



The Sideways Sammy Season Review

2021/22

Opening Words

My own expectations for Coventry City were not high heading into the season. As fun as it would be to be back in person to witness the team, it looked to be a very similar team to one that had struggled in the previous campaign.

While an incredible start to the season could not be maintained, Coventry City have surpassed expectations this year. Whereas it was simply an achievement to be in the Championship, the Sky Blues have raised the bar this year to demonstrate that it is possible for this club to thrive at this level.

It hasn't just been about winning more games than the previous year, it has been how often this team has been the better side in games that has been the marker of progress. On the one hand, it leaves a sense of disappointment that this team did not achieve the top six finish that it was probably capable of. On the other, it is a huge step forward from what was witnessed over the majority of the previous campaign.

This has been a Coventry City team that has played in 'the right way' on several levels. From the ambition to play attractive, progressive football to the application and work-rate that has consistently been put into performances. It has been easy to get behind this set of players.

Even when things haven't come off for this team, it has been apparent what they have been trying to achieve and there has never been the sense of the group or

individuals giving up in the face of adversity. That is why this Coventry City kept itself in the race for the top six until the final weeks, because they kept going, even when things looked to have turned against them.

Finishing the campaign in 12th and nine points off the play-offs, it would not have taken much to have made up that gap. A smoother fixture list and better luck with injuries here and there would have made the most difference, while there were a number of individual games where this team was simply unlucky not to come out with the wins they deserved.

It gives Mark Robins a good foundation with which to build next season on, but that is not the point of this season review. Now is the time to look back on the season that was, the highs, the lows, the individuals, the opposition, and reflect on how it all played out.

Just a note that any statistics in this are as accurate as possible as of the 10th of May 2022.

Also, any feedback and shares on social media are gratefully appreciated.

Thanks in advance for reading this.

Dominic

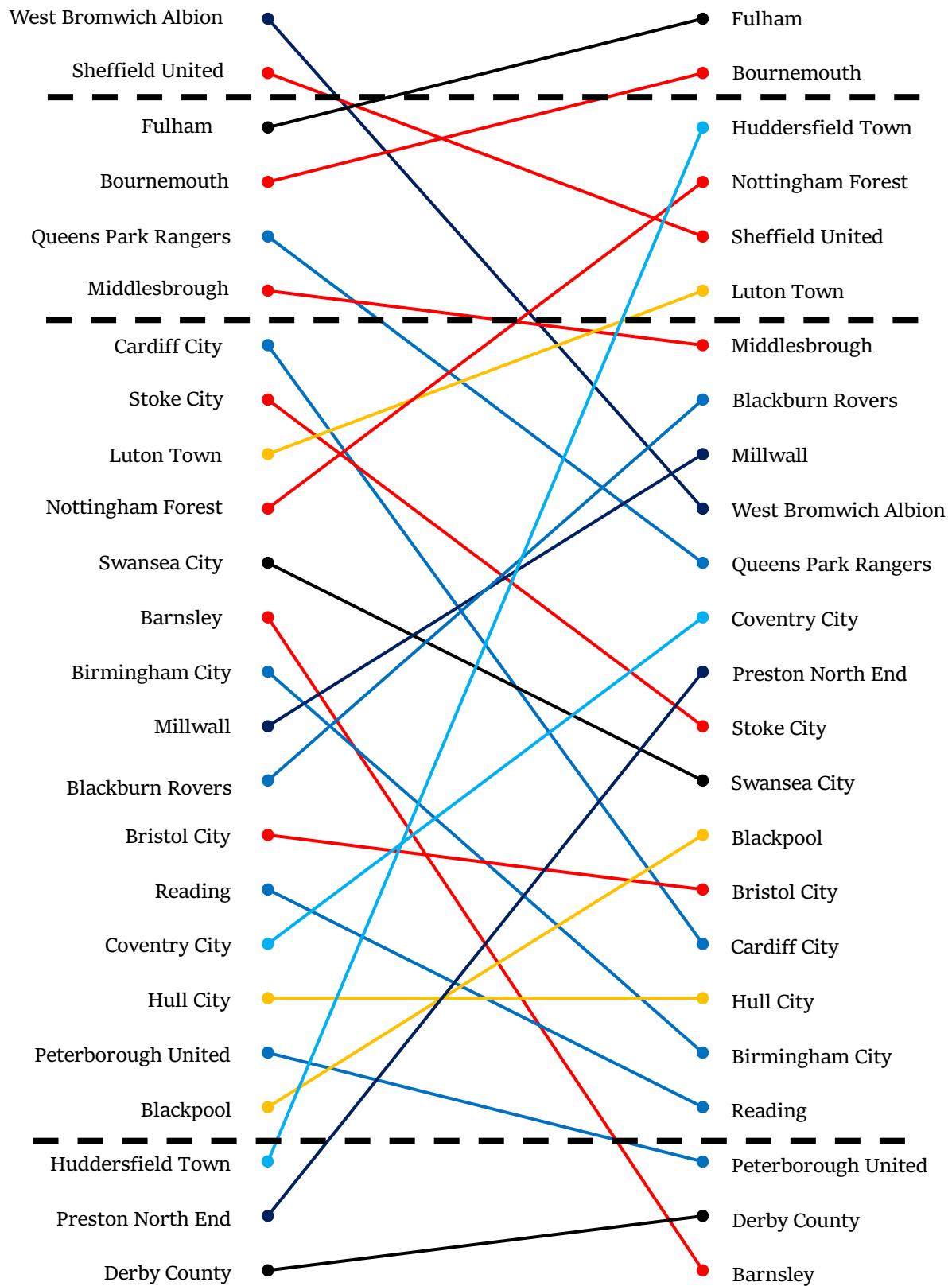
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Club-By-Club Reviews

Final Table Versus Predictions





Barnsley

Final Position: 24th

Top Scorer: Carlton Morris (7)

Most Assists: Amine Bassi (5)

Clean Sheets: 7

What I Said

"Mid-table is likely to be a good return, especially if it involves an evolution of style under new boss, Markus Schopp."

The Manager

Vacant: After trying twice to replace Valerien Ismael this season, Barnsley were ignominiously relegated to League One. For a club that has prided itself on being smarter than others, successive poor managerial appointments is not a good look.

Key Player

Carlton Morris: Among a myriad of tall, physical strikers at Oakwell, Carlton Morris' greater technical ability made him a key focal point this season. Finally benefitting from a consistent run of games, Morris looks a really well-rounded centre-forward who is unlikely to hang around in League One with the Tykes.

Overview

After finishing in the top six last season, there was a confidence around Barnsley that, despite losing their inspiration manager, Valerien Ismael, the club was in a good position for another strong season in the Championship. With ambitions to evolve the style of play in order to increase the value of their squad, relegation was the last thing on Barnsley's minds.

However, a poor managerial appointment in Markus Schopp, along with sub-standard recruitment, quickly undid all of the good work of last season.

Attempting to play a possession-based style of football with few players that were genuinely comfortable on the ball, Barnsley quickly went from a nightmare to play against to a dream for their opponents.

Schopp's replacement, Poya Asbaghi, deserves less criticism for Barnsley's relegation, but took too long to make an impact. As much

as 'outside the box' thinking has worked so well for the club in recent years, appointing a relatively inexperienced manager in the middle of a relegation battle was, in hindsight, an ill-conceived decision.

Performances improved to an extent under Asbaghi, aided by adding genuine creativity in January, via Domingos Quina and Amine Bassi, but results did not follow – Barnsley had the worst record in the Championship in 2022. Not anywhere near good enough at any point this season, perhaps there was little any manager could have done at Oakwell.

Heading into League One, there is pressure on the club's ownership to rectify the poor decision-making that has engendered such a rapid fall from grace. Getting the right man in charge will be the big decision to get right. These past two seasons at Oakwell have demonstrated what a difference a manager can make.



Birmingham City

Final Position: 20th

Top Scorer: Scott Hogan (10)

Most Assists: Jeremie Bela (4)

Clean Sheets: 14

What I Said

[Birmingham City] look a more organised, motivated team that will be capable of bloodying some noses along the way."

The Manager

Lee Bowyer: Threatened to form a really effective, hard-working side earlier in the season, but Bowyer's thinking became increasingly muddled over the course of the campaign. Has not been dealt a good hand, but hasn't played it well, either.

Key Player

Tahith Chong: It could have been a very different season for Birmingham City had Tahith remained fit. A dynamic and skilful attacking presence who glides past players with ease, Chong made a stodgy Birmingham side into an effective one. Too good for this level, on his day, but injury issues threaten to derail his career.

Overview

Birmingham City entered the season with momentum after a good end to the previous campaign, following Lee Bowyer's appointment. Hard-working, dogged and with enough threat at the other end, Blues briefly looked capable of at least a top-half finish. However, losing three key loan players – Matija Sarkic in goal, Dion Sanderson in defence and Tahith Chong in attacking midfield – was a blow from which the Blues and Lee Bowyer could not recover from.

As much as Lee Bowyer has to come in for criticism for a lack of identity to the team's playing style – as well as constantly playing players out of position – there are clearly bigger issues at Birmingham City than the manager. With St Andrew's in a state of disrepair, a lack of certainty over who actually calls the shots at the club, and an ageing squad in need of major rebuilding over the next few seasons, it is not unsurprising how

beleaguered Bowyer appeared to become over the course of the campaign.

Looking set to leave the club over the summer, Lee Bowyer did himself few favours with how he managed the club over the final few months of the campaign. Boosted by the January additions of Juninho Bacuna and Onel Hernandez in midfield, with Lyle Taylor arriving in attack, the quality of football remained turgid and uninspiring. The situation around the club hasn't helped, but Bowyer has looked increasingly lost in the dug-out.

Having been so poorly run for so long, rumours suggesting that the club is set to be taken over this summer can only be a good thing for Birmingham City. With a stadium to repair, a squad to rebuild, and, probably, a manager to appoint, there will be plenty in the in-tray for the Blues' prospective new ownership.



Blackburn Rovers

Final Position: 8th

Top Scorer: Ben Brereton Diaz (20)

Most Assists: Joe Rothwell (10)

Clean Sheets: 15

What I Said

"There is surely too much talent in this Blackburn Rovers squad for [relegation] to be a possibility... mid-table looks on the cards at Ewood Park.

The Manager

Tony Mowbray: Another season, another collapse over the second half of the campaign for a Tony Mowbray side. While he is someone who clearly has good ideas about the game and improves players, this was one collapse too many for Mowbray at Blackburn.

Key Player

Ben Brereton Diaz: Has enjoyed a remarkable turnaround since adding Diaz to his surname and playing for the Chile national team. Having always been a hard-working, skilful, and physical presence in attack, Brereton Diaz added the missing element of goals to become one of the best forwards outside of the top-flight.

Overview

While it may be yet another post-December collapse for a Tony Mowbray side, the one Blackburn Rovers experienced this season is nowhere near of the magnitude of last year's. With a more modestly-assembled squad, Mowbray did remarkably well to get a high level of performance over the first half of the campaign, with the decline in results reflecting more of a regression to the mean than the shortcomings of the manager.

Without many particularly notable additions over the summer, this was a season for Blackburn Rovers embodied by players such as Ben Brereton Diaz in attack and the midfield trio of Joe Rothwell, Lewis Travis and John Buckley taking big leaps forward in their development. The few additions that were made were impactful, with Brighton & Hove Albion loanees, Jan-Paul van Hecke and Reda Khadra, the best pieces of business.

Altogether, Blackburn Rovers were a hard-working and quick-thinking outfit that were more than the sum of their parts.

After an incredible run of form towards Christmas, that hot-streak couldn't be maintained. One or two unfortunate injuries didn't help, with Tony Mowbray left with little to do but hope that key players could play themselves back into form. When they didn't, Blackburn regressed to the upper mid-table position that was probably a fairer reflection of the quality they had in their ranks.

With Tony Mowbray, along with a handful of key players, set to leave this summer, Blackburn Rovers are at a crossroads. A good appointment and smart recruitment could see the club take that next step into the top six, however, it is equally possible that they could return to a similar mess to the one they were in five years ago when Mowbray arrived.



Blackpool

Final Position: 16th

Top Scorer: Gary Madine (9)

Most Assists: Kenny Dougall (5)

Clean Sheets: 11

What I Said

"Keeping this Blackpool side in the Championship would add another string to Neil Critchley's bow as a young manager. It will be a tall order..."

The Manager

Neil Critchley: Is proving himself to be one of the brightest young managers in the game, establishing Blackpool back in the Championship with a level of ease. Tactically-flexible and capable of improving players, Blackpool look in a good place under Critchley.

Key Player

Josh Bowler: After getting lost in the system at Everton, Bowler has proven a real find for Blackpool after signing last summer. An incredibly direct and skilful winger who is genuinely two-footed, Bowler is the kind of player who cannot be stopped when on top form. Blackpool will do well to keep hold of him this summer.

Overview

There didn't really look to be a good reason why Blackpool wouldn't struggle in the Championship this season, like most promoted clubs tend to. Sticking with the core of the promotion-winning squad with few particularly notable additions, it's fair to say that the degree of comfort with which they stayed in the division is a lot down to manager, Neil Critchley.

After a slow start to the campaign, Critchley's tactical flexibility made Blackpool a really difficult side for teams to suss out. Switching between various formations and personnel, Blackpool could be niggly and well-organised when they had to be, or more open and attacking when they spotted the opportunity. That Critchley was able to change things up so effectively with a squad of few established Championship performers is a credit to his credentials as a manager.

