal has been streaky over the course of the campaign.

After a reasonably encouraging start to life at the club where his movement and striker's instincts looked to be an improvement on our other attacking options, Godden seemed increasingly frustrated and isolated at playing as a lone centre-forward in a 4-3-3.

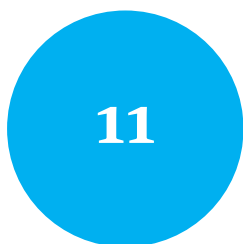
An injury in October possibly came at a good time for him to re-set, with his return coinciding with an incredible feat of back-to-back hat-tricks, which catapulted the team into the promotion race

Yet, Godden again saw his confidence gradually drain from that high point, culminating in a bizarre attempt to lob Birmingham City's Lee Camp in the closing stages of the FA Cup replay which belied a lack of self-belief.

Godden then recovered from that dip in confidence to score the crucial winning goal against Portsmouth, then adding to that with other match-winning finishes against Sunderland and Ipswich Town. There is arguably no-one in this team who has made a greater individual contribution to our promotion than Matt Godden.

The big summer striker signing, Matt Godden has done the job expected of him by registering goals at a strike rate just below one in two games. Whether he can continue a similar rate in the Championship remains to be seen.

First Appearance	Bolton Wanderers (a)	League One
Last Appearance	Ipswich Town (a)	League One
First Goal	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Goal	Ipswich Town (a)	League One

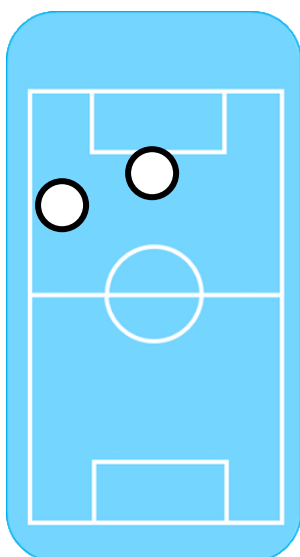


Jordy Hiwula

2019/20

Appearances	18
Starts	17
Minutes	1,458
Goals	4
Assists	3

Position Map



Jordy Hiwula entered the campaign as the top-scoring player from last season but has ended it almost as far away from the first-team as possible.

It is the lack of conviction and apparent self-belief in Hiwula's game that seems to have held him back. Quick and capable of moments of great skill, Hiwula has never quite seemed driven or confident enough in his own ability to convert that into a consistent threat.

Even at his best, he drifts in and out of games, which means you never know quite what he is going to do next. It is that sense of him not quite being in control of what he does next that is particularly frustrating.

While he seemed to have lost confidence in himself around October, it seems harsh that he has been exiled entirely from the first-team since that point of the season. Hiwula's pace could have been a useful attribute from the bench when we've needed to stretch teams.

The change in system hasn't helped Hiwula, he is neither an out-and-out centre-forward, nor capable of playing in an advanced midfield role. Perhaps, Hiwula has simply been a victim of the decreasing need to change things up as the season has progressed.

With a solid scoring record in League One, you would imagine Hiwula will have no problem finding a new club this summer. It's just that it seems unlikely he'll kick on from that level.

First Appearance	Southend United (h)	League One
Last Appearance	Milton Keynes Dons (a)	EFL Trophy
First Goal	Exeter City (h)	League Cup
Last Goal	AFC Wimbledon (h)	League One

Most Used Team





Top Scorer

Player	All Comps	League
Matt Godden	15	14
Maxime Biamou	11	4
Jordan Shipley	7	5
Amadou Bakayoko	5	4



Most Assists

Player	All Comps	League
Liam Walsh	8	5
Callum O'Hare	6	3
Jordan Shipley	5	4
Zain Westbrooke	5	2



Most Goal Involvements

Player	All Comps	League
Matt Godden	17	16
Maxime Biamou	13	5
Jordan Shipley	12	9
Liam Walsh	12	8



Most Minutes Played

Player	All Comps	League
Marko Marošić	3,974	3,351
Fankaty Dabo	3,926	3,057
Michael Rose	3,865	2,989
Kyle McFadzean	3,779	2,776

Story Of The Season

Part One

New Environs

1st July 2019 – 20th August 2019

For what could be considered a tempestuous summer, the most remarkable thing to happen was how straightforwardly Mark Robins got on with his transfer business.

Having ended last season looking set for a bright campaign to follow, with an extended stay at the Ricoh Arena looking likely and Mark Robins plotting some ambitious moves in the transfer market, the expected confirmation of the club's stay in Coventry dragged on, then on and on and on.

The revelation that SISU had made a complaint to the EU Commission back in February regarding the sale of the Ricoh Arena to Wasps proved a sickening twist to negotiations that had seemingly taken place in good faith. Soon, both sides were back to wielding accusations at one another, with the eventual announcement that the club would again be forced into exile from Coventry seeming likely to put paid to all of the progress made by Mark Robins since his return to the club in March 2017.

However, that sickening breakdown of negotiations was contrasted sharply with the business Mark Robins was doing in the transfer market.

Although the club failed to secure the return of last season's loan star Bright Enobakhare and also sold top youngster Tom Bayliss, the additions of centre-back Kyle McFadzean, central midfielder Jamie Allen and striker Matt Godden indicated that the club was operating in a position of strength in the transfer market. Further intrigue came via the additions of wingers Wesley Jobello and Gervane Kastaneer from foreign shores, suggesting the club was running a slick, intelligent recruitment operation.

It meant that fans heading to Birmingham on a sunny August afternoon to see the season kick off weren't quite sure what to expect. More than anything that happened over the summer, the performance, result and atmosphere for the opening game of the season looked set to define expectations for the rest of the campaign.

The opposition were a Southend United side that had struggled the previous season. The Sky Blues started the game energetically, placing an emphasis on playing out from the back, testing the footwork of new goalkeeper, Marko Marosi. There were flashes of promise but also a sense that this team was teetering on the edge of a catastrophic error or two.

It was perhaps this fear of making errors that led to a largely tepid contest. The players were still getting to know one another, occasionally treading on each other's toes, playing passes to each other that hadn't been anticipated, not knowing when to make runs. There had been some good passages of play, but Southend's goal had barely been threatened.

The game's golden chance looked to have been spurned by Jordy Hiwula in the first-half, as the forward seized on a poor touch from a Southend defender, rounded the keeper, only for his unconvincing effort on goal to provide the opportunity for the away side to spare their blushes.

The second-half picked up in a similar manner to the first, crucially though, a swift passing move set-up Zain Westbrooke to arrow an effort from outside the penalty area into the back of the net to put the Sky Blues ahead and validate the effort this side was putting in to playing tidy, possession football.

Southend United

League One

03/08/19

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Westbrooke

While Southend forged a couple of good chances as they mounted pressure on the Sky Blues towards the game's closing stages, it was a performance good enough to win the game in an atmosphere of encouragement from a set of fans looking to get behind the team.

The first away trip of the season, at a beleaguered Bolton Wanderers side whose senior players were on strike for this fixture, looked a perfect opportunity to keep the momentum going for at least another week longer.

Bolton's starting line-up had an average age of just 19 and their oldest player at 24 years-old. It looked set to be a walk in the park, the only doubt heading into the game appeared to be how many this team would manage to get.

In a frustrating first-half where the Sky Blues were guilty of moving the ball too slowly, a breakthrough looked to have been found just after the half-hour mark when the lanky French winger, Wesley Jobello, got on the end of a speedier passing move, only for the assistant's flag to be raised for offside.