A key element of Blackpool's success this season has been the diversity of their attacking threat. While Josh Bowler has stood out as the team's star performer, strikers, Jerry Yates, Shayne Lavery and Gary Madine have all stepped up at various times to score goals. Additionally, the ability to rotate wingers Keshi Anderson, Owen Dale, Charlie Kirk, CJ Hamilton, and the aforementioned Josh Bowler has meant that Blackpool have constantly been able to surprise teams either from the start or within games.

Understandably, performance levels dipped once safety was secured but that makes it no less of an impressive campaign for Blackpool. Heading into next season, the club looks in a good position to add further quality to their squad – even if the departure of Josh Bowler is a possibility – while they know they have a manager in Neil Critchley who will continue to find ways to get the best out of his available resources.



Bournemouth

Final Position: 2nd

Top Scorer: Dominic Solanke (24)

Most Assists: Philip Billing (10)

Clean Sheets: 21

What I Said

"With a competent manager in charge in Scott Parker, it would be especially surprising if they don't achieve promotion this time out."

The Manager

Scott Parker: Has achieved his second promotion in three full seasons as a manager, but the jury remains out about his ability as a coach. A tendency towards caution has seen Bournemouth eke out points when they've had the quality to blow opponents away.

Key Player

Dominic Solanke: The exploits of Aleksandar Mitrovic have seen Dominic Solanke go under the radar this season, but his reliability in front of goal has been why Bournemouth have won promotion. A good all-rounder who can both create and score chances, whether he can do the same at Premier League level is his next test.

Overview

With one of the most talented, and expensive, Championship squads ever assembled, Bournemouth have achieved their objective of winning promotion. After messing around with two stand-in managers last season in Jason Tindall and Jonathan Woodgate, the appointment of Scott Parker last summer has provided better structure, even if the football itself has left something to be desired.

The early part of the campaign spoke well to Scott Parker's managerial acumen. With few notable summer additions, Parker lent on the club's academy, promoting Mark Travers in goal, Jordan Zemura and left-back and winger Jaidon Anthony to regular status and overseeing a long unbeaten run. However, once that good start began to fade, Bournemouth turned to the transfer market to see them over the line – with Kieffer Moore, Todd Cantwell and Nat Phillips the most notable

additions – which saw results improve even if performances underwhelmed, from a neutral's perspective.

Whether it's been a deliberate plan or not, Scott Parker's Bournemouth side have had a tendency to create relatively little but have won games nonetheless due to moments of outstanding individual quality. While more was expected from the talent available, Parker and Bournemouth fans will see this season as 'job done'.

Scott Parker now faces a very different job back in the top-flight to the one of this season. A cautious approach could well be valuable when faced with higher-quality opposition, equally, a lack of identity could make next season a slog for Bournemouth. The Cherries needed to win promotion quickly, but they will need to improve further to secure a longer-term top-flight stay.



Bristol City

Final Position: 17th

Top Scorer: Andreas Weimann (22)

Most Assists: Antoine Semenyo (12)

Clean Sheets: 6

What I Said

"While the squad should still be a little too good to struggle, Pearson's managerial style could only add to the malaise..."

The Manager

Nigel Pearson: Just whether he is the man to lead Bristol City back to play-off contender status remains to be seen but he has done a solid job in beginning the rebuild, by reducing the squad size and bringing through youngsters. A tendency to pass responsibility for bad results onto the players is his biggest flaw as a manager.

Key Player

Andreas Weimann: The Austrian forward has enjoyed a remarkable campaign at Ashton Gate. Operating just behind the strikers, Weimann's combination of movement, vision and technique has made him a prolific source of both goals and creativity.

Overview

Bristol City are in the first part of a rebuilding process, having had to overhaul a squad that had become oversized, overpaid and underperforming in an attempt to make the top six a few years ago. With a smaller, less-experienced, group, it is not unsurprising that the Robins have been so inconsistent this season, but there are signs of the framework being laid down for greater success in the years to come.

Nigel Pearson deserves credit for clearing the decks at Ashton Gate while avoiding a relegation battle. Trimming the fat from the squad last summer, Pearson has been willing to plug gaps with some of the talented youngsters emerging from the academy. Creative midfielder, Alex Scott, is at the apex of this new wave at Bristol City, followed by the likes of Ayman Benarous, Robbie Cundy, and Sam Bell.

However, the key part of the job that Nigel Pearson has done at Ashton Gate this

season has been in unlocking the potential of more established senior players. Most notably, the forward trio of Chris Martin, Andreas Weimann and Antoine Semenyo have emerged as one of the most potent in the division, while Han-Noah Massengo in central midfield has recaptured form after losing his way last season.

For all of the good that Nigel Pearson has done, he has struggled to rectify the team's defensive issues.

Constantly bemoaning a frail mentality, Pearson's lack of confidence in his defenders may have contributed to poor defensive performances. If things don't improve next season with new defensive personnel, Pearson will only have himself to blame.

Bristol City look in a good place heading into next season. A younger, more vibrant team with one of the division's most dangerous forward lines, it is up to Nigel Pearson to deliver more consistent performances next year.



Cardiff City

Final Position: 18th

Top Scorer: Aden Flint (6)

Most Assists: Ryan Giles (9)

Clean Sheets: 7

What I Said

"There is enough experience and nous to get this Cardiff City side towards the higher end of the table."

The Manager

Steve Morison: Stepped up from the club's under-23 side to steady the ship following Mick McCarthy's sacking. Has done a reasonable job but will need to demonstrate next season that he can enact a vision of a way forward for Cardiff City.

Key Player

Ryan Giles: Left the club mid-season after an impressive loan spell, Giles was the team's most consistent performer. His combination of pace and crossing ability from the left wing, with the number of big, physical players at Cardiff City proved a highly-effective formula.

Overview

There were hopes heading into this season that Cardiff City could finish in the top six, after improving immensely last year under the management of Mick McCarthy. However, McCarthy's methods quickly turned stale, leaving an ageing Cardiff side in need of a new direction, while also having to be careful of not falling into relegation danger.

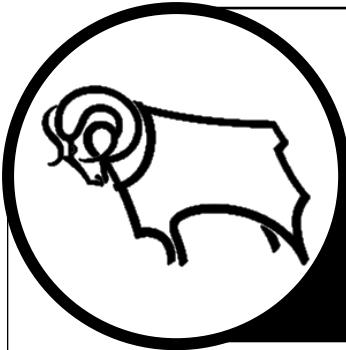
The promotion of Steve Morison from the club's academy set-up was a bold move but has proven to be enough to avoid a disastrous campaign at the Cardiff City Stadium. Morison had wanted to evolve the team's style but there has been little tangible improvement in the quality of football, other than a number of youngsters starting to make an impact for the first-team.

If there is a way forward for Cardiff City from this season, it will be based around the exploits of homegrown forwards, Isaak Davies, Mark Harris, and

Rubin Colwill. Colwill, in particular, could be set for a big impact next season, supplying both creativity and goals between the lines of midfield and attack for the Bluebirds.

Cardiff City look set for a rebuild over the next season or so, but there are questions as to whether Steve Morison is the man to entrust with such a responsibility. After a decent start, results tailed-off over the course of the campaign. While he talks a good game, his words have not always been matched by the product on the pitch.

It is a lot of responsibility to place on the shoulders of an inexperienced manager to rebuild a team over the summer, especially with resources likely to be relatively meagre. If Steve Morison is not up to the job, Cardiff City could be in trouble next season. If Morison has learned from the teething issues he has endured this campaign, forward progress may be on the horizon.



Derby County

Final Position: 23rd

Top Scorer: Tom Lawrence (11)

Most Assists: Tom Lawrence (5)

Clean Sheets: 14

What I Said

"At the moment, staying in the Championship seems a less important objective than remaining as a football club for Derby County."

The Manager

Wayne Rooney: Has admirably stuck with the club through its darkest period. With few resources to work with, Rooney's ability to coax performances out of both veterans and raw youngsters has been very impressive.

Key Player

Tom Lawrence: After an underwhelming few years at Pride Park, Lawrence has relished the responsibility of being the club's captain and key player. A skilful attacking midfielder who has always had a capacity for brilliance, Lawrence has added a work-rate and drive to his game this season. Will surely be part of a top-end Championship side next year.

Overview

Certain for relegation heading into the season, that it took until the final weeks for it to be confirmed says a lot about Wayne Rooney's motivational skills as a manager. There were several junctures this season where it would have been easy to down tools - from points deductions, to key players having to be moved on, to the sheer uncertainty over the club's existence - yet Derby County kept fighting until they couldn't.

With a squad decimated by the club's parlous financial condition, Wayne Rooney was forced to cobble together a team of youngsters and a handful of free agents no other teams wanted. Implementing a patient, passing style of football, Derby County didn't just dig in and scrap for points, they played some genuinely attractive football and outplayed a number of opponents - particularly at home.

The team's key players underline how cobbled

together this squad was. Goalkeeper, Ryan Allsop, Wycombe Wanderers' second-choice last season. A centre-back pairing of 37 year-old Curtis Davies and 39 year-old Phil Jagielka. Krystian Bielik returning from years out with serious injury in midfield, along with academy youngster, Max Bird, adding another level to his game. Those that stuck around, such as Tom Lawrence and Nathan Byrne. Along with a seemingly endless crop of youngsters emerging; from Festy Ebosale at right-back, Luke Plange in attack, to tricky winger, Malcolm Ebiowei.

Just where Derby County head next will not be clear until a few months' time, at the earliest. There looks to be plenty of work to do to get a takeover over the line, before the real work of rebuilding Derby both on and off the pitch can begin. Getting to the end of this season is an achievement, bouncing back over the longer-term will be much harder.



Fulham

Final Position: 1st

Top Scorer: Aleksandar Mitrovic (43)

Most Assists: Harry Wilson (19)

Clean Sheets: 17

What I Said

"There is surely too much quality about this Fulham squad not to end up at least around the top-six, but there is little sign of an end to their current yo-yo cycle."

The Manager

Marco Silva: Has demonstrated just why he was one of the most exciting managers in the top-flight not too long ago. With a very talented squad, Marco Silva seems to have raised the level of performance higher than it might have been, even if the real test will be next year.

Key Player

Aleksandar Mitrovic: Scoring over 40 goals in a season is rather insane. Often through brute force, Mitrovic has tormented the Championship, benefitting from a team built to maximise the service to him. Looks in as good a position as ever to demonstrate his credentials in the top-flight.

Overview

This season has proven to be a walk in the park for Fulham, but it wasn't as certain as it now looks to have been. With a squad that had looked a disparate set of parts from previous, failed, eras at the club and appointing a manager who had endured a difficult few jobs, this season could have been much more difficult for Fulham in the wrong hands.

It speaks well to Marco Silva's qualities as a manager that he has been able to impose a sense of cohesion at Craven Cottage. Finding a way to motivate a set of players who were low on confidence – with many probably looking for a way out of the club – following relegation is one of Silva's underrated achievements this year. That's before it is factored in just how quickly Silva found a style of play to maximise the significant talent at his disposal.

The team was clearly built to get the best out of its best player, Aleksandar Mitrovic. With the wide play of Harry

Wilson and Neeskens Kebano, supported by attacking full-backs in Neco Williams and Antonee Robinson, all geared around getting crosses into the box for the powerful Mitrovic to attack in bulldozer fashion.

Having passed the test of getting out of the Championship, once again, the big question with Fulham is whether they are in any better condition to establish themselves in the Premier League than the last two occasions. Adapting to being unable to dominate games in the same fashion as at Championship level will be the key challenge, with Fulham's frailness in defence and goal a concern in that regard.

Just like those previous stints in the top-flight, Fulham's success will likely rest on how well they do in the summer transfer market. As impressive as this season has been from the Cottagers, they are yet to prove that they have learned from the mistakes of the past at Premier League-level.



Huddersfield Town

Final Position: 3rd

Top Scorer: Danny Ward (14)

Most Assists: Sorba Thomas (11)

Clean Sheets: 19

What I Said

"There doesn't look to be the resources in place to hand [Carlos Corberan] what he needs to put his ideas into practice at the John Smith's Stadium."

The Manager

Carlos Corberan: Having looked to have struggled over the course of last season, Corberan has imposed greater consistency at Huddersfield this year. Proving himself to be a pragmatic presence in the dug-out, Corberan's organisation and calm head have made his team into a surprise package.

Key Player

Lee Nicholls: The second-choice goalkeeper at League One Milton Keynes Dons last season, Lee Nicholls has been instrumental at a Championship top six side. An excellent reflex shot-stopper, Nicholls has added an extra level of safety behind Huddersfield's tight defence.

Overview

Huddersfield Town didn't look to be in a good place heading into the new season. Having attempted an overhaul of the team's style the previous year, their summer recruitment looked strangely unambitious, with a number of cheap steady-Eddies brought in. It looked a lot like Huddersfield were preparing for an era beyond the management of Carlos Corberan.

However, the Spaniard has demonstrated his pragmatism as a manager this season. While Huddersfield have been capable of some really neat passages of play, their go-to this season has been in keeping games tight and scoring from set-pieces or counter-attacks.

Whether it was in the early portion of the season, where Sorba Thomas' delivery from dead-balls became the key feature of Huddersfield's play, to later in the season where the battling qualities of Tom Lees, Matty Pearson and many others at the back

saw the Terriers consistently keep games tight, Huddersfield have been a highly efficient and effective points-winning unit.