It was a theme that would repeat itself during a second-half where the Sky Blues tried, but largely failed, to raise the intensity. Two further efforts were ruled out for offside, while the referee saw nothing wrong with two potential penalty calls. Those contentious decisions partially obscured what was an underwhelming performance for a team that seemed unwilling to impose itself on a group of inexperienced teenagers.

Bolton Wanderers

League One
10/08/19
Score: 0-0

What could have potentially been a serious blow to confidence was quickly overcome during a midweek League Cup tie with League Two Exeter City.

Exeter City

League Cup
13/08/19
Score: 4-1
Scorers: Hiwula (2),
Godden, Bakayoko

A surging run from the previously shaky new right-back, Fankaty Dabo, to assist Jordy Hiwula's opening goal set the tone for a confident attacking display. Hiwula and recent arrival, Matt Godden, added further goals before half-time, leading to a low-key second-half that saw the game finish 4-1.

That boost in confidence was clear to see during the first-half of the subsequent league game against Bristol Rovers. The Sky Blues not only enjoyed long spells of possession but moved the ball around with purpose.

With attacking full-backs in Fankaty Dabo on the right and Brandon Mason on the left, the team could stretch opponents from deep, allowing Jordan Shipley and Zain Westbrooke to get into advanced positions from central midfield in support of the front three of Jordy Hiwula, Wesley Jobello and Matt Godden.

The opening goal of the game arrived just before half-time, via Jordan Shipley, rewarding a dominant performance. The second-half then saw the defence, marshalled by new central-defensive pairing Kyle McFadzean and Michael Rose, keep an opponent attempting to rally at arm's length.

Bristol Rovers

League One

17/08/19

Score: 2-0

Scorers: Shipley,

Kastaneer

Needing a goal to kill off the game, Mark Robins played his joker card from the bench with the burly, yet skilful, Dutchman Gervane Kastaneer, who smacked home a powerful curling effort with one of his first touches of the ball as a statement of intent of what the new arrival could be capable of.

The Bolton result aside, it had been an encouraging start to the campaign for what was largely a new-look side, especially given the circumstances of playing outside of Coventry. A trip to one of the strongest sides in the division, Portsmouth, provided an opportunity to see how these early promising signs stacked up against the top end of the division.

It was an excellent start, with Jordy Hiwula rounding off a swift counter-attack to put the Sky Blues ahead. However, as soon as the opposition ramped up the pressure, the team looked to have been rattled quite severely.

Portsmouth were quickly level, exploiting the space between our centre-backs and full-backs as Ronan Curtis rose unmarked to head in from point-blank range. The pressure built and built throughout the rest of the first-half, eventually leading to Portsmouth taking the lead, as they caught Fankaty Dabo again out of position, with Marko Marosi then misjudging a soft, low cross to provide Portsmouth's John Marquis with a tap-in.

If this side had been taught a lesson in that first-half, they showed little sign of having learned from it in the second. This time it was Kyle McFadzean at fault as he miscontrolled a simple ball forward to allow Portsmouth's Gareth Evans clean through on goal to extend the home side's lead. 3-1 down, no way back.

Portsmouth were denied a fourth when Fankaty Dabo handled a ball that sent Ronan Curtis through on goal, only for the referee to call play back and send the right-back off. Nonetheless, there appeared little difference between 3-1 down with ten men and 4-1 with eleven.

A strange tentativeness seemed to strike Portsmouth from that point onwards. The Sky Blues gradually inched their way up the pitch, managing to win a penalty as Liam Kelly

Portsmouth
League One
20/08/19
Score: 3-3
Scorers: Hiwula, Godden,
Rose

caught a stray leg in the box, allowing Matt Godden to reduce the deficit.

Just when thoughts were turning to an unlikely comeback, Gervane Kastaneer provided a demonstration of his sheer unruliness, recklessly sliding into a tackle with two feet, getting himself sent off, leaving the team with nine men.

However, that insanity only served somehow to further unsettle Portsmouth. Their fears manifested when Michael Rose leapt highest from a corner-kick to level the scores in the 86th minute.

A bonkers, topsy-turvy game borne out of both teams collectively losing leave of their composure.

These opening few games had proven this team could be competitive in these new environs. Just how good remained unclear.

Part Two

Heading To The Top

24th August 2019 – 28th September 2019

Gillingham

League One

24/08/19

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Hyam

An uneventful 1-0 win over Gillingham may not have lived long in the memory but it was kind of routine and unfussy victory characteristic of teams that stay around the top.

While the Sky Blues were lacking in attacking flair – hampered by the suspensions of Fankaty Dabo and Gervane Kastaneer – the focus on possession proved to be an effective form of defence, limiting the opportunity for the opponent to come into the game.

Watford

League Cup

27/08/19

Score: 0-3

Despite a heavy defeat in the League Cup at Premier League Watford, it was the following league game, away at Oxford United, that further enhanced the conclusion that possession was this side's best form of defence.

Against an Oxford United side that controlled large portions of the game, the Sky Blues managed to forge a two-goal lead on the counter-attack. However, it was a lead that never felt a comfortable one, with an excellent finish by Oxford's Jamie Mackie setting up a tense finale against a team turning the screw on us.

Lacking confidence as a defensive unit, the Sky Blues retreated further into their own half as the clock ticked to 90 minutes. Oxford's wastefulness looked to have cost them the game, until Fankaty Dabo somewhat mysteriously stabbed in a cross into his own net under little pressure.

Just when it looked like two points had been dropped, new loan signing Callum O'Hare was put through on goal by Matt Godden to put the Sky Blues back ahead in the second minute of stoppage time.

Oxford United

League One

31/08/19

Score: 3-3

Scorers: Westbrooke,
Godden, O'Hare

Incredibly, the drama wasn't yet over, as Oxford piled on the pressure one more time, leading to Liam Kelly lunging in tiredly to a challenge, allowing Oxford's Tariqe Fosu to dance past him and fire in a cross that was stabbed home – again, by Fankaty Dabo – to level the scores.

This side had once again buckled under the pressure of one of the better teams in the division. It may have been early days, but there was a sense that perhaps this team had benefitted from a friendly early fixture list rather than being genuinely one of the better sides.

A home game against a high-flying Blackpool side would provide another opportunity to assess where this team ranked in this division.

The early indication from this game was that this team perhaps had a soft underbelly for opponents to target, aided by our dedication to methodically playing it out from the back at every opportunity. Within the first minute, Blackpool's Sullay Kaikai beat Marko Marosi with an impudent dink. Then, Blackpool muscled Liam Walsh off the ball to score a second in the 38th minute.

Given what we knew about Mark Robins' Coventry City teams, the game looked to be over. The manager had a poor record of turning games around from losing positions, having failed to do so in a home game since his return to the club in March 2017.

Importantly, an alert Matt Godden effort soon after that second goal at least reduced the size of the task. With half-time looming, the manager could focus on changing things around in an attempt to salvage a point. However, a powerful Wesley Jobello effort levelled the scores and made Robins' task for the second-half a very different one.

It set the tone for a 45-minutes where the Sky Blues could set about breaking down a Blackpool side who had retreated into their defensive shell. Liam Walsh was handed the keys to the game, growing in confidence as he orchestrated matters in the centre of the park.

For all the control, the Sky Blues appeared to be lacking the attacking guile to make that crucial breakthrough. Once again, it was the tricky and industrious Callum O'Hare who provided the important upwards change in tempo. With the game reaching its dying stages, the substitute danced through a tangle of trailing Blackpool limbs to fire into the roof of the net to secure all three points.

At long last, Mark Robins had won a home game from a losing position – although not 'home' in the purest sense of the word. It was an indication that maybe there was something different about this side this season.

Blackpool
League One
07/09/19
Score: 3-2
Scorer: Godden, Jobello,
O'Hare

Burton Albion

League One

14/09/19

Score: 0-0

The top of the nascent league table was in sight as the Sky Blues travelled to Burton Albion for the following league game. Against a fellow top-six hopeful, the teams exchanged spells of pressure during the first-half but struggled to threaten the goal.

The second-half threatened to explode into something more entertaining as each manager attempted to up the gears from the bench. An opening goal somehow eluded both sides, with Gervane Kastaneer coming closest towards the end of the game as he narrowly sent an effort wide when sent through on goal.

With momentum beginning to build, lowly AFC Wimbledon looked to have thrown a spanner in the works with a bright start in a Tuesday evening clash at St Andrew's. Putting pressure on our passing game, a loose pass from Marko Marosi to Liam Walsh resulted in the latter taking a heavy touch and tripping AFC Wimbledon's Michael Folivi for a penalty in the eighth minute.

After going in front, AFC Wimbledon had chances to extend their lead, mainly coming from pressuring Liam Walsh, but let a sloppy Sky Blues side off the hook.

At the other end of the pitch, Jordy Hiwula was on the end of the Sky Blues' best chances but lacked a killer instinct of his own before he finally converted from a slide-rule pass by Jordan Shipley to level the scores.

An air of frustration was taking hold at St Andrew's as the Sky Blues laboured through the rest of the game in a toothless fashion. AFC Wimbledon had come with a game-plan to physically rattle our cages and were looking like coming out with at least a point for their efforts. While this side were clearly technically superior, a lack of aggression looked to be the Achilles Heel.

Just as the clock appeared to be running out on our hopes of going top of the table, Liam Walsh suddenly found the gumption to up the gears. The midfielder sparked into life, surged through the AFC Wimbledon midfield, exchanged passes with Jordan Shipley and struck home from just outside the area to put the team ahead and cue delirious celebrations from the stands.

AFC Wimbledon

League One

17/09/19

Score: 2-1

Scorers: Hiwula, Walsh

A second come-from-behind win at St Andrew's in a row, top of the league, it was getting harder to argue that this team wasn't capable of staying there.

The following game against Doncaster Rovers was a repeat of the themes we had already seen throughout this campaign. A slow start with the opposition attempting to catch us on our heels in possession in our own half, falling behind, then a sustained period of control as we sought to get back into the game.

Doncaster Rovers

League One

28/09/19

Score: 1-1

Scorer: Bakayoko

While this occasion only resulted in a 1-1 draw – with Amadou Bakayoko grabbing the goal – it was the consistent level of control we were having on games that was most encouraging about this team over the course of the opening months of the season.

Although the team lacked a reliable goal threat, the spread of goals throughout the side meant that we kept finding different sources of inspiration at the important moments in games. That combination of control and the ability to step up in key moments felt like the foundations to a successful campaign.

Part Three

Seeking Solutions

5th October 2019 – 14th December 2019

Rotherham United
League One
05/10/19
Score: 0-4

On the morning of the away trip to a strong Rotherham United side, news emerged that winger Wesley Jobello would be out for the rest of the season with a cruciate ligament injury.

While Jobello hadn't necessarily been a crucial cog in the system, the team went on to produce its worst performance of the season. Whether Jobello along would have made a difference is doubtful, what was clear was that Rotherham's fitness and physicality made them uniquely suited to punishing our defence for playing the ball loosely across the back-line.

An anaemic first-half performance, littered with errors across the back, handed Rotherham a two-goal lead heading into half-time.

Any hope of the kind of second-half improvement that had been characteristic of the campaign thus far was put paid to by a clumsy trip in the penalty area by the lumbering Kyle McFadzean that led to a red card and a spot-kick, which was converted to make it 3-0. From that point onwards, it was a question of how many Rotherham wanted to win by, the answer was four.

The combination of Jobello's injury and that heavy defeat gave Mark Robins plenty to think about. For the time being, he elected to shoe-horn impact substitute Callum O'Hare into the vacant spot in the right wing, however, the team suddenly seemed to have lost the composure and resolve of the opening months of the campaign.

It led to a series of powderpuff performances in front of goal that suggested that the good start to the season had perhaps been built upon unstable foundations.

It started off with a frustrating display at St Andrew's against Tranmere Rovers, where the Sky Blues had plenty of chances, but failed to convert – with Jordy Hiwula and Matt Godden particularly wasteful. A point seemed scant reward for the team's dominance, an eventual defeat – the result of Tranmere scoring from a rare foray forward late-on – was bewilderingly harsh.

If there was one player that epitomised the team's loss of attacking mojo, it was Jordy Hiwula. The forward had

Tranmere Rovers
League One
13/10/19
Score: 0-1

Milton Keynes Dons

League One

19/10/19

Score: 0-0

been the club's top-scorer the year before but had struggled to find form over the opening period of the season and had entered a serious rut.

A crucial moment in Hiwula's campaign came in the second-half of the following game away at MK Dons. In a tight game between two teams low on confidence, Hiwula had won the team a spot-kick and elected to step up to take it himself.

With the possibility of getting his and his team's season back on track flashing in front of his eyes, Hiwula appeared weighted down by the responsibility, leading to a penalty miss that could be seen coming from miles off.

It wasn't just three games without a win, it was the increasing lack of purpose and self-belief to the performances that was worrying. The choice was between entering a holding pattern until January where Mark Robins could inject the attacking quality required to bolster the team's threat or somehow stumbling upon a formula with the existing set of players that could restore the qualities that had seen the team start so well.

From the evidence of the first-half against Fleetwood Town on a cold Tuesday night in October, the choice had been to wait until January. The opposition were stronger, faster and more purposeful than a supine Sky Blues outfit, racing into an early lead and creating chances at will to extend their advantage.

While 1-0 at half-time wasn't the end of the world, there appeared to be little way back. The insipid nature of the performance forced Mark Robins' hand at half-time. He immediately turned to the experience and physicality of Kyle McFadzean and Maxime Biamou, then added additional sternness via Liam Kelly a few minutes later into the second-half.

The impact of those changes – switching from 4-3-3 to 3-5-2 – wasn't immediately obvious, however, it had at least stemmed the flow of Fleetwood pressure.

Without creating a great deal, Amadou Bakayoko – forming a big man, bigger man strike partnership with

Fleetwood Town

League One

23/10/19

Score: 2-1

Scorers: Bakayoko,
Westbrooke

Maxime Biamou – was first to a rebound from a Sam McCallum effort to level the scores. Then, Biamou was tripped in the penalty area, setting up a second key spot-kick of the campaign.

This time it was Zain Westbrooke who stepped up to take his first ever penalty-kick in a senior game, but with seemingly little weight on his shoulders. With little fuss, Westbrooke stroked the penalty into the back of the net, the team rode out a late Fleetwood rally, and the Sky Blues were back to winning ways.

Mark Robins stuck with the same formula ahead of the trip to a powerful-looking Peterborough United side. It was apparent from the first-half that there really was something in this new system. A controlled performance saw Amadou Bakayoko put the team ahead with a cool finish, the forward then put a second in the back of the net, only for the officials to rule it out for a questionable offside call.

It proved to be a crucial reprieve for Peterborough, who conducted a tactical reshuffle of their own after half-time and immediately began controlling affairs. Still, for their sudden upping of the tempo, it took a glaring error from Kyle McFadzean to get them back in the game, with the experienced centre-back once again unnecessarily lumbering into a challenge handing the opposition a chance to equalise from the spot, which they took.