Throughout this season, there has been an expectation that Huddersfield Town would eventually drop-off. Their level of performances haven't been as impressive as their results, but their ability to manage games has meant that they haven't had to completely dominate in order to pick up results. In a play-off race that has been defined by a lack of consistency in the teams around them, Huddersfield possessed qualities others were desperate for.

Heading into the play-offs, Huddersfield have to be considered one of the favourites due to that ability to see results out. There are parallels to their previous Premier League promotion, where excellent team spirit went a long way. It would probably be a more impressive achievement this time around.



Hull City

Final Position: 19th

Top Scorer: Keane Lewis-Potter (12)

Most Assists: George Honeyman & Ryan Longman (4)

Clean Sheets: 15

What I Said

"Hull have the potential to be quite an exciting side going forward but it's the thinness of the squad further back that is the concern."

The Manager

Shota Arveladze: Appointed following the mid-season takeover of the club by Acun Ilicali, Arveladze struggled to make a quick impact Hull City but gradually appears to have got up to speed with the Championship with some effective counter-attacking displays.

Key Player

Keane Lewis-Potter: A touch of class for Hull City in the final third that they otherwise would have lacked this season. An intelligent and skilful forward who can identify space and hurt teams with it. If the Tigers can keep hold of Lewis-Potter over the summer, it could make for an exciting first full season under new ownership.

Overview

Comfortably the best team in League One last year, it took a while for Hull City to get up to speed with Championship football. Under a soft transfer embargo last summer, there were periods in the early part of the campaign where Hull looked short on the quality required to stay in the Championship. However, an excellent mid-season run under Grant McCann effectively assured survival.

The end of that run coincided with the takeover of the club by the Turkish media mogul, Acun Ilicali. That threatened to cause a level of uncertainty enough to see Hull dragged back into the relegation scrap, however, Ilicali's new manager, Shota Arveladze, had enough breathing room to get used to the squad at his disposal and eventually get results out of it.

When Hull City were good this season, it was generally because the forward trio of George Honeyman, Keane

Lewis-Potter and Ryan Longman were on form, giving the team energy and threat on the counter. With impressive performances at the back too from homegrown youngster, Jacob Greaves, there are elements to build around next season for a more impressive campaign.

The key thing to come out of this season for Hull City is the change in ownership, with the club looking to be going nowhere under the previous owners, the Allams. Both Grant McCann and Shota Arveladze deserve credit for helping steer Hull City to safety amid the uncertainty. It is now, over the coming summer, that will demonstrate both the ambition and competency of Acun Ilicali as an owner.

Hull City look like being a team to watch over the summer, heading into next season. Not only could there be some interesting pieces of recruitment, but there is the basis of a team that could finish much higher than 19th next year.



Luton Town

Final Position: 6th

Top Scorer: Elijah Adebayo (16)

Most Assists: Kal Naismith (7)

Clean Sheets: 19

What I Said

"What makes Luton such an exciting prospect is they won't set out to play like a side that is financially outgunned by most of the division."

The Manager

Nathan Jones: The Welshman has combined a clear sense of identity with incredible resourcefulness to get Luton Town punching as far above their weight as they have this season. A fiery character that his players clearly adore, Jones will not be content with a just top six finish.

Key Player

Elijah Adebayo: A physically-powerful centre-forward who possesses a dangerous level of technical skill and pace to his game. There is still work to do on his finishing, but Adebayo is effectively a one-man frontline who is consistently a real pain for opposing defences to attempt to deal with.

Overview

Luton Town were tipped for dark horse status heading into the new campaign, but it has been impressive, nonetheless, how they have proved just why there were such high hopes for them this year. With Nathan Jones providing both the tactical and motivational power to make this Luton side greater than the sum of their parts, the Hatters have consistently overcome the hurdles they have faced this year.

From a slow start to persistent injury issues throughout the campaign, Luton Town have continued to plug away and keep themselves in the play-off hunt due to a clear understanding of the blueprint laid down by Nathan Jones. With injuries forcing Jones to slot players into different formations and positions, the consistency of performances from Luton Town has been especially impressive.

Luton's game-plan is centred around a high-energy

pressing game that can choke the life out of opponents. Led by the effervescent Elijah Adebayo and Harry Cornick in attack, supported by Allan Campbell and Pelly-Ruddock Mpanzu in midfield, Luton's ability to win the ball high up the pitch and quickly create chances has been a key feature of their play.

With a clear expectation of what they want to achieve on the pitch, that is why players are able to slot in and out of the side, and in different positions, so easily. While Adebayo and Cornick garner the headlines, the versatility of players such as Kal Naismith and James Bree has been why Luton have been able to sustain their play-off push.

Luton Town are in the top six on merit and have a great chance to pull off what would be a remarkable promotion to the Premier League. If they don't make it, they look to be in a good position to try again next year.



Middlesbrough

Final Position: 7th

Top Scorer: Matt Crooks (10)

Most Assists: Isaiah Jones (9)

Clean Sheets: 16

What I Said

"it is hard to see too many other teams in this division who will play with the intensity [Middlesbrough] will at their best"

The Manager

Chris Wilder: Quickly added intensity to what had looked a humdrum, mid-table campaign for Middlesbrough under Neil Warnock. Results tailed-off towards the end of the campaign, perhaps because Wilder hasn't quite had the players required to consistently enact his game-plan.

Key Player

Matt Crooks: An energetic box-to-box midfield presence recruited from Rotherham United over the summer, Crooks' combination of technical quality, physicality and enthusiasm for the game has made him a key presence for Boro this season, particularly when popping up in the penalty area.

Overview

Middlesbrough looked in a good place to build on a top-half finish under Neil Warnock last season, however, they never really got going under the veteran manager. Recruiting Chris Wilder as Warnock's replacement was a coup for Boro, with the former Sheffield United boss quickly demonstrating why he should probably still be managing in the top-flight, with an impressive run both in the league and FA Cup after arriving at the Riverside.

Looking like one of the form teams heading into the final month of the campaign, it was surprising and disappointing that Middlesbrough fell short. Playing a fast and intense style of play, Middlesbrough may have just been lacking a touch of quality to get over the line in the play-off race.

Players such as Isaiah Jones, Marcus Tavernier and Matt Crooks allowed Middlesbrough to play so quickly to overwhelm

opponents. With a solid back-line and some reliable senior players spread across the pitch, it is in attack where Middlesbrough found themselves lacking this season.

Despite Andraz Sporar, Duncan Watmore, Flo Balogun and Josh Coburn demonstrating a reasonable level of effectiveness in front of goal, Chris Wilder never found a consistently effective partnership between any combination of those four in attack. That chopping and changing up front may well have disrupted the team's rhythm as the run-in loomed.

With a summer to work with and strengthen the squad, Middlesbrough should be in a good position to go one better next season and make the top six. In Chris Wilder, they will have one of the division's best managers to call upon, which should count a long way.



Millwall

Final Position: 9th

Top Scorer: Benik Afobe (12)

Most Assists: Jed Wallace (12)

Clean Sheets: 14

What I Said

"Millwall just look too solid and reliable a team-unit to find themselves in danger for any kind of extended period this season."

The Manager

Gary Rowett: Continues to get underdogs to perform well above their level of resources at Championship level. Rowett's ability to generate consistency of performance meant that Millwall were constantly in a position to threaten the top six throughout the campaign.

Key Player

Benik Afobe: After a difficult few years, Benik Afobe looks to have found a home at Millwall. A hard-working, physical centre-forward, Afobe has provided Millwall with a presence in attack they haven't really had in a long while. It would make a lot of sense if he made his loan move permanent this summer.

Overview

Having been a top-half team for years on a relatively limited budget, it would be easy to underestimate what an achievement it is for Gary Rowett to have had the Lions in the conversation for the play-offs this year. Constantly in the top-half for much of the campaign, a late run from Millwall threatened to see them gate-crash the end of season party.

The most remarkable thing about Millwall's excellent season has been that they have been less reliant on Jed Wallace than usual. With their key creative and scoring cog suffering a handful of absences throughout the campaign, Gary Rowett took the opportunity to diversify the team's threat, with the physical presence of Benik Afobe, the goal poaching of Tom Bradshaw, and the pace of Mason Bennett and Tyler Burey, providing Millwall with different ways to win games.

The core of what Millwall do so well has remained the same. Jake Cooper, Murray Wallace and Bartosz Bialkowski in defence and goal make the Lions are tricky to score against. By keeping games tight, Millwall always have a chance to nick games. What has made this season a little bit better than recent ones has been not all of their threat has been centred on Jed Wallace and set-pieces.

Millwall's consistency over the years makes them a difficult team to find new things to write about. A policy of gradual evolution under Gary Rowett has meant that the team doesn't tend to change drastically as new elements are slowly added to it. It is incredible how they punch above their weight so often, making it hard to see just when they might stop doing so.



Nottingham Forest

Final Position: 4th

Top Scorer: Brennan Johnson (16)

Most Assists: Brennan Johnson (10)

Clean Sheets: 17

What I Said

"With the right final pieces added to the squad, Nottingham Forest could be in a position to challenge towards the upper end of the table."

The Manager

Steve Cooper: Forest looked a hard team to turn around when Steve Cooper arrived in September, but he quickly turned the team into one of the best in the division.

Combining excellent organisation with setting the team's attacking players free, Cooper has now made the play-offs in the three seasons he has been a senior manager for.

Key Player

Brennan Johnson: Off the back of a successful loan at Lincoln City, Johnson has proven himself to be one of the most exciting young talents in English football this year. A skilful and quick forward who can both create and score goals, Johnson has a big future in the game.

Overview

When Nottingham Forest were struggling at the start of this season under serial Championship promotion-winner, Chris Hughton, it looked to be a case that they were maybe just an unmanageable football club. However, Steve Cooper has shown since his early season appointment that Forest actually had a lot of the pieces in place to do a lot better than they had showed.

Cooper quickly identified that this Forest side needed to be built around the talent of youngster, Brennan Johnson. However, that structure also demonstrated that they were quite a few other very talented players already at the club. From intelligent forward, Phillip Zinckernagel, to James Garner and Ryan Yates in midfield, Djed Spence at right-back, and Scott McKenna and Joe Worrall in defence, Forest quickly looked a side packed with some very good Championship players.

That was further supplemented in January by some excellent recruitment. The addition of the intelligent and physical Keinan Davis to play centre-forward was the most notable signing, but Steve Cook added a presence in defence, while Sam Surridge added further depth in attack.

Putting enough of a run of form together to trouble Bournemouth for their automatic promotion place heading into the final week of the season, there may be an element of regret at the City Ground that Steve Cooper did not arrive at the club a little earlier. Nonetheless, the team looks in a strong position to gain promotion via the play-offs.

As important as achieving promotion would be for Nottingham Forest in terms of holding onto their best players, with Steve Cooper in charge, they would be in a good position to build on this season if they missed out on a Premier League place.



Peterborough United

Final Position: 22nd

Top Scorer: Jonson Clarke-Harris (12)

Most Assists: Harrison Burrows (7)

Clean Sheets: 6

What I Said

"There should be enough about them to survive, but it is a season that is likely to come down to how Peterborough cope in pressure situations."

The Manager

Grant McCann: Returned to the club with a little too much to do to keep them in the Championship. McCann added a level of organisation that had been missing earlier in the campaign and would probably have made a better fist of survival had he arrived earlier.

Key Player

Siriki Dembele: In what has been a season where too few of Peterborough United's squad adapted quickly enough to Championship football, Dembele – who left for Bournemouth in January – was the most notable player who did. His evasive skill and pace gave Posh a level of danger in the final third that they otherwise lacked.

Overview

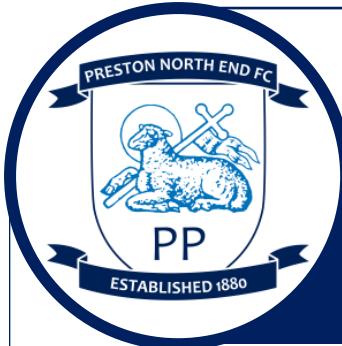
Having put so much effort over the years to get back into the Championship, Peterborough United will be hugely disappointed in themselves in how easily they gave up second-tier status this season. With too many players either not up to the level or taking too long to adapt, Posh's survival hopes got away from them very quickly.

The most frustrating thing about this season may well be the improved form after replacing Darren Ferguson as manager with Grant McCann. While it's understandable why the club stayed faithful to the man who won promotion – and is also pretty much the only successful manager the club has had over the past decade or so – Ferguson's lack of tactical nous and habit of falling out with players was shown up when faced with a higher standard of opponent. The performances since McCann's arrival have suggested that, with better organisation, Posh may have

stood a chance of staying in the Championship this season.

Although he ended up in double-figures for goals, striker, Jonson Clarke-Harris, embodies the frustration with this Peterborough side. It was only under McCann, with relegation all but certain, that Clarke-Harris found form. Similar could be said for other key figures in the side, such as Sammie Szmodics, Jack Marriott, and Jorge Grant.

Likely to keep hold of most of their key players, Peterborough look in a good position under Grant McCann to bounce back from relegation at the first attempt. If they return, the club may need a slight change in emphasis to establish itself in the Championship, but Posh fans are likely to relish a more enjoyable campaign on the horizon at London Road.