The Sky Blues responded impressively to that set-back, taking back control of the game but seemingly failing to capitalise on the pressure they were building. A crucial moment of inspiration from Maxime Biamou looked to have won the game, with the Frenchman scoring with his typical panache, from an audacious scissor-kick from a Liam Kelly pass with five minutes remaining.

However, a late away-day defensive retreat for the Sky Blues was once again punished, as Peterborough's Siriki Dembele danced through the defence to set-up Mohamed Eisa for an equaliser in the final minute of second-half stoppage time.

Peterborough United

League One

26/10/19

Score: 2-2

Scorers: Bakayoko,
Biamou

Accrington Stanley

League One

02/11/19

Score: 0-0

The following home game against Accrington Stanley provided a different test for this new system, this time coming up against a team willing to sit back rather than take the game to us. It led to a drab game with chances for both sides coming at a premium.

The most notable thing to come from the game was a red-card for Maxime Biamou for a clumsy elbow that would lead to a three-game ban. With Matt Godden and Jordy Hiwula out with injury at the same time, the ban couldn't have come at a worse time for both the team and the player.

Mark Robins, however, proved that scarcity is the mother of invention as he shuffled his pack again for an FA Cup tie away at Colchester United, switching from a 3-5-2 to a curious 3-6-1 system featuring four central midfielders configured as Jordan Shipley and Zain Westbrooke playing in advanced roles ahead of Liam Kelly and Liam Walsh.

Colchester United

FA Cup

09/11/19

Score: 2-0

Scorers: Shipley,
McCallum

That extra presence in midfield provided the freedom for the midfielders to make late runs into the box, which led to Jordan Shipley's opening goal. A comfortable win was then capped off by Sam McCallum striking an effort from a long-range free-kick that completely foxed the opposing keeper.

This new midfield configuration continued into the following league game against Rochdale. It was a game that followed a familiar pattern to many that had been seen at St Andrew's already this season, with the away side starting energetically and taking the lead, only for the Sky Blues to gradually move into control of the game, with Jordan Shipley scoring an important equaliser just before half-time

The second-half saw the Sky Blues move into complete control of affairs, with Rochdale ceding possession and sitting deep to hold onto the point. With Amadou Bakayoko's goalscoring touch deserting him, Rochdale's plan looked to be working.

What they couldn't have expected was for Liam Walsh to receive the ball in midfield, surge forward, beat four players and turn in a dramatic effort past the goalkeeper.

Rochdale
League One
16/11/19
Score: 2-1
Scorers: Shipley, Walsh

It was the kind of goal that words simply do not do justice to, the combination of technical skill, and composure. Most remarkably was that it wasn't completely out of character for Walsh, with the midfielder having produced something similar in the win against AFC Wimbledon a few months prior.

With that shot in the arm, now seemed to be the time to end the winless streak away from home. With Sunderland the opposition, the stage seemed to have been set for a high-point of the campaign.

Everything seemed to be going to plan, with the Sky Blues controlling the first-half against a beleaguered Sunderland, and Dominic Hyam heading in from a corner-kick to hand the team the lead.

However, the second-half saw a familiar away-day tentativeness set in. The team seemed to have become all too aware of their prior failures on the road, responding by ceding control to the home team.

Even then, it appeared that Sunderland's toothlessness would result in that long-awaited away win. However, the team appeared unwilling to accept that they could win this game. From a simple ball into the box, the defence failed to clear after numerous opportunities, with Sunderland's young forward, Benjamin Kimpioka, obligingly finishing to put our team out of its psychological torture to ensure the winless away run could continue.

Sunderland
League One
23/11/19
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Hyam

Next up was a double-header against an Ipswich Town side that looked to be cruising to promotion, first in the FA Cup, then in the league, both at St Andrew's. Looking to be on the path to a recovery from October's wobble, these two games would be a good test of where this team was currently at.

Ipswich Town
FA Cup
01/12/19
Score: 1-1
Scorer: O'Hare

Unsurprisingly, the two fixtures were incredibly similar to one another. Both teams seemed to be capable of holding each other at arm's length, with Ipswich occasionally demonstrating their quality with swift attacking moves, and the Sky Blues largely in control of possession but lacking the ability to threaten with it.

Ipswich Town
League One
07/12/19
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Biamou

On both occasions, Ipswich took the lead via their lanky forward, Will Keane, and looked to have snuffed out hope of a comeback. However, the Sky Blues eventually found an equaliser in both games, first from Callum O'Hare deep into stoppage time in the FA Cup tie, then from Maxime Biamou much earlier in the second-half in the league.

That draw in the Cup led to a replay that neither team could have been much interested in. Interestingly, the tie at Portman Road led Mark Robins to attempt a further tactical change, taking out a centre-back in order to introduce another attacking midfielder to play a narrow 4-2-3-1 formation in search for greater attacking threat.

That tactical variation led to a confident and threatening first-half display, with the Sky Blues taking a comfortable 2-0 lead into half-time.

Despite Ipswich coming back into the game in the second-half and pulling a goal back, it was a display that suggested that a first away league win was just around the corner.

A trip to Shrewsbury Town seemed as good a time as any to sort out our away form in the league. Things looked to be going to plan for the new system, as Jordan Shipley headed in an opening goal to give the Sky Blues the lead after a tight first-half.

However, Shrewsbury came on strong in the second-half, stretching the game with their width and running at our short-handed defence. With Callum O'Hare spurning an excellent chance to make it 2-0, Shrewsbury immediately charged down the other end to equalise.

The game then became stretched late-on as both teams searched for the winning goal. Once again, the Sky Blues were caught high up the pitch, allowing Shrewsbury to run directly at our back-line and scoring in injury time to secure all three points.

The issue this game presented was that our centre-backs were too slow and our full-backs were too attack-minded to suit playing in a back four. It proved to be a crucial lesson that Mark Robins would learn from for the rest of the campaign.

Ipswich Town
League One
10/12/19
Score: 2-1
Scorer: Shipley, Biamou

Shrewsbury Town
League One
14/12/19
Score: 2-1
Scorer: Shipley

Part Four

Solutions Found

21st December 2019 – 18th January 2020

Lincoln City

League One

21/12/19

Score: 1-0

Scorer: Westbrooke

Having learned that the team was best off with a back three and wing-backs, Mark Robins restored the 3-6-1 formation for the next league game, against Lincoln City at St Andrew’s.

The Sky Blues enjoyed long spells of possession during the first-half but were unable to move the ball into areas that threatened the opposing defence. The game’s only goal came outside the general pattern of play, with Liam Kelly catching a Lincoln City midfielder on the ball during a rare spell of opposition possession, his initial effort was saved but Zain Westbrooke tidily tucked away the rebound from just outside the penalty area.

The rest of the game was relatively uneventful, with Lincoln briefly rallying just after half-time, only for the Sky Blues to quickly rediscover their composure in possession to see out the win in comfortable fashion.

That sense of certainty in the system appeared to set the tone for the team’s best league performance of the campaign, just after Christmas against the league leaders, Wycombe Wanderers.

There was a clear composure, belief and sense of purpose to the Sky Blues that afternoon. Importantly, this was backed up by a more concerted goal threat than had previously been seen.

The proficiency of the system was demonstrated via the opening goal, a cross into the box from the advanced Fankaty Dabo was poorly cleared, the extra presence in midfield allowed the Sky Blues to win back possession, playing out to the other wing-back, Sam McCallum, who cut inside and scored from a glorious curling effort.

The familiar away-day jitters soon presented themselves, as Wycombe’s Adebayo Akinfenwa bulldozed his way through the Sky Blues backline to plunder himself an easy goal.

However, the composure was quickly restored, aided by a comedic piece of defending from Wycombe’s Sido Jombati as he needlessly tripped Sam McCallum after playing a comfortable back-pass for his goalkeeper to clear.

Wycombe Wanderers

League One

29/12/19

Score: 4-1

Scorer: McCallum,
Godden (3)

Up stepped Matt Godden to the spot, who tucked home his first goal in over three months to put the team back ahead. Having gotten rid of that monkey from his back, Godden played with the assurance of a confident goal-poacher, latching onto a long Michael Rose pass to round the keeper and calmly grab his second of the day.

Another encouraging element of this system was the freedom it allowed Jordan Shipley and Zain Westbrooke to alternate between dropping deep and pushing forward. This was in evidence for the fourth goal, with Shipley surging on past the Wycombe defence to latch onto a pass from Westbrooke made from a deep position. Shipley then underlined the team's suddenly-discovered swagger as he artfully flicked the ball into the path of goal machine-mode Matt Godden to finish with his first touch from outside the penalty area.

Not only had the team finally won a league away game but they had done it in style. The win not only demonstrated that this team could win away from home, but that they could do without compromising on the preferred brand of football.

Suddenly, this team looked ready to charge up the table.

It was with that newfound verve that the Sky Blues took to Prenton Park to face a struggling Tranmere Rovers side and absolutely dominated the first-half. It was a further demonstration of the elusive qualities the combination of Jordan Shipley and Zain Westbrooke in those advanced midfield roles provided, with Tranmere simply unable to figure out a plan to deal with their movement.

It led very quickly to the game's opening goal, providing the space for Fankaty Dabo to cross for Matt Godden who had timed his run to perfection for an unmarked finish. Jordan Shipley himself benefitted from Tranmere's defensive disarray to ghost into their penalty area to make it 2-0. Zain Westbrooke then had a great opportunity to make it three under similar circumstances but failed to convert. That miss didn't seem to matter as we were creating chances at will against a team devoid of confidence.

However, Tranmere's potato-patch of a pitch proved to be a leveller as the half wore on. It created the confusion that led to a simple punt forward catching our defence flat-footed and for the home side to pull a goal back just before half-time.

It shouldn't have mattered based on the balance of play in the first-half, but it seemed to set the tone for Tranmere to pile the pressure on early in the second-half. Suddenly, the swagger appeared to have completely evaporated, replaced with a familiar away-day panic and defensive retreat.

For all of the attacking fluency the 3-6-1 offered, the problem was that when the team were penned in deep, there was no obvious out-ball to relieve pressure. The team were caught between attempting to retain the ball in dangerous areas or punting the ball away without anyone up top with the physicality or pace to make the ball stick.

The pressure eventually led to a penalty conceded by a sloppy push from Fankaty Dabo to hand Tranmere the opportunity to tie the scores.

Mark Robins' sigh of relief as the ball ballooned over the bar was almost audible. It provided him the opportunity to immediately address the team's tactical shortcomings, introducing Callum O'Hare for some extra pace and Amadou Bakayoko for his physical presence to help the team get out of their defensive bunker.

The impact was almost immediate, with Amadou Bakayoko chasing down a hopeful long pass – which held up on a particularly sticky patch of mud of – who played a cut-back to Callum O'Hare, who stabbed a neat pass with his first-touch through to Matt Godden to finish. Within a matter of minutes a potential 2-2 scoreline was now 3-1.

Tranmere, clearly deflated by those two key moments of the game, plodded through the closing stages. A further Sky Blues goal was eventually added after O'Hare was bundled down in the box, allowing Matt Godden to complete a second hat-trick in as many games and make it three wins out of three over the Christmas period.

Tranmere Rovers

League One

01/01/20

Score: 4-1

Scorer: Godden (3),

Shiple

Bristol Rovers

FA Cup
05/01/20
Score: 2-2
Scorer: Walsh, Own Goal

From seventh-place and 12 points off top after the defeat to Shrewsbury Town, the Sky Blues had suddenly risen to 3rd and just three points off first-place. Automatic promotion now looked a realistic prospect.

The Sky Blues continued their streak of dominant performances, this time in the FA Cup Third Round at Bristol Rovers, however, two sloppy defensive lapses saw the home side hold us to a 2-2 draw.

Remaining in the hat as a result of that draw led to the curious prospect of facing landlords, Birmingham City, at St Andrew's, as the home team, if we could navigate the replay victoriously.

That was a nice distraction, but the bigger prize would be in the league. A home game against a struggling MK Dons side looked a good opportunity to keep our mojo flowing, which Sam McCallum's first-minute goal suggested would be exactly what would happen.

However, an energetic MK Dons side gradually worked themselves back into the game over the first-half. Significantly, there were real signs of fatigue from the Sky Blues as they failed to build on the lead despite having a handful of chances to kill the game off.

Just when it looked like enough had been done to secure the win regardless of the drop in intensity, MK Dons' Carlton Morris pounced on a half-clearance to reward his team's diligence with a share of the points.

The jaded nature of the performance in dropping those two points made the Cup replay with Bristol Rovers feel especially like a distraction. This was reflected in Mark Robins' naming a second-string side.

It proved to be an opportunity to the fringe players to demonstrate the level of strength in depth in the squad. In particular, a front three of Jamie Allen and Callum O'Hare operating behind Maxime Biamou added a level of directness, pace and power that had been missing in the MK Dons game.

Against a beleaguered Bristol Rovers side, that attacking trio run the opposition ragged. Callum O'Hare grabbed

Milton Keynes Dons

League One
11/01/20
Score: 1-1
Scorer: McCallum

Bristol Rovers

FA Cup
14/01/20
Score: 3-0
Scorer: Biamou (2), Pask

himself two assists from driving directly at the opposing defence and picking the right pass at the right time, with Biamou getting on the scoresheet twice in a comfortable 3-0 victory.

Taking on our landlords in their own home was now set to become an intriguing reality.

Doncaster Rovers

League One
18/01/20
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Shipley

If there was a concern that that impending local derby would prove a distraction, the Sky Blues immediately dismissed it with a professional display at Doncaster Rovers, won in routine fashion thanks to a long-range Jordan Shipley effort.

Part Five

Confidence & Composure

25th January 2020 – 7th March 2020

The Birmingham City cup tie felt like it had come at the perfect moment to demonstrate this team's ability to compete against a higher standard of opposition. Not only had results improved over the past month, but the team had found the requisite confidence and composure required to win games on a consistent basis.

The opening exchanges in a heated atmosphere at St Andrew's, however, highlighted the gulf in quality between the top of League One and the Championship. The Blues looked faster, stronger and quicker of thought as they created a handful of early chances and held our own attempts at attacking at arms' length – like a fight between an older and younger brother.

Towards the end of the first-half, the little brother finally swung a few punches of their own, with Liam Kelly and Liam Walsh getting stuck-in to help establish a foothold for the Sky Blues. While it didn't lead to any notable chances, it set the tone for a second-half where the Sky Blues were largely on top.

Birmingham City

League One

25/01/20

Score: 0-0

As the second-half wore on, the script seemed to have been written for substitute Callum O'Hare – an Aston Villa loanee – to win the game. A ball across the penalty area sat up perfectly for O'Hare to stab home and rub the victory in the opposition's faces, only for the midfielder to completely miscue his attempt on goal.