Preston North End

Final Position: 13th

Top Scorer: Emil Riis Jakobsen (16)

Most Assists: Emil Riis Jakobsen, Daniel Johnson & Alan Browne (5)

Clean Sheets: 13

What I Said

"There should be enough residual quality about this Preston North End side to avoid being sucked into a relegation scrap"

The Manager

Ryan Lowe: Has brought excitement and unity to a club that looked on a downward spiral earlier in the season. A positive and charismatic presence in the dug-out, a summer to sort the squad out should see Preston kick on under Lowe.

Key Player

Daniel Iversen: The Leicester City loanee has probably been the best goalkeeper in the Championship this season. A commanding presence who is also capable of excellent reflex saves, Iversen is a key reason why Preston didn't slip into danger earlier in the campaign. The Dane stands a good chance of being a Premier League regular next season.

Overview

The decision to hand caretaker, Frankie McAvoy, the full-time managerial job last summer reflected a lack of ambition at boardroom level at Preston North End that had seen the club lose its way after years of punching above its weight. However, the mid-season arrival of Ryan Lowe in the dug-out injected a level of purpose that had been lacking at Deepdale, even threatening an unlikely play-off charge.

Had it not been for the goalkeeping of Daniel Iversen and the goals of Emil Riis Jakobsen, Preston North End could well have been in genuine relegation danger by the time Frankie McAvoy was sacked. Instead, Ryan Lowe could make a quick impact by adopting a more attacking game-plan that quickly got fans onside and led to some excellent results.

For all of the depression around Deepdale earlier in the campaign, there remained some excellent players for Preston North

End to call upon. The quality in midfield provided by Daniel Johnson, Ben Whiteman and Alan Browne allowed Preston to play some excellent football. The January addition of exciting Aston Villa loanee, Cameron Archer, threatened to add that extra touch of quality for Preston to make this season more than a transitional one.

With a squad that has grown somewhat stale, and with quite a few out of contract, this summer looks set to be about Ryan Lowe overhauling this Preston outfit and shaping into something better able to enact his style of play. If Lowe can get the recruitment right, Preston could be a force to be reckoned with next season, surfing on the wave of their manager's infectious positivity.



Queens Park Rangers

Final Position: 11th

Top Scorer: Andre Gray (10)

Most Assists: Chris Willock (11)

Clean Sheets: 12

What I Said

"There are few other sides among those who were in the Championship last year that look in as good a position as QPR."

The Manager

Mark Warburton: Looked to be continuing his steady steering of Queens Park Rangers into the top six but a poor run in March put paid to what had appeared a certainty, costing Warburton his job at Loftus Road. Clearly someone who can improve players, a lack of tactical nous may have been his biggest shortcoming.

Key Player

Chris Willock: Emerged this season as one of the best creative, attacking midfield players in the division. An elegant presence on the ball who can drift past opponents in the centre of the pitch before picking his final pass, Willock threatened to carry QPR into the top six.

Overview

For much of the season, Queens Park Rangers' top six status looked to be a certainty. Off the back of an impressive run over the second half of the previous season, QPR were chugging along nicely until hitting a roadblock in the final few months of this season.

Just why that proved to be the case is not quite clear. Injuries in goal haven't helped – QPR used four different goalkeepers this season – nor the lack of a reliable goalscorer among their strikers, nor the disruption caused by Ilias Chair and Seny Dieng going to the African Cup of Nations. However, those factors don't quite seem to explain how a team that looked so comfortably a top six side suddenly stumbled with the finish-line in sight.

It is hard to even apportion the blame on the shoulders of Mark Warburton. While he may have not always got his team selection and tactics right, he has clearly been able to improve and get

performances out of the majority of his squad. Maybe the simple explanation is that Queens Park Rangers have been unlucky this season.

There was a period around the mid-way stage where the Hoops looked set to surpass the play-offs and challenge for automatic promotion. Looking solid at the back, with goals further forward and Chris Willock knitting things together nicely with his creativity, QPR were close to an unstoppable force before their remarkable fade away began.

Despite the stumble this season, Mark Warburton has done an excellent job at Queens Park Rangers in transforming a lower mid-table side into top six candidates. Whoever replaces him will have the basis of a strong Championship side next season, but the club will have to prove just why they think they can find an improvement on Warburton.



Reading

Final Position: 21st

Top Scorer: John Swift (11)

Most Assists: John Swift (13)

Clean Sheets: 5

What I Said

"There is very little margin for error this season at Reading, they could finish comfortably in the top-half or they could struggle badly.

The Manager

Paul Ince: Plucked from an eight-year managerial exile to the club that his son just so happens to play for, Paul Ince provided the change in emphasis at the Madejski required to keep Reading in the Championship. Whether he is the man to take the club further forward remains to be seen.

Key Player

John Swift: Over the first half of the season, John Swift looked to be one of the best players in the Championship, while playing in a struggling side. Adding goals to his creative play, Swift's return of 11, with 13 assists on top of that, demonstrate that he deserved much more than to be in such a poor side.

Overview

Reading threatened to finally pay the price for years of poor off-field management of the club with relegation this season. Under a soft transfer embargo, docked points and with a team that was woefully underperforming, there only looked to be one direction the Royals were heading.

With a cobbled together squad of free agents, youngsters and a handful of the big money signings remaining that were brought in a few years ago, making sense of this Reading squad proved to be too big of a challenge for Veljko Paunovic. The Serb had impressed last season with his motivational skills, but he eventually faced too many challenges to overcome at the Madejski.

That the club turned to Paul Ince – who last managed in 2014, at Blackpool – as the man to turn things around doesn't speak well to the decision-making process at Reading, but the former England international did

enough to coax results from the mess that he had been left with. It certainly helped that he could call upon players such as John Swift, Lucas Joao, Junior Hoilett and his own son, Tom, who are proven, top-level, Championship attacking players.

Whether it gets any better for Reading looks doubtful. With a large portion of their squad out of contract and continuing issues with Financial Fair Play to manage, there looks to be limited scope for the rebuild that looks to be necessary for the club.

The one source of optimism is the club's academy, with youngsters, Tom Holmes, Tom McIntyre and Luke Southwood emerging as heroes of this season, but the issue is just who will make the decisions to provide them the structure around which to flourish. Staying in the Championship one more year looks to have done little to address the underlying issues at Reading.



Sheffield United

Final Position: 5th

Top Scorer: *Billy Sharp (14)*
Most Assists: *Morgan Gibbs-White (9)*
Clean Sheets: *20*

What I Said

"It would take a lot to go wrong for Sheffield United not to challenge for automatic promotion this season."

The Manager

Paul Heckingbottom: Took over mid-season with United a long way away from the play-off picture and quickly brought in the organisation and purpose that had been missing. Seems to get the club in a way his predecessor, Slavisa Jokanovic, was missing.

Key Player

Wes Foderingham: Goalkeeping issues had been a key reason why Sheffield United started the season so slowly, yet the Blades ended up with one of the best clean sheet records thanks to the emergence of Wes Foderingham as first-choice. A strong shot-stopper, Foderingham brought a level of calmness and authority that had been missing.

Overview

This season was always going to be a big test of just how much of a loss Chris Wilder was for Sheffield United. The man who took the club from mid-table in League One into mid-table in the Premier League, it was a bold decision to part ways with him on the way to top-flight relegation given how transformational his presence at the club had been.

A slow summer in the transfer market handed something of a hospital pass to Wilder's replacement, Slavisa Jokanovic. The Serb wanted the team to play a more fluent, possession-based style, but consistent defensive calamities dogged his time in charge at Bramall Lane. While the Blades' owners might have been more patient with Jokanovic, it increasingly looked like it was a poor fit between manager and club.

Turning to Paul Heckingbottom, who had worked with the club's under-23 side and had a

spell as caretaker end the end of the previous season, Sheffield United looked a lot more like the team they were expected to be. Solid at the back, with Wes Foderingham proving a good choice in goal, capable of dominating in midfield via Olly Norwood, John Fleck and Sander Berge and capable of winning games through the guile of Morgan Gibbs-White and Billy Sharp in attack, the Blades gradually made the top six position expected of them.

Nonetheless, there still looks to be an element missing from Sheffield United to get them playing of the standard expected of them. Despite their recent Premier League status, they start the play-offs as the outsiders due to that lack of consistency over the course of the campaign. If they miss out on promotion, it may take a longer period of rebuilding for the Blades to get back to a similar position.



Stoke City

Final Position: 14th

Top Scorer: Jacob Brown (13)

Most Assists: Tommy Smith (6)

Clean Sheets: 15

What I Said

“While there are some missing pieces to this Stoke City side, there are the elements in place to improve upon recent underwhelming campaigns.”

The Manager

Michael O'Neill: Has sorted out the mess that Stoke City were in upon his arrival but appears to be unable to get them to take that next step. Clearly a very competent manager but may not be quite what Stoke need to take the next step.

Key Player

Mario Vrancic: The inspirational spark behind the team's strong first half to the campaign. A creative midfielder with the ability to step forward and score goals out of nowhere, keeping him fit for the entirety of the campaign could have ensured Stoke City were a stronger play-off contender than they were.

Overview

There can be little doubt that Michael O'Neill has done good work at Stoke City, but his second full season in charge of the club has played out in almost the exact manner as his first. A decent start to the campaign gave way to an inconsistent final few months that saw Stoke finish much further away from the top-six than they really should have.

Michael O'Neill still deserves credit for clearing the decks at Stoke City following their relegation from the top-flight. Refreshing the squad and bloodling a handful of youngsters, Stoke are in a much healthier place than they were a few years ago when they were in genuine danger of the drop. This is a lot to like about this Stoke side, from Josef Bursik in goal, Harry Souttar and Josh Tymon in defence, the talents of Mario Vrancic, Lewis Baker and Nick Powell in midfield, the energy of Jacob Brown in attack. However, they continue to struggle for consistency.

There has been a portion of bad luck for Michael O'Neill this season. Injuries to Harry Souttar and Mario Vrancic around the mid-way stage robbed his team of two of its most important players. However, O'Neill was able to recruit a level of quality in January – such as Phil Jagielka, Lewis Baker, and Josh Maja – that few other teams at the club would have been able to and still fell short of expectations.

Some impressive performances towards the end of the campaign, once the play-offs were out of sight, may just buy Michael O'Neill further time to live up to expectations at Stoke City, but it is hard to see why next season would be any different to the last two. For all the good that O'Neill has done at Stoke, it may just be that a potential successor would be in a better position to parlay his efforts into the top six position the club craves.



Swansea City

Final Position: 15th

Top Scorer: Joel Piroe (22)
Most Assists: Jamie Paterson (9)
Clean Sheets: 16

What I Said

"A repeat of the top six finishes of the past two seasons may be beyond a Swansea City team that look to be in a rebuilding phase."

The Manager

Russell Martin: An idealist in the dug-out who wants his teams to completely dominate possession, Martin has taken this season to implement his ideals at Swansea City. There have been some impressive performances along the way, but a lack of consistency put paid to a play-off bid.

Key Player

Joel Piroe: Recruited from PSV Eindhoven's youth system, Piroe has emerged as one of the best strikers in the Championship. An excellent finisher, with a great understanding of how to get into goalscoring positions, Piroe is the kind of striker that doesn't look like he has to do much to score goals.

Overview

Appointing such an idealistic manager in Russell Martin without the benefit of a pre-season meant that the objective for much of this campaign has been for the manager to implement his methods, rather than garner results. While there were periods where the play-offs looked a possibility, that search for style has made this a transitional campaign.

It is easy to forget just what a big rebuilding job it was at Swansea City over the summer. After losing the play-off final, the core of the side was decimated, with Freddie Woodman, Marc Guehi, Connor Roberts, and Andre Ayew the most notable departures, that Swansea end this campaign looking to have large parts of a potential top six side for next year in place shows how well they have executed the rebuild.

The defence has been remodelled around the ball-playing qualities of keeper, Andy Fisher, with Ryan Manning moved into the

back-line for his passing ability. In midfield, the additions of Jamie Paterson and Olivier Ntcham have provided creativity on top of Matt Grimes passing rhythm. In attack, Joel Piroe and Michael Obafemi look well-placed to grab 40+ goals between them after a year of integrating into the team's style.

There is work to do over the summer to add greater depth to the squad, but it will be a far cry from the level of overhaul the squad has endured over the course of this season. The challenge for Russell Martin will be to find a way to marry his desire to play good football with the consistency in results required to make the top six, but Swansea City fans seem happier that their team has returned to a style that was once synonymous with the club's name.



West Bromwich Albion

Final Position: 10th

Top Scorer: Karlan Grant (18)

Most Assists: Callum Robinson (9)

Clean Sheets: 19

What I Said

"As it stands, it is hard to look past West Brom as one of the favourites for promotion this season."

The Manager

Steve Bruce: Brought in to ensure the club didn't slip out of the top six, Bruce did little to address the slide at Albion this season. Backed to oversee a rebuild over the summer, Bruce will be under pressure from early on next season.

Key Player

Matt Clarke: The Brighton & Hove Albion loanee has provided the pace at the back that has helped West Bromwich Albion's physical back-line especially imposing. Also effective at bringing the ball out of the defence, Clarke deserved better than mid-table football at The Hawthorns this season.