It was a miss that epitomised the performance, close, but not quite there. It would mean a replay that added to an already congested fixture list. With Leicester City drawn out of the hat for the next round, the choice for Mark Robins was between pursuing local bragging rights or going all-in for automatic promotion.

The sense that Mark Robins would have to pick between the two was in evidence during the following league game, away at Fleetwood Town. There were clear signs of fatigue as the team struggled to string passes together, inviting pressure from a strong home side.

Fleetwood Town

League One

28/01/20

Score: 0-0

Thanks to our increasingly solid and reliable defensive unit of Kyle McFadzean, Dominic Hyam and Michael Rose, Fleetwood were largely restricted to pot-shots and half-chances, which saw both sides draw a blank.

Bristol Rovers
League One
01/02/20
Score: 2-1
Scorers: Allen, Walsh

It was a solid enough point but would have to be backed up by a win at struggling Bristol Rovers to keep our promotion bid going. Another tired, sloppy performance allowed the home side to start the game strongly, aided by Kyle McFadzean returning to his early season self in finding himself outpaced to allow former Sky Blue, Jonson Clarke-Harris, to go one-on-one with Marko Marosi and score.

Just when questions were starting to be asked about the quality of this side's, there was a notable upping of the gears in response to that early set-back. As ever, Liam Walsh's influence in the centre of the park was pivotal as he began to dictate affairs. It was Walsh who set up Jamie Allen to level the scores, then it was he who got on the end of a Fankaty Dabo cross to make it 2-1 just before half-time.

With the lead in their hands, this Sky Blues side were in no mood to relinquish it. Without particularly dominating the second-half, Bristol Rovers were held at arm's length for the remainder of the game. In League One, it was us who were the big brothers.

The team selection for the FA Cup replay suggested that Mark Robins' focus was very much on the league, resting many of the regular starters. However, with Birmingham also weakening their starting XI, the game became a stalemate between two teams that neither wanted to win nor lose.

The Sky Blues, backed by a boisterous away end, looked the more motivated of the two sides, starting the game the strongest. It was a lack of killer touch that prevented us from taking a lead, with Birmingham gradually working their way back into the game due to their significant threat from set-pieces.

After withstanding a barrage from corner-kicks, free-kicks and long throws from Birmingham City towards the end of the first-half, the Sky Blues took control of the second-half, with Birmingham seemingly having spent the best of their attacking threat.

A swift move soon after the re-start saw Zain Westbrooke dink a pass into the path of Amadou Bakayoko, whose effort deflected into the back of the net to spark raucous scenes among the Sky Blues supporters as the prospect of taking on Leicester City in the next round became tangible.

Despite missing a series of excellent chances to kill the tie off, a spluttering and disjointed Birmingham City performance suggested that one goal would be enough to win it – especially with our stern defensive record. It was with an air of disbelief that the Blues bundled the ball into the back of the net deep into second-half injury time. A certain Sky Blues victory extinguished with a faint huff from the opposition.

With neither team seemingly in the mood for extra-time, the introduction of Liam Walsh from the bench swung the tie back in the Sky Blues' favour. Walsh's presence instantly added a zip to our passing rhythm, leading to a swift move from back to front, rounded off by Maxime Biamou, to put the team back ahead with just six minutes remaining to restore the victory that had seemingly passed us by.

Or so we thought.

After Matt Godden mystifyingly blew a one-on-one chance late-on to rubber stamp the win, Birmingham City mustered one last huff up the pitch, with their winger Jeremie Bela putting in a tired cross from just outside the penalty area. Seemingly impossibly, the misdirected cross hung in the air, passed over Marko Marosi's head and looped into the top corner. It just wasn't our night.

Although it took a penalty shoot-out offered one last chance to salvage the victory, it seemed obvious before the two teams stepped up that the Sky Blues had already blown the chance to win. So, it proved. There would be no away trip to Leicester City, any glory this season would have to come in the league.

In the wake of that midweek extra-time game, it was hard to be overly critical of the tired showing against Bolton Wanderers a few days later. After a promising start, with

Birmingham City

FA Cup

04/02/20

Score: 2-2

Scorers: Own Goal,
Biamou

Bolton Wanderers

League One

08/02/20

Score: 2-1

Scorers: Bakayoko,
Biamou

Amadou Bakayoko confidently heading in a Fankaty Dabo cross early on to put the team ahead, the team struggled to muster the energy to press home that advantage.

Bolton gradually grew in confidence over the course of the game, with their young winger, Dennis Politic, driving at our defence in an increasingly concerning manner. It was he who levelled the scores, confidently turning in a Chris O'Grady pull-back, to reward Bolton for a strong start to the second-half.

Fortunately, the luck that had been denied us against Birmingham City presented itself, with the minute Jamie Allen out-jumping a Bolton centre-back to set-up Maxime Biamou just as the fourth official raised the board for stoppage time to secure three-points despite an off-colour performance.

It set up an important clash with a Portsmouth side who had won their previous nine games and would overtake us if they extended that streak a game further.

Again, the team looked leggy from recent exertions, ceding dominance of the game to a physically pre-possessing Portsmouth side who were looking to overwhelm us. Unlike earlier in the season, the team appeared composed despite the lack of control, with the defence appearing to relish their opportunity to come to the fore.

Portsmouth

League One

11/02/20

Score: 1-0

Scorers: Godden

Having successfully kept the game tight as it reached its closing stages, Mark Robins introduced Matt Godden from the bench in what proved to be a decisive move. With virtually his first-touch, Godden flicked in Callum O'Hare's impudent dink over the Portsmouth defence to score the game's winning goal.

This was a team that seemed to have mastered the winning habit. Whether playing well or poorly, against teams strong or weak, this team could figure out a way to win.

This sense of a winning mentality was hammered home over the course of the following two away games.

Southend United

League One

15/02/20

Score: 2-0

Scorers: O'Hare, Biamou

First up was a trip to a struggling Southend United side whose line-up and bench were filled out with young academy players. While the Sky Blues again struggled to find an attacking mojo against a supposedly weak opposition, a breakthrough was eventually found via Callum O'Hare, as he walked through a statuesque defence to hand the team the lead. Maxime Biamou then rounded off the win, bullying a teenage Southend centre-back in a challenge and calmly finishing past the goalkeeper.

Rochdale

League One

22/02/20

Score: 2-1

Scorers: Rose, Godden

The next away trip, to a Rochdale side who had been a bogey team in previous years, was a similarly unfussy victory. Michael Rose headed home to put the Sky Blues ahead early on, which allowed the team to hold the home side at arm's length until Matt Godden eventually sealed the victory in the second-half.

Despite a strange consolation goal for Rochdale straight from the kick-off, it was another routine win.

This set up a clash with league leaders Rotherham, the side who completely schooled us back in October. In another cagey affair, Rotherham's physicality, energy and pace looked to have put them in control of the contest.

While we had managed to limit their clear-cut openings, it was a goalkeeping calamity from Marko Marosi that put Rotherham ahead. The keeper, who had been so reliable over the course of the season, dropped a routine catch from a corner straight onto the feet of Rotherham's top-scorer, Freddie Ladapo, to hand the away side a lead they didn't look like relinquishing.

Rotherham United

League One

25/02/20

Score: 1-1

Scorers: Godden

Despite creating little for the rest of the game, the one big chance fell to the feet of Matt Godden just after half-time. The striker, who was back in a rich vein of scoring form after a post-Christmas drought, calmly put it away to ensure a share of the points and make it eleven games unbeaten.

The big games continued to come, with a resurgent Sunderland next up at St Andrew's. With the game moved to a Sunday due to television coverage, the results on the Saturday had meant that the team knew victory would take us top of the table for the first time since September.

Sunderland

League One

01/03/20

Score: 1-0

Scorers: Godden

Any sense of nerves at that prospect were quickly wiped out thanks to a bright start, rounded off by a smart finish from Matt Godden in the second-minute to put the Sky Blues ahead.

However, those nerves soon reared their head as Sunderland gradually grew into the game. Their physicality and cynicism disrupted our rhythm and saw them to create several chances from dead-ball situations. Yet again, the defence stood firm under the pressure, which saw Sunderland rapidly run out of ideas as the game progressed.

Sky Blues fans got a taste of what it would be like to be in the big time, when Sunderland saw a potential equaliser belatedly wiped out as the assistant spotted an offside. It was the kind of decisive moment in a tight game that suggests that it's just your day.

Twelve games unbeaten and top of the league, it was getting harder to see who could stop us. It certainly wasn't going to be a struggling Ipswich Town side.

Another quick start saw Matt Godden put the Sky Blues ahead at Portman Road, latching onto a Liam Walsh through-ball to calmly finish – cueing a topical and light-hearted touch of the elbows celebration.

Despite Ipswich rallying over the course of the game, it simply would not be the day that luck would go against us. It was the kind of vaguely fortunate win that teams that get promoted tend to consistently pull-off.

Confident, composed and perhaps slightly lucky, these were the qualities of champions. It was hard to see anything that could stop us now.

Ipswich Town

League One

07/03/20

Score: 1-0

Scorers: Godden

Part Six

Cancellation

14th March 2020 – 9th June 2020

Within the space of a week, the prospect of a global pandemic had gone from vaguely humorous to deadly serious.

Within the world of football, the week between that win over Ipswich Town and the following home game against Shrewsbury Town had seen the policy change from business as usual to a complete shut-down of the industry as a result of Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta and Chelsea winger Callum Hudson-Odoi contracting the Coronavirus.

For Sky Blues fans, this was a nightmare scenario. It had been over half a century since the club had won a league title and it had seemingly been denied us by a freak external factor – taking out the clearly more serious concern of tens of thousands of Britons dying.

As the weeks ticked past with little prospect of a nationwide lockdown ending, it became increasingly apparent that football below the elite level would be incapable of returning – for both logistical and financial reasons. The debate then turned from how to restart the season to how and whether to resolve it.

The option of rendering the campaign null and void was soon taken off the board, making some kind of Points Per Game resolution the most likely prospect. However, delay after delay occurred as the authorities attempted to protect themselves against a legal challenge to the decision by a group of big clubs – headed up by Peterborough United and Sunderland – who were set to miss out as a result of a Points Per Game-resolved season.

Once every hoop was passed through to avoid accusations of a rushed or biased process, League One clubs eventually voted overwhelmingly to curtail the season and resolve the final standings on a Points Per Game basis, thereby crowning Coventry City as champions.

The Manager
Mark Robins

The club that Mark Robins returned to back in March 2017 is unrecognisable to the one that he oversees now – much more so than the fact that the club currently playing in a different city.

It is the sense of a vision that has been Mark Robins' key attribute in turning around the club. Just about every summer has seen him re-mould the squad to the needs of the following campaign. From injecting the steel and competitive spirit required to get out of League Two, adding dynamism for the return to League One, then adding the determination and final touches of quality to get us into the promotion positions this season. Every year has witnessed a natural evolution of the team.

Importantly, it isn't just that sense of a vision that had made his second spell at the club so successful, it has been his ability to know how to attain that vision that has separated him from his predecessors. Tony Mowbray had a vision, Steven Pressley had a vision, even Andy Thorn had a vision, the difference with Mark Robins has been a realism and self-belief with his vision, knowing what is achievable and not sticking to the course despite temporary set-backs along the way – not least, having to play outside of Coventry this season.

That is not to say that Robins is an unambitious manager. It was an incredibly ambitious move to rebuild the successful side that won us promotion to League Two to the more progressive, ball-playing unit that has taken us up to that next level.

Another important part of Mark Robins' success since his return to the club has been his ability to appoint the right people off-the-pitch to help him maximise his available resources. By all accounts, Adi Viveash has been a driving force on the training pitch in improving and developing what is largely a group of young footballers. In terms of recruitment, Tommy Widdrington and, latterly, Chris Badlan, have managed to source a playing squad that has dragged us from League Two to the Championship without spending lavishly.

That said, it is Mark Robins whose hands are very much on the wheel. He is a manager who is unafraid to make bold, seemingly questionable decisions in order to improve the team over the long-run. Any other manager wouldn't have let the likes of Jack Grimmer or Michael Doyle leave last season, offloaded Abu Ogogo six months into a three-year deal, or dropped a high-performing player in Brandon Mason this season.

Such has been Mark Robins' belief in what he is doing, players that fall even slightly short of his requirements have gone to the wayside.

The benefit of that approach has been what we've seen this season, where the team has played to a consistently high standard of performance. The downside is that it has seen a relatively high level of player turnover, which risks inconsistent performances as a result of a lack of continuity.

The level of player turnover has meant Mark Robins has had his fair share of duds in the transfer market, despite the

success of his current spell at the club. Most notably this season, the gamble on two forwards from overseas in Wesley Jobello and Gervane Kastaneer has provided just two goals, one assist and an ACL injury across a combined 27 appearances – they both have two years each left on their contracts.

Additionally, Mark Robins' adherence to a Plan A in terms of playing style has seen the team come under pressure when opponents have been able to pin-point our weaknesses. Most notably, this led to the 4-0 defeat at Rotherham United where the opposition constantly put us under pressure from playing the ball out from the back, it has also led to periods in games where opponents have been completely on top of us.

However, Robins has shown a greater ability to adapt this season than in previous years. Not only has this Coventry City side taken more points from losing positions than in recent years, but it was the deviation from the 4-3-3 system that we had begun the season with to the 3-6-1 that has made this campaign a success.

It immediately made us a more balanced team both defensively and going forward, making us a more cohesive and consistent team unit than our promotion rivals in League One.

While goals and attacking flair have been in relatively short supply this season, this team became increasingly reliable as the campaign wore on.

The step up to the Championship will be the biggest test of Mark Robins' managerial ability. The track record of

recent League One teams promoted to that level only goes to show that even the very best League One sides can struggle to compete on a weekly basis in the second-tier.

However, Mark Robins projects such a quiet authority in the managerial dug-out that it's hard not to feel that we'll be okay whatever happens next season.

As both Coventry City and football as a whole moves into interesting and potentially very challenging times, it is incredibly reassuring to have such a safe pair of hands in charge of this football club.

Most Important Player

Liam Walsh

It's easy to forget that Liam Walsh was signed in the summer almost as an afterthought in the dying minutes of the transfer window. We needed defensive-midfield cover for Liam Kelly after he picked up an injury, in came Liam Walsh. Had things been even slightly different, Liam Walsh would never have signed for Coventry City.

What a signing he has been. Liam Walsh has made himself the fulcrum of this team with his range of passing. It isn't just that Walsh is a good passer that has made him the team's most important player but the game awareness and nous that he has developed over the course of the campaign has made him effective at breaking up the play of opponents at the base of midfield and able to spot the right moments in games to press forward for maximum impact. Liam Walsh is the orchestrator of this Coventry City side.

What's been most impressive about Walsh has been his improvement over the course of the season. In his early appearances for the club, the talent was there to see but it was the game awareness that was missing. He cost the team a number of goals from holding onto the ball for too long in dangerous areas or being muscled off the ball. That version of Liam Walsh is unrecognisable to the one that we are now familiar with.