Overview

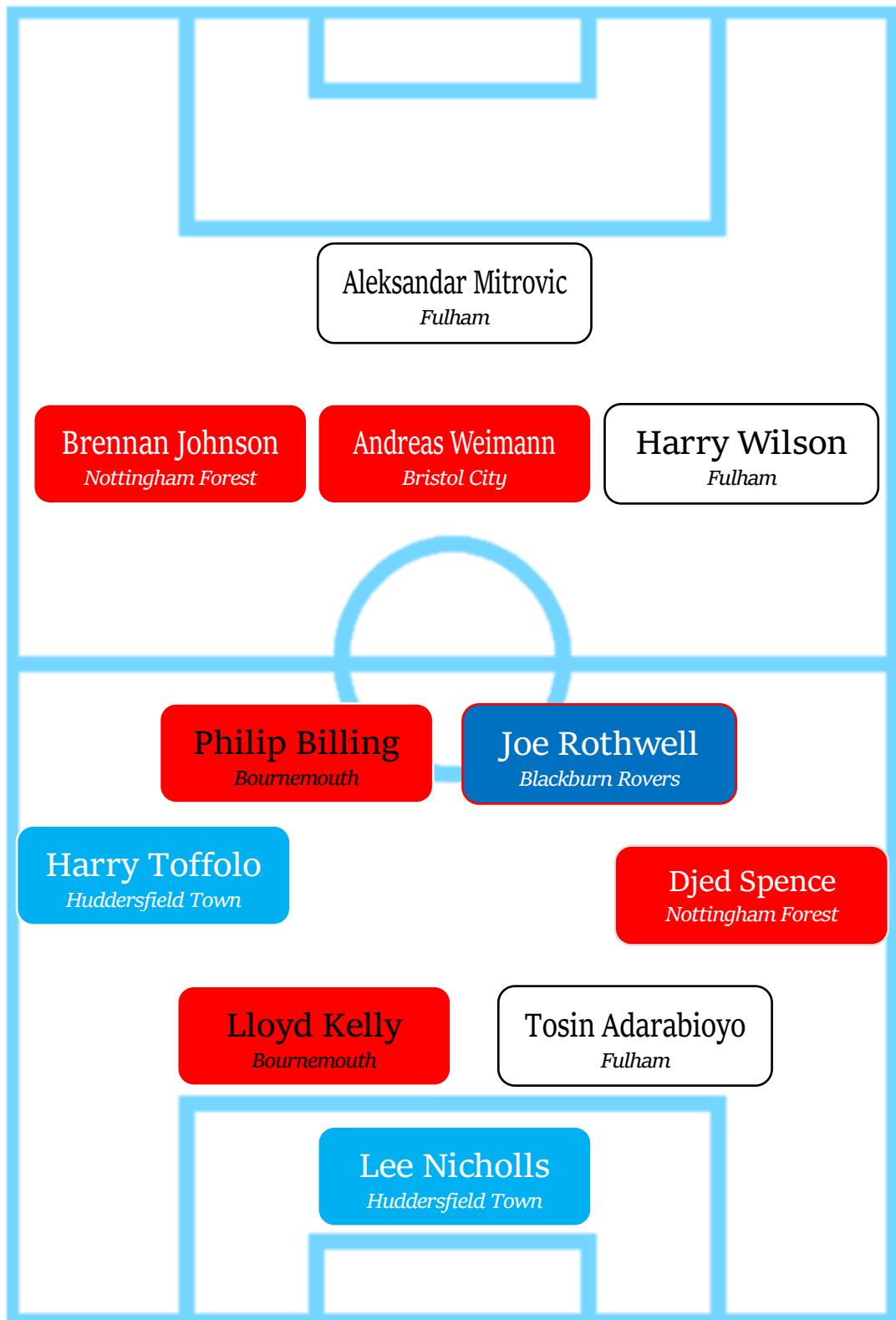
It was going to be an interesting experiment to see how Valerien Ismael could take what had worked so well at Barnsley last year into a recently-relegated Premier League side. While the end result was some pretty miserable, low-scoring football at The Hawthorns, Ismael might have done a better job with greater freedom to mould the squad to his requirements.

That the club's owners opted to go from the extreme of Valerien Ismael to the supposed safe pair of hands of Steve Bruce mid-season does not speak well to the decision-making process behind the scenes at West Bromwich Albion. Arriving just after the closure of the January transfer window, Steve Bruce faced the same problem that Ismael faced, of not having a squad suited to his managerial approach. With confidence at a low, West Brom limped through the rest of the campaign.

Albion have drifted badly over the years and no longer look the smart, well-run club they once were. There was talent enough in this squad to finish, at least, in the top six, but a lack of a playing identity that suited the likes of Karlan Grant, Callum Robinson and Grady Diangana meant that West Brom were much less than the sum of their parts.

With the right manager in charge and some decent summer recruitment, West Bromwich Albion could be a force next season. Whether Steve Bruce is the man and whether he has the structure behind him to enact a rebuild seems doubtful. For a club that had not finished lower than 6th in the second-tier since the year 2000, West Brom could be set for a period in the relative wilderness with a poor summer.

Team of the Season



Lee Nicholls



Huddersfield Town Pos: GK Apps(Clean Sheets): 43(18)

It really is a remarkable piece of recruitment that Huddersfield Town identified Lee Nicholls, who had been second-choice in League One last season at Milton Keynes Dons, as someone worthy of even being part of Championship squad. With first-choice, Ryan Schofield, failing to convince in the early part of the season, that decision to sign Nicholls was put under even more pressure. An excellent shot-stopper and someone whose presence in the penalty area has improved over the course of the season, Huddersfield's year could have been very different if Nicholls hadn't stepped up.

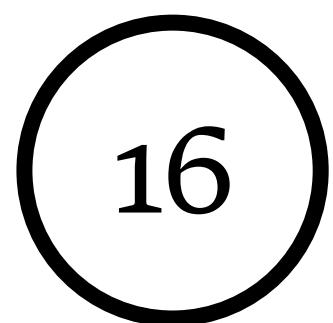
Djed Spence



Nottingham Forest Pos: RB Apps(Goals): 39(2)

Allowed to leave Middlesbrough on loan to a Championship rival last August, the only reason that Boro haven't regretted Djed Spence's impressive form at Nottingham Forest has been that of their own right wing-back, Isaiah Jones. Out of the two, Spence has, just about, had the more impressive campaign. A supremely skilful and confident footballer, Spence drifts past opponents with ease from right-back playing with an aesthetically pleasing level of fluency, while also supplying quality in his final ball and capable of threatening the opposing goal.

Tosin Adarabioyo



Fulham Pos: CB Apps(Goals): 41(2)

Having been a rare bright spot in Fulham's most recent stint in the Premier League, it should be little surprise that Tosin Adarabioyo has stood out as one of the classiest performers at Championship level this season. In a Fulham side built around committing as many to the attack as possible, Adarabioyo's positioning and mobility in the cover has been essential in maintaining his side's stranglehold on games. While Fulham's defence will require additions over the summer, Adarabioyo will remain a regular starter at Premier League level.

Lloyd Kelly



Bournemouth Pos: CB Apps(Goals): 41(1)

This year has been a big step forward for Lloyd Kelly, having gradually earned first-choice status during his three seasons at Bournemouth. Kelly's pace is his key asset, providing him some wiggle room to get him, and his team-mates, out of difficult situations, but this season has seen him play with a greater level of authority and composure to reduce the requirement to have to cover in the first-place. At just 23 years old, Kelly now has plenty of experience behind him to cement himself as a top-flight regular.

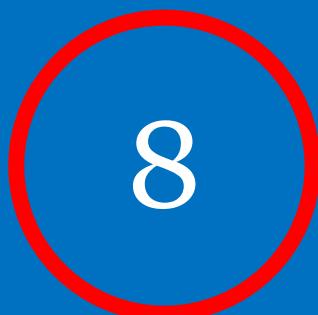
Harry Toffolo



Huddersfield Town Pos: LB Apps(Goals): 42(6)

Since making the step-up to the Championship two-and-a-half years ago, Harry Toffolo has been a remarkably consistent presence for Huddersfield Town. A well-rounded presence at full-back, Toffolo provides both energy and quality when surging forward but is more than capable as a defender. In a team that has prided itself on its ability to make games tight, Toffolo has been a key element of that stiff back-line. On top of that, his ability to supply quality when pushing forward has helped Huddersfield win a number of those tight games.

Joe Rothwell



Blackburn Rovers Pos: CM Apps(Goals): 41(3)

Joe Rothwell has always been someone capable of brilliance at Championship-level, this season has seen him add a greater level consistency to his game. There is no greater sight on a Championship pitch than Rothwell gliding past opponents in midfield like it's an easy thing to do. As well-known as that ability of Rothwell's is, there have been few teams that have found a way to contain it. There is always something remarkable and unexpected about those Rothwell glides, which has made Blackburn such a dangerous team to attempt to defend against.

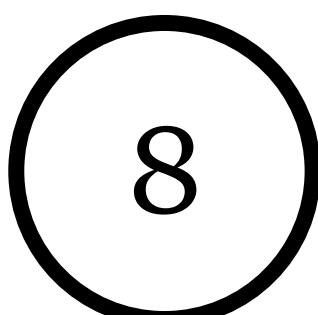
Philip Billing



Bournemouth Pos: CM Apps(Goals): 40(10)

One of a number of players at Bournemouth of Premier League quality, Philip Billing has been one of the most consistently impactful. A central midfielder who catches the eye not just for his sheer physical stature but with the ease with which he strides across the pitch and takes control of the ball, Billing's return of 10 goals and 10 assists has been crucial in Bournemouth's promotion challenge. A player who easily dominates at Championship level, Billing still has something to prove in the Premier League but looks in a good place to do so next season.

Harry Wilson



Fulham Pos: W Apps(Goals): 41(10)

Harry Wilson has been one of most dangerous attacking players in the Championship for quite a while now, which made his signing for Fulham over the summer an especially ominous prospect. The Welsh wideman's skill and directness on the ball is well-known, but Wilson is also a fierce competitor with the drive to force his will onto games. Benefiting from having Aleksandar Mitrovic ahead of him as both a target for his creativity and to open up space for him, that should help Wilson establish himself in the top-flight next year.

Andreas Weimann

Bristol City

Pos: AM/W/ST

Apps(Goals): 46(22)

14

For much of his career, Andreas Weimann has acted a useful foil for other players in attack but has been somewhat short of the quality to be a main man in his own right. Weimann has matured at Bristol City into a genuinely devastating attacking player, while retaining that quality of making the players around him look good. Weimann's understanding of the space around him allows him to ghost into dangerous positions with apparent ease, allied with a calm head to take the next decision. Only Solanke and Mitrovic have been directly involved in more goals this season.

Brennan Johnson

Nottingham Forest

Pos: AM/W/ST

Apps(Goals): 46(16)

20

Another young player to have blossomed at Nottingham Forest this season, Brennan Johnson had been tipped for success after a stand-out spell in League One with Lincoln City last year. A versatile and elusive attacking player, Johnson combines his pace with tight control and excellent vision to make him incredibly difficult for defences to pin down. It speaks to how much Johnson has developed that conversations earlier in the season surrounding a lack of a clinical touch in front of goal have quickly been put to bed.

Aleksandar Mitrovic

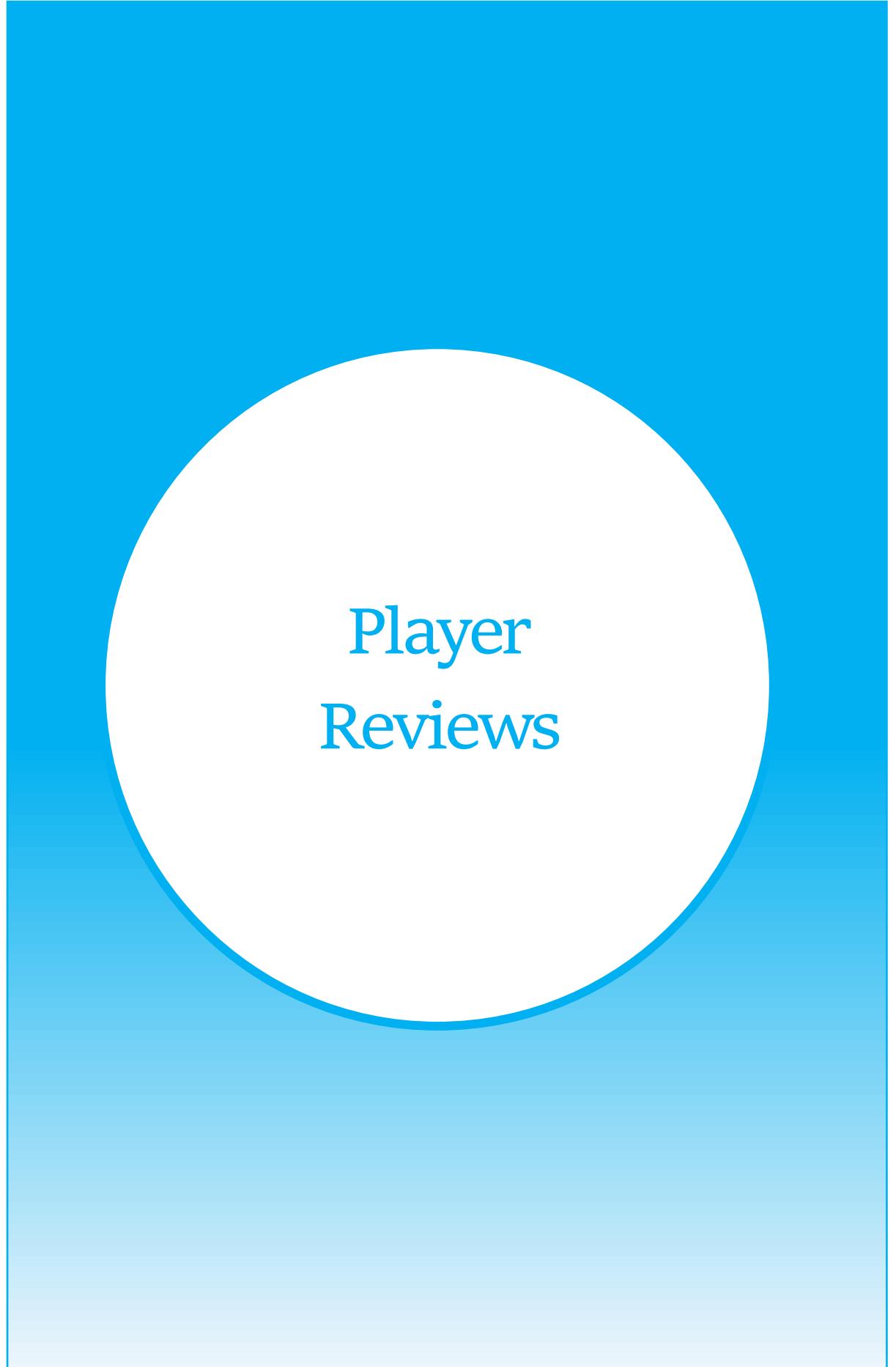
Fulham

Pos: ST

Apps(Goals): 44(43)

17

It is no surprise at this point that Aleksandar Mitrovic is a devastating goalscorer in the Championship, but the extent to which he has dominated the division this season has been absurd. Aided by an excellent creative effort from a Fulham team designed the service to him, the sheer physical power of Aleksandar Mitrovic can make him impossible to contain. Whether it's from attacking crosses or by bullying opponents to open up space for himself, Championship defences will be hoping that, this time around, Fulham are in the Premier League to stay.