Instead, the current version of Liam Walsh is a player who has been clearly far too good for League One football for some time now. Games have become increasingly easier for him as the season has progressed. That extra level of game awareness and determination he's added to his game has made a huge difference, he's not only cut the errors out but has

been able to completely bend games to his will.

Walsh has been the player that has made this strange 3-6-1 system work. There was a risk with the system that a lack of attacking width would make us a predictable team going forward and one that could struggle to relieve pressure defensively. The inventiveness and graft in Walsh's game has kept the supply in attack flowing and has helped prevent exert pressure on us.

Walsh has combined being able to consistently control games with producing some key individual moments in games. That surging drive and finish to win the game against Rochdale back in November stands out the most, but he has been involved to some extent in almost all of the key goals we've scored this season. It's fitting that the final goal we scored this season came from a Liam Walsh assist.

Walsh has played to such a level that even after a promotion, we know that he is imminently destined for greater things than Coventry City. He is probably already of the standard of a top-half Championship player, if he is given the platform at Bristol City to continue playing regularly, I don't think he would be too far away from earning a move to the Premier League in the near future.

One of those players who it is a delight to watch week-in and week-out, Liam Walsh will go down as one of the best transfer deadline signings this club has ever made.

Most Improved Player
Sam McCallum

There were question marks against Sam McCallum heading into this season as to whether he was good enough to even be second-choice at left-back, he has ended the campaign having earned a move to the Premier League. That is an incredible progression in the space of less than 12 months.

On the handful of occasions he had been used last season, Sam McCallum looked nervous and shaky. His biggest attribute looked to be his ability to keep plugging away undeterred after making mistakes. It was a bold call from Mark Robins to jettison the more experienced Junior Brown in favour of Sam McCallum.

Upon his first appearances of this campaign – playing at right-back as a result of Fankaty Dabo's sending-off against Portsmouth – McCallum look much more assured. His defensive awareness seemed to have improved, as well as his physical stature, while he was still making mistakes, there were clearer signs of the player he could become.

In the wake of the 4-0 defeat at Rotherham United, Mark Robins decided to entrust Sam McCallum with the starting spot at left-back ahead of Brandon Mason, who had started the campaign in excellent form. It was another remarkable show of faith in McCallum from the manager, which provided the player with the platform to steadily improve on a weekly basis.

McCallum's biggest attribute over Brandon Mason is his greater level of athleticism. In the ball-hoarding style of football we have utilised this season, having someone who can stretch the play

to a greater extent improves the array of options available to the rest of the team. Whether that's in pinning an opposing winger back, winning headers on the touchline to keep the ball in play or getting into the penalty area, McCallum has become a useful outlet for the team on the left.

With the defensive side of his game still in need of refinement – there is still a sense that a particularly skilful or quick winger can have his number – the move to a system featuring wing-backs instead of full-backs has truly allowed Sam McCallum to blossom, freed from a degree of defensive awareness.

Gradually improving in confidence, it was his performance away at Wycombe that fully demonstrated why Sam McCallum had been preferred at left-back. Opening the scoring with a confident, curling finish, McCallum played with a composure and self-belief in just about everything he did that suggested his future was at a higher-level.

Almost immediately, that assumption was proven true, with Norwich City swooping in for him in the final days of the January transfer window, loaning him back for the rest of the campaign.

While there has been a slight dip in performance since that move was secured, it's a natural part of a young player's development to go through the occasional trough in their first full season as first-choice.

It is Sam McCallum's capacity and clear desire for improvement that makes him such an impressive young footballer.

The Next Chapter

This is the part of the season review where I usually analyse which players are likely to stay and go over the summer and where we might need to strengthen, in light of the ongoing impact of the Coronavirus, such an analysis feels like it would be missing the bigger picture.

Football, like other industries, is heading into a fundamental period of change. The squabbles over what to do with this season may prove to be irrelevant ahead of what is to come. The next 12 months are going to have a profound impact on the industry and our relationship, as fans, with the game.

The biggest question heading into next season is whether and when it can actually start. Those questions have played a role in the current state of play of Leagues One and Two being curtailed, and the Championship and the Premier League opting to resume.

In making the leap from League One to the Championship, Coventry City are not just moving into a new division but into a completely different financial terrain. The resumption of the current Championship was driven by the value of the TV deal, which, unlike the lower leagues, rendered the costs of testing and keeping players in training relatively irrelevant.

For that very reason, it is likely that we are more certain of when our next competitive game of football will be – likely to be mid-September – than the clubs in League One that we leave behind. For those clubs, the start of next season is far from certain. There is an assumption that football has to resume, but the timing of it could be the difference

between having a full slate of 72 Football League clubs or several fewer.

Of course, what would change the debate would be if the lockdown this country is in is eased to the degree that by September, fans could return be allowed back into stadiums – at least, in a reduced capacity. If not, there would have to be a financial stimulus package in order to help clubs in Leagues One and Two, and below, to get back playing on the same schedule as the top two divisions.

Depending on the source, that financial stimulus package is likely to come with strings attached that could change the nature of lower league football clubs.

Were it to come from the Premier League, there would surely be yet another debate to come over ‘B teams’ entering the league structure, or maybe a watered-down version of ‘B teams’ whereby lower league clubs become official or semi-official feeder clubs of Premier League sides. It would entrench and stretch the current divide between the top and bottom of the game

Were the financial stimulus to come from the government, it would likely impose tighter controls on transfer fees and wages that could also widen the gulf between the top and bottom of the game but would at least provide the opportunity for teams to get to the top level with a good few seasons.

Promotion to the Championship at this exact juncture may well be perfect timing for this football club. You only have to look at the reports in recent weeks linking us with a €1.5 million transfer to get an indication of the greater financial muscle

we have as a Championship club compared to a League One side.

€1.5 million would be the most we've spent on a player since Lukas Jutkiewicz ten years ago. That's even while playing away from the city of Coventry and with what is reportedly set to be the division's lowest budget.

Just what happens next with the club's exile from the city is just as doubtful as what happens with the game as a whole. The hope is that the financial impact of the pandemic puts greater pressure on Wasps to get a deal sorted – were fans to return for the majority of next season, that greater footfall from bigger Championship clubs would surely be especially enticing for all parties. However, the one thing we've learned from these years of bickering between the parties involved in the Ricoh Arena dispute is not to expect anyone to take the common sense decision.

With the dispute having correlated, more or less, exactly with our time away from the second-tier, it would be especially gratifying for it to reach some kind of resolution at the same time as our return.

Even were we to return to the Ricoh Arena, the poor track record of sides promoted from League One to the Championship in recent years demonstrates just what a humongous step up in quality it is. While the pandemic could be a leveller in terms of the spending power of clubs at that level, there is still likely to be a financial divide between ourselves and the majority of clubs at that level with rich owners who can fund losses.

While the FA Cup saga with Birmingham City was an indication that the current squad isn't far from Championship quality, it was a little concerning to me that a second-string mid-table Championship side could match us without breaking much of a sweat. It would be deflating to repeat that kind of game on a weekly basis.

The most important thing we can do over the summer will be to invest in players who can improve over the course of two or three years. If we are to stay up, our best chance is to already have the players in place to push on further rather than have to sign new ones. If we are to go down, we have the opportunity this coming season to source a better quality of player than we could otherwise get.

It is a shame that we've missed out on having the moment to celebrate winning a league title on the football pitch with the players and fellow fans, but promotion could prove an opportunity to change the directory of the football club if the next decisions made by those in charge are the right ones.

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