Player Reviews

1

Simon Moore

Position: GK

Age: 31

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 4,183 (4,051)

Appearances: 42 (41)

Starts: 42 (41)

Clean Sheets: 10 (10)

Assists: 1 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



With an improvement in goal a clear requirement last summer, recruiting a 31 year old goalkeeper who had played two games in the last three seasons hardly instilled confidence. However, Simon Moore has proved to be the steady pair of hands this team has needed.

There isn't really anything remarkable about Simon Moore's game, which isn't a criticism. He's a decent shot-stopper, he can command his area fairly well, he can distribute the ball fairly well. It is the level of reliability in Moore's performances that have meant that this team haven't had to worry about the goalkeeper doing something completely erratic this season.

In the early part of the season, in particular, Simon Moore proved his quality between the sticks. Projecting a level of

confidence behind the defence that the team had lacked in the previous season, Moore could be relied upon as not only a last line of security but to prevent danger from occurring by keeping things calm in goal.

Over the course of the season, Simon Moore's form has declined somewhat. Seven of his ten clean sheets came prior to January, highlighting this drop-off from Moore. However, that trend is as much to do with the defence in front of him than Moore himself.

Handed a rest in the final weeks of the campaign, there should be little doubt that Simon Moore will be back next season as the team's number one. Keeping that pressure on his place could prove a smart piece of management from Mark Robins.

13

Ben Wilson

Position: GK

Age: 29

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 693 (202)

Appearances: 7 (5)

Starts: 7 (5)

Clean Sheets: 2 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



Despite a reasonable record after unexpectedly stepping up as first-choice last season, it was apparent that Ben Wilson wasn't of the level to hold onto that jersey going forward. The addition of Simon Moore has meant Wilson has seen less action this season.

Handed two stints in the starting XI – first, when Simon Moore picked up COVID in January, and then in the final few games of the season – Ben Wilson has been okay but has done little to truly put Moore under pressure. At the very least, Wilson has added a penalty save, against West Bromwich Albion, to his list of highlights at Coventry City.

A steady enough presence in goal, Ben Wilson lacks the same degree of authority that Simon Moore possesses. Instead of holding onto shots, he tends to parries them.

Instead of catching crosses, he tends to punches them away. With a slight rash streak to his game – he has given away quite a few penalties over the past two seasons by getting caught rushing off his line – there is always a sense with Wilson that there may be a mistake to come.

Despite getting a run in the side towards the end of the campaign, there is little chance of Ben Wilson making himself number one over the course of next season. Nonetheless, there is something to be said for having players around the squad that are content to be back-ups and can occasionally step into the team, when needed.

23

Fankaty Dabo

Position: RB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 2,611 (2,514)

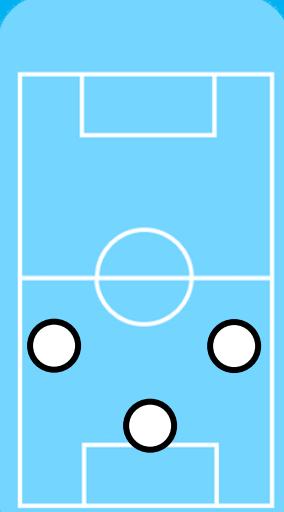
Appearances: 30 (29)

Starts: 27 (26)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 1 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



It has been another injury-hit campaign for Fankaty Dabo, who has only played one more game than he managed last year. Nonetheless, this season feels a better indication of what Dabo is capable of at Championship-level.

The evidence in the early part of the season was that Fankaty Dabo could be among the better players in his position in this division. His ball-carrying ability on the right side of the pitch provides the team with an excellent outlet to stretch teams, while he is also a determined player in his defensive duties.

However, that impressive form faded, with question marks rising as to Fankaty Dabo's ability with his final ball. It's not just that Dabo's crossing can be a little under-hit and easy to defend, but that he deliberates a little too much when he has the

opportunity to get the ball in, allowing opponents to get in positions to repel his crosses.

Injuries – as well as having to fill-in different positions – have limited Fankaty Dabo's scope to improve that area of his game this season. Often having to play on the left, while Dabo's ball-carrying remained useful, his need to cut onto his right foot to cross made it even harder for him to threaten with his final ball.

Ending the season with a knock, just as he looked to be coming back into form, leaves Fankaty Dabo in a similar position heading into this pre-season as he was last year. There is still reason to believe that Dabo has further improvement in him, with the benefit of fitness and a run of starts, it's just whether he'll be in a condition to take advantage of that at the start of next season.

29

Julien Dacosta

Position: RB

Age: 25

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 219 (123)

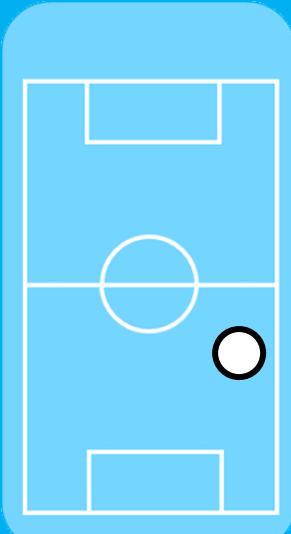
Appearances: 5 (4)

Starts: 3 (2)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



There had been concerns as to whether Julien Dacosta was good enough as back-up to Fankaty Dabo at right wing-back heading into the season, Dacosta's first few performances were enough to convince Mark Robins to seek a replacement for him, in the form of Todd Kane.

While there is an erratic nature to Julien Dacosta's performances, there are elements that might have been worked on with more patience.

Reasonably quick, eager in the challenge and, seemingly, a willing worker, if Dacosta was less of an erratic performer, he may have given himself more time to become a success at Coventry City.

Another issue for Dacosta was that the fans were very quickly on his back this season. After struggling in the opening game of the season

against Nottingham Forest, almost every touch in his other league start, against Reading, was treated with groans. That can't have helped him settle into the game. Of course, it could be argued that a better player would be able to rise above that.

Shipped out on loan to Portugal in January, there is little indication of a route back into the first-team for Julien Dacosta as he enters the final year of his Coventry City contract. A player who could have been a useful option had he settled into the team better, Dacosta joins the list of recent overseas signings for the Sky Blues that haven't hit the mark.

20

Todd Kane

Position: RB

Age: 28

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 2,467 (2,313)

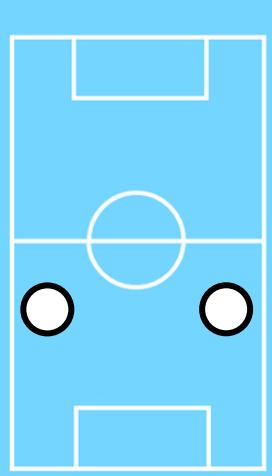
Appearances: 31 (29)

Starts: 24 (23)

Goals: 1 (1)

Assists: 5 (4)

Position Map (This Season)



Initially recruited as cover for Ian Maatsen at left wing-back, it was quickly apparent that Todd Kane was very much a right-sided player. Nonetheless, Kane has proved a useful piece of recruitment, adding another Championship-level player to the squad.

Todd Kane's biggest asset for the team has been his crossing. While it has tended to be a case of quantity over quality, that willingness to put balls into the box can unsettle opposing teams and also saw his team-mates increasingly look to gamble on making runs that might get on the end of Kane's final ball.

Despite a good return of assists, especially when compared with Fankaty Dabo, Todd Kane didn't quite establish himself as first-choice at right wing-back due to the deficiencies in his game. A fairly weak defender, the

bigger issue for Kane has been that he isn't as threatening carrying the ball as Dabo, which means that he can be stymied against teams that sit back against him.

Heading into next season, Todd Kane will continue to be a useful rotation option for the team at right wing-back. At 28 years old, further improvement in his game is unlikely. However, that doesn't mean that Todd Kane will not have his uses next season, as someone who provides a genuine alternative at right-back.

Right wing-back is a rare position in the squad where there are two decent options for Mark Robins, both of whom provide something different to the team.

27

Jake Bidwell

Position: LB/CB

Age: 29

At Club Since: January 2022

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 1,330 (1,255)

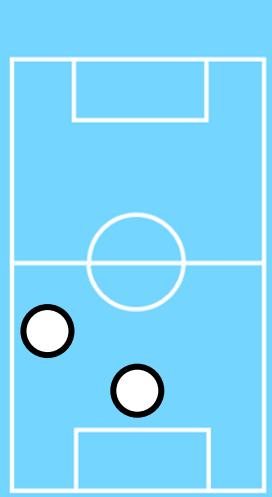
Appearances: 17 (16)

Starts: 14 (13)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



Another piece of recruitment this season to add Championship experience to the squad, the January addition of Jake Bidwell looked to be a really solid signing for Coventry City.

Just last season, Jake Bidwell was considered one of the best left wing-backs in the league, at Swansea City. However, he arrived at the Sky Blues in January not only lacking sharpness but like he had never played as a left wing-back in his life.

Unable to get into the game for much of his first few appearances for the club, and when he did, he offered little going forward and looked a defensive liability, Jake Bidwell was in danger of becoming a flop. However, a move to left-sided centre-back in the final months of the campaign seemed to suit Bidwell's game better, and he began to look a lot

more settled into life at Coventry City.

With Ian Maatsen leaving the club this summer following the end of his loan spell, a player of Jake Bidwell's experience really should be looking to make that vacancy at left wing-back his own. Whether getting that opportunity to play at centre-back has helped him settle down or further demonstrates that he may not be suited to the left wing-back role at Coventry City remains to be seen.

It may not matter whether Jake Bidwell steps up to first-choice at left wing-back if another strong player in the position is recruited over the summer. While Bidwell's reputation would suggest he should be of the calibre to be a first-choice player at Coventry City, he looks set to at least provide Mark Robins with a useful option in two positions next season.

18

Ian Maatsen

Position: LB/AM

Age: 20

At Club Since: Summer 2022 (Loan)

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 3,536 (3,440)

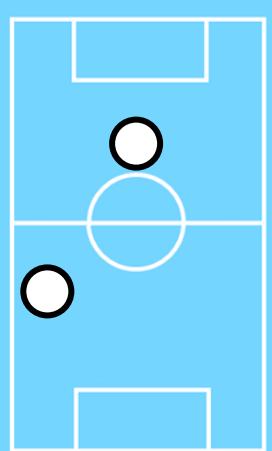
Appearances: 42 (40)

Starts: 36 (35)

Goals: 3 (3)

Assists: 1 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



Finding a new left wing-back was a key piece of business that had to be conducted last summer. Ian Maatsen has proved to be a more than capable option for Coventry City in the position.

A quick and technically-proficient operator, Ian Maatsen has the aura of a player who has enjoyed an excellent footballing education. It is his touch and the way that he strikes the ball that speaks to this quality. Having someone who can so easily control the ball and drive forward with it on the left of the pitch has been an asset to this team as they look to stretch opponents.

Over the fullness of his season at the club, Ian Maatsen has probably delivered slightly less than he has promised to. Able to get himself in good positions, Maatsen has often been hesitant with his final ball, which has

seen moves break down. It hasn't quite been often enough that Maatsen has matched the promise he clearly has with a demonstrable end product.

Filling in for a spell in an advanced midfield role further demonstrated Ian Maatsen's strong technical grounding as a footballer. Capable of spotting opportunities to get into space around the penalty area, and with the confidence to finish chances off, he might have been deployed there more often had it not been for injury issues in defence.

Ian Maatsen will have benefitted from this first season in the Championship, but it will be another club that will likely benefit from his learning process this year. That is the deal with loanees, hopefully, the club can find a permanent solution to Maatsen's position this summer.

22

Josh Reid

Position: LB

Age: 20

At Club Since: January 2021

Stats Summary –

Total (League)

Minutes: 96 (0)

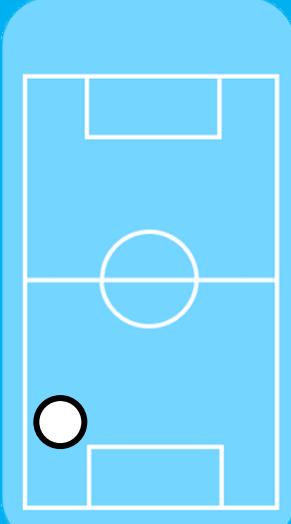
Appearances: 1 (0)

Starts: 1 (0)

Goals: 0(0)

Assists: 0(0)

Position Map (This Season)



Signed in January of last year off the back of 20 Scottish Premiership appearances with Ross County, it is strange that Josh Reid has yet to make a league appearance for Coventry City, or even look close to doing so.

Limited to a singular appearance for the club, in the League Cup tie against Northampton Town, whether Josh Reid will ever reach the level required to break into the first-team at Coventry City is beginning to look doubtful.

While it can happen that young players do not develop as expected – Josh Reid is only 20 years old, after all – it is a little disappointing that a player that had seemingly been recruited with a vacancy in the first-team in mind looks so far away from being involved.

It could be set to be quite an important pre-season,

to come for Josh Reid. With Ian Maatsen leaving the club, there is an opening at left wing-back there for him if he can catch Mark Robins' eye in pre-season training.

The likelihood that another left wing-back will be recruited this summer lessens Reid's opportunity to make the breakthrough next year. Mark Robins has showed in the past that he is willing to hand opportunities to youngsters if they can prove that they are of the requisite level of talent, time is running out for Reid to reach that level.

3

Jake Clarke-Salter

Position: CB

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 2,735 (2,506)

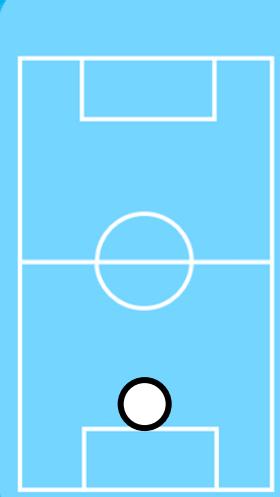
Appearances: 31 (29)

Starts: 29 (27)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



The loan signing of Jake Clarke-Salter last summer appeared to make a lot of sense. Coventry City needed a left-footed centre-back, Jake Clarke-Salter needed to find a club where he could play regular football. It has proved to be a good marriage of convenience.

Moreover, Jake Clarke-Salter has proved his worth above and beyond simply being left-footed. A composed and quick presence at the back, Clarke-Salter has generally kept his side of the defence locked down pretty well. Competent with the ball at his feet, Clarke-Salter has been exactly what this team had been looking for on the left of the back three.

There are two key drawbacks that have come with Jake Clarke-Salter this season. The first is that he can be far too eager at times to commit to the challenge, leaving

huge gaps behind him when he gets it wrong. The other is that he has endured two extended spells out with injury.

It is that latter issue that raises doubts as to whether Coventry City should make what would otherwise be a no-brainer move in signing Jake Clarke-Salter permanently once his Chelsea contract expires this summer. As a former England under-21 international who has proved himself a solid performer at Championship-level, there is likely to be competition for Jake Clarke-Salter's signature. The question is whether potential fitness concerns could render it a financial commitment not worth making to sign him permanently.

35

Declan Drysdale

Position: CB/CM

Age: 22

At Club Since: January 2019

Stats Summary –

Total (League)

Minutes: 96 (o)

Appearances: 1 (o)

Starts: 1 (o)

Goals: 0 (o)

Assists: 0 (o)

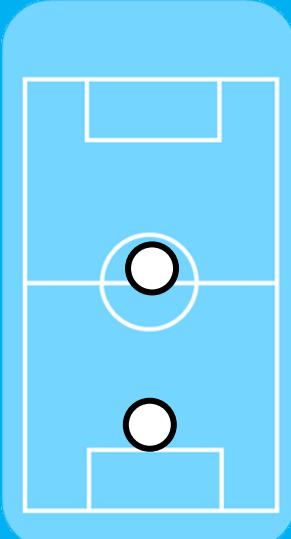
Having looked on the verge of making his breakthrough at Coventry City two seasons ago, a series of underwhelming loan spells over the subsequent period suggest that Declan Drysdale is not of the level required to be a viable option for this team.

probably a level too high for Drysdale's talent – reflected in just four appearances made – but he is a promising enough young player who could kick-start his senior career at a club at the right level where he could get a regular run of starts.

Tall and with an elegant appearance on the ball, one of Declan Drysdale's key issues appears to be a lack of pace. Having often been played in midfield at each of the clubs he has had loan spells at – Gillingham, Cambridge United and, latterly, Ross County – Drysdale has had limited scope to work on his positional play that could help cover that lack of speed as a centre-back.

With another year left on his contract, it looks set to be another spell or two out on loan for Declan Drysdale next season. The temporary spell at Ross County in January was

Position Map
(This Season)



15

Dominic Hyam

Position: CB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2017

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 4,367 (4,138)

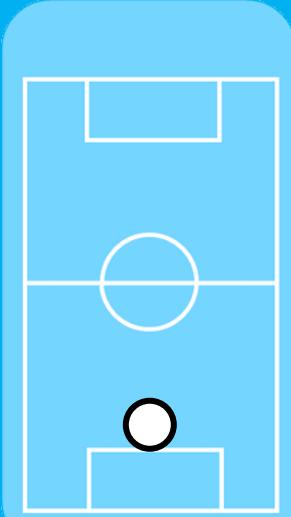
Appearances: 45 (43)

Starts: 43 (41)

Goals: 3 (2)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



It has been another solid campaign for Dominic Hyam at Coventry City. Entering the season with one or two question marks against him after struggling a bit in his first year in the Championship, Hyam has looked much more comfortable at the level this time around.

A calm and composed presence in defence who has filled in across all three positions in the back three, Dominic Hyam provides a useful reference point around which the rest of the defence can be built around. Solid in the air, solid in the challenge, solid on the ball, Hyam rarely stands out but does the work in the background to keep the team functioning.

Nonetheless, in what has been a season that has been dogged by a number of silly, soft goals conceded, Dominic Hyam, like the team's other

centre-backs, has to be wary that his place in the side may be the subject to challenge over the summer through recruitment.

As much as Dominic Hyam is probably the centre-back with the least current pressure on his place, it is possible that not even he will be spared from Mark Robins' ruthless streak. However, were Hyam to lose his place, he seems like someone who would react to it by improving further.

There may be better centre-backs than Dominic Hyam out there, but he has made himself such an important presence at Coventry City for both his consistency and ability to improve.

5

Kyle McFadzean

Position: CB

Age: 35

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 3,442 (3,442)

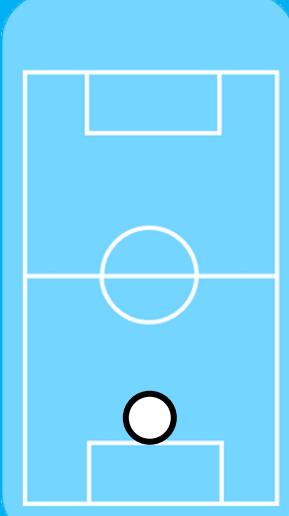
Appearances: 37 (37)

Starts: 35 (35)

Goals: 3 (3)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



For the first half of this season, Kyle McFadzean looked a strong candidate for player of the season. While he has been unable to get much of a run in the side in the subsequent months, it has, nonetheless, been an impressive campaign for the veteran centre-back.

The most incredible part of Kyle McFadzean's performances in the first months of the campaign was how he, somehow, looked more mobile than ever. On top of the aerial dominance and authority McFadzean can be relied upon for, it was rare that he was caught out for pace, with him developing a knack for easily turning opposing forwards looking to catch him on the ball.

Injury and COVID issues meant that Kyle McFadzean didn't get much of a run in the team in the final months of the campaign. When he did

play, he looked a little more fallible than he had earlier in the season. However, it's difficult to say whether it was a reflection of a decline or just that he was short of the sharpness of someone playing regular football.

Earning another year at the club, Mark Robins probably has a gradual phasing out of Kyle McFadzean in mind. As it stands, McFadzean's presence is too important for the team to be without. However, there is always a chance with older players that the decline will be sudden and irrevocable.

16

Josh Pask

Position: CB/RB

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 30 (0)

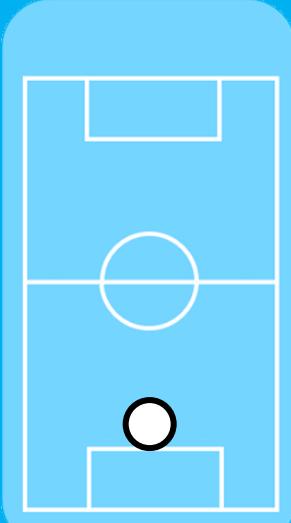
Appearances: 1 (0)

Starts: 0 (0)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



After missing much of his first season at the club through injury, Josh Pask showed last year that he probably wasn't quite of the standard to play regular Championship football. Barely involved this season, before being shipped off on loan to League Two Newport County in January, Pask will not get the opportunity with Coventry City to prove that sentiment wrong.

Impressing at Newport County before picking up yet another injury, Josh Pask has played precious little football in his career to date. It really is imperative for the player to find a club where he can be a regular starter, as well as, hopefully, avoid injury.

Josh Pask is one of a few players that have been on the books over the past two seasons that have been victims of the club's status as a Championship

club. Through no fault of his own, Josh Pask found himself below the level required to be a regular for Coventry City.

4

Michael Rose

Position: CB

Age: 26

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 2,728 (2,433)

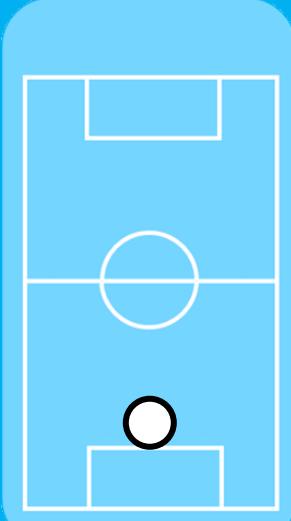
Appearances: 32 (29)

Starts: 27 (24)

Goals: 2 (2)

Assists: 2 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



After an injury-hit first year in the Championship, this season has provided a stronger indication of what Michael Rose is capable of at this level.

There have been some very promising displays from Michael Rose over the course of this campaign. An excellent passer of the ball from defence, Rose has shown the ability to project a calm authority around him as a centre-back. However, a tendency to lose concentration every few games or so is why Rose has been unable to make himself an automatic first-choice in his position.

While the talent is there for Michael Rose to establish himself as a good player at Championship-level, that tendency towards sloppy moments could put his status at the club in doubt heading into the summer. Mark Robins is likely to be

looking for a solution to the team's leakiness at the back, which could well lead to a piece of typical Robins ruthlessness if a decision was made to move on a solid performer for the team in Michael Rose.

It is a strange situation where, on raw talent, Michael Rose is probably the best centre-back at the club, however, he is also probably in most danger of being moved on. It is up to the player to add greater consistency to his game heading into next season and make himself much harder to keep out of the side than he has this year.

8

Jamie Allen

Position: CM/AM

Age: 27

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 2,735 (2,890)

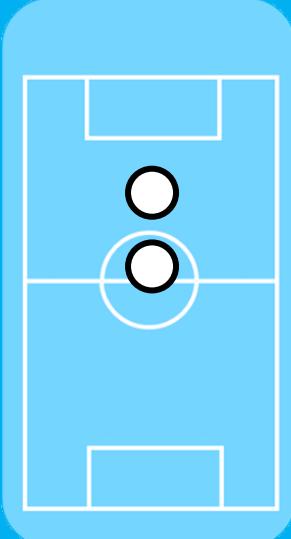
Appearances: 41 (35)

Starts: 31 (29)

Goals: 1 (1)

Assists: 3 (2)

Position Map (This Season)



For all the world, Jamie Allen looked surplus to requirements last summer. That he stuck around to make himself a first-team regular this season speaks well to Jamie Allen's mental fortitude and work-rate.

It may have taken a slice of fortune for Jamie Allen to get back into the team – with injuries to Josh Eccles and Liam Kelly, on top of the failure to sign Matty James permanently, providing his opening – but he has done an excellent job in making sure that he took the opportunity that came his way.

Generally playing in a deeper midfield position than he did last year, it appears to suit Jamie Allen's game to have space in midfield to run into, rather than having to play on the turn in tight areas. It is Jamie Allen's industry without the ball that has made him such a useful

part in Mark Robins' plans this season.

However, Jamie Allen is a player with his limitations, which have showed up even in an impressive individual campaign. For all the running, Allen's ability to control the ball and find quality with his passing have been found wanting on numerous occasions this campaign.

Jamie Allen has, deservedly, earned an extended stay at Coventry City, but he is also of a calibre that the club should be looking to improve upon if the ambition is to kick-on further at Championship level. For Jamie Allen, the challenge is to continue to improve to reach as the standard of the team does.

28

Josh Eccles

Position: CM/RB

Age: 22

At Club Since: N/A (Academy Product)

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 358 (254)

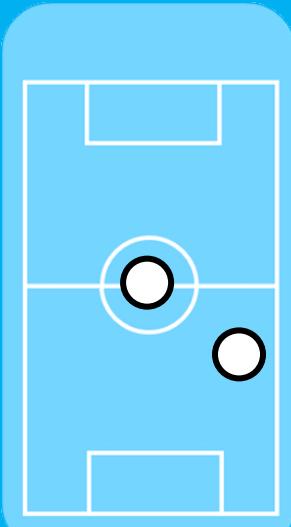
Appearances: 7 (5)

Starts: 4 (3)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



Looking ready to play a bigger role in the first-team this season, Josh Eccles has been beset by two extended injury absences that have robbed him of the opportunity to make a leap forward in his development this year.

In the short periods in which Josh Eccles has been fit this year, he demonstrated just why this season looked like a potential breakthrough for him. Mainly deployed at right wing-back, Eccles' energy and intelligent use of the ball made him a look a comfortable and effective performer for the team away from his preferred central midfield position.

Impressing in that wing-back role even in a game against Premier League opposition - in the FA Cup, against Southampton - Mark Robins has hinted that he sees Eccles as a viable option in that position. If it had not been

for persistent injury issues this campaign, Eccles could well have established himself as first-choice at right wing-back this year.

Picking up yet another knock on the final day of the campaign, the concern with Josh Eccles is whether the set-backs are down to more than just bad luck. A talented and intelligent young footballer, Eccles is a player of the talent to break into the first-team, which make his injury issues all the more unfortunate.

It is a big year ahead for Josh Eccles, both in making the step-up to the first-team expected of him and in getting to the bottom of the injury issues that have plagued him this year.

38

Gustavo Hamer

Position: CM

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Stats Summary –
Total (League)

Minutes: 3,520 (3,377)

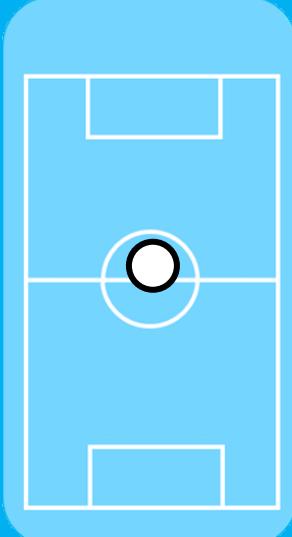
Appearances: 41 (39)

Starts: 39 (37)

Goals: 3 (3)

Assists: 9 (9)

Position Map
(This Season)



After a drop-off in form towards the end of last season, Gustavo Hamer has proved this season that his earlier form last year was no flash in the pan. Taking great leaps forward in both his performance levels and consistency, Hamer has been one of the team's stand-out performers.

Capable of occupying just about every role in midfield, Gustavo Hamer can build the play from deep, push forward, threaten the opposing goal, and break things up for the opposition without the ball. Also, an excellent set-piece taker, Hamer provides the team with an incredible amount of output for just one player.

It has been Gustavo Hamer's form over the second half of the campaign has seen him demonstrate his innate talent over an extended period of games. The kind of midfielder who looks to

bend games to his own will. Hamer has been at the heart of this team's most impressive performances this season.

The major caveat to Hamer's game is his disciplinary record. While he is a good enough reader of the game to avoid having to lunge into challenges, he is overtaken a little too often by a desire to be overly forceful. Serving two bans for an accumulation of yellow cards, avoiding the needless bookings would make him an even more important player, simply because he would be available more often.

Among 'the big three' at Coventry City that are likely to be the subject of intense interest in the transfer market this summer, if the last of Hamer in a Coventry City shirt has been seen, he's made an indelible impression.

36

Ryan Howley

Position: CM

Age: 18

At Club Since: N/A (Academy Product)

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 79 (13)

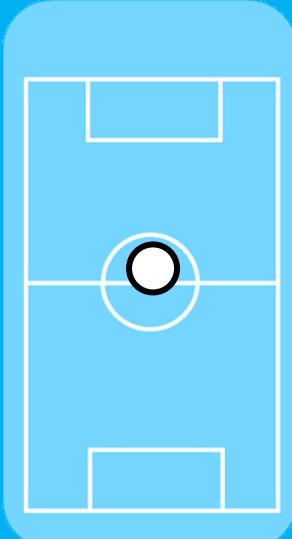
Appearances: 2 (1)

Starts: 1 (0)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



Involved in the first-team squad at an incredibly young age, this season may prove a valuable experience in Ryan Howley's early career.

It is likely that Howley's physical stature is a key reason why he has been able to advance to first-team level so quickly. The next step will be in showing he has the technical ability to match up to senior opponents. The youngster is likely to feel that he could have shown a little more quality in the one league appearance he made this season, against a, very good, Nottingham Forest side.

The objective for Ryan Howley will be to earn further involvement in the first-team over the coming years through strong performances with the under-23 side. With Mark Robins not the kind of manager to hand-out first-team appearances to

youngsters for the sake of it, there must clearly be something about Ryan Howley that suggests he can develop into a good player. The next few years will be about him showing what exactly that is.

6

Liam Kelly

Position: CM

Age: 32

At Club Since: Summer 2017

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 912 (912)

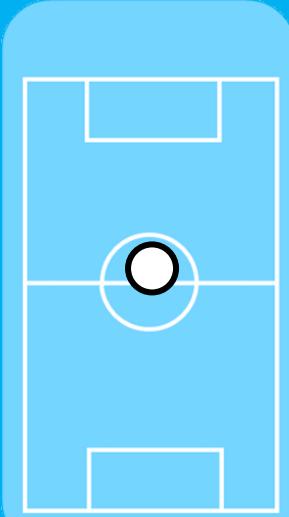
Appearances: 16 (16)

Starts: 8 (8)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 1 (1)

Position Map (This Season)



In an injury-affected campaign, Liam Kelly looks like he has been surpassed in importance for the team by younger players in the squad.

Starting the campaign injured, it allowed the room for Ben Sheaf to step-up as the team's main screening presence in central midfield, with Jamie Allen also allowed the opportunity to move up the midfield pecking order. While Liam Kelly showed in a few games that his physical and calming presence can have its uses for this team, he has often looked slower on the ball compared to the team's other midfielders.

Whether Liam Kelly could have played a bigger role this season had he remained fit for a longer period seems doubtful. It appears that the team has outgrown the requirement for Kelly in midfield and it would probably take a

change of style in order to integrate him back into regular status next season.

With another year left on his contract, it may be up to Liam Kelly to decide over the summer whether he wants to stick around and be a bit-part player at a club he is settled at, or to seek a club at a lower level where his experience will make him an asset. There may still be occasions next season where a Liam Kelly-type may be useful for this team, but they may be increasingly infrequent in their arrival.

14

Ben Sheaf

Position: CM

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 3,377 (3,148)

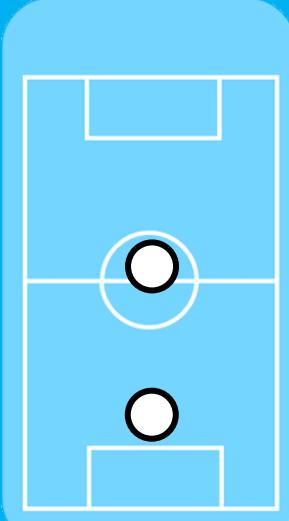
Appearances: 37 (35)

Starts: 35 (33)

Goals: 2 (2)

Assists: 4 (3)

Position Map (This Season)



After an underwhelming first year at the club, there were doubts as to the wisdom of signing Ben Sheaf permanently last summer, but the player has gone a long way to proving why Mark Robins put so much effort into bringing him to Coventry City.

Almost right from the off, Ben Sheaf looked a more driven character on the pitch than in the previous year. Whereas he often looked content to let the game happen around him, Sheaf has become a much more imposing presence in front of the defence, which has allowed his technical ability to shine through.

The sloppy mistakes on the ball in front of his own defence have been almost completely eradicated, instead, Ben Sheaf has become an integral player for the team in providing a presence in front of the

defence and getting play going from deep.

Filling in at centre-back on a few occasions, Ben Sheaf further demonstrated his awareness and combativeness as a footballer, which hadn't previously been apparent. While that's unlikely to be a position Sheaf will play more often next season, it's a useful option for Mark Robins to have up his sleeve.

It really has been a remarkable transformation from Ben Sheaf this season. While he hasn't quite reached the level of the team's stand-out performers, he has often done the dirty work to provide the platform for others to shine. If there is further development to come in Sheaf, he may soon be recognised more widely as the stellar performer that he has become.

26

Jordan Shipley

Position: CM/AM/W/LB

Age: 23

At Club Since: N/A (Academy Product)

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 885 (655)

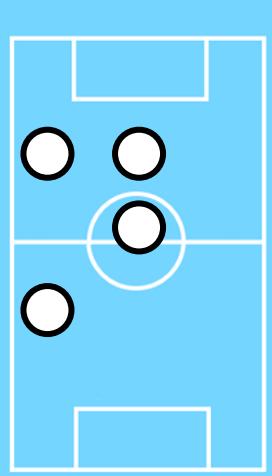
Appearances: 14 (11)

Starts: 10 (8)

Goals: 1 (1)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



After a decent run of form towards the end of last season, Jordan Shipley would have expected at least a little more involvement this time out. Only used in extreme emergency, Shipley done an okay job when played but has done little to stake a claim for more regular involvement.

Failing to make a league appearance until January, Jordan Shipley was only thrown into the side due to injuries at left wing-back. Looking decent in the two appearances he made in that role, the signing of Jake Bidwell prevented Shipley from gaining further opportunities to prove his worth in the position.

When moved further forward, Jordan Shipley seemed to lack the technical ability or tactical awareness to get himself into games. Mark Robins very quickly realised that Shipley was no longer a

viable option for the team in an advanced role, and he barely featured after that.

Mark Robins may well view it as a mistake to have, seemingly, missed out on the opportunity to move Jordan Shipley on in January. The team may have benefitted from a player of better quality taking Shipley's place in the squad.

For all of the desire that Shipley has shown in carving out a career for himself at Coventry City, it looks like he isn't quite up to the standard that is now required at this football club. He has played a big role in turning this club around from League Two, now is the time for him to carve out a career for himself as a regular elsewhere.

11

Bright Enobakhare

Position: AM/W

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 66 (o)

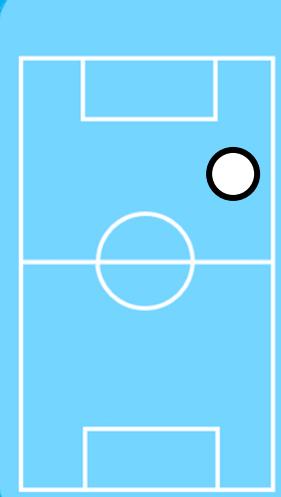
Appearances: 1 (o)

Starts: 1 (o)

Goals: 0 (o)

Assists: 0 (o)

Position Map (This Season)



Bringing Bright Enobakhare back to the club last summer looked to be a gamble. If it had come off, Enobakhare would have been the additional game-changer that might have been worth enough points to make the top six. However, it is far from surprising that this was a gamble that did not pay off.

Bright Enobakhare's career since his first spell at Coventry City has seen him unable to settle down at any club. Amid suggestions of a far from professional attitude, if Mark Robins, the only manager who he has produced consistent performances for, couldn't reverse his career trajectory, then no-one probably will.

Spending much of his time at Coventry City this season attempting to gain get up to the required standard of fitness,

Enobakhare looked well below it in the one appearance he made for the club this season – against Northampton Town in the League Cup. For all the promise Enobakhare, theoretically, provided, it was quickly apparent that his return to Coventry City would be ill-fated.

Since leaving the club in November, Bright Enobakhare has since joined Hapoel Jerusalem in the Israeli Premier League, where he is yet to start a game. It is such a waste that someone so talented at football appears to have little interest in playing it.

7

Jodi Jones

Position: W/AM

Age: 23

At Club Since: March 2016

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 322 (156)

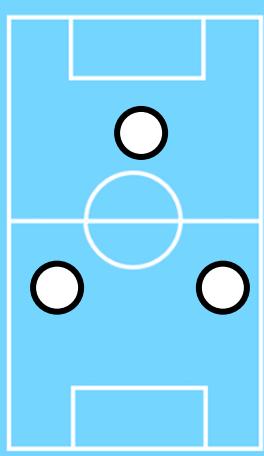
Appearances: 12 (9)

Starts: 1 (0)

Goals: 0 (0)

Assists: 1 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



Injured for much of the four seasons prior, there were two big questions surrounding a fully-fit Jodi Jones this season. The first was whether he could avoid further set-backs, which he largely has. The second was whether a player who last played regularly in League Two could make an impact for a Championship side.

For much of the first half of the season, Jodi Jones threatened to make that step up. One of Mark Robins' key options from the bench, there were a handful of games where Jones helped turn the course of proceedings in the team's favour.

While Jodi Jones suffered a period out January–February, via a combination of COVID and a minor injury setback, the harsh reality is that he has, ultimately, not made enough of an impact this season to convince the manager that

he can be part of a Championship squad in the years going forward. It hasn't helped that there isn't a natural role for him to fulfil in the starting XI.

As much as Jodi Jones may feel that he could still play a role for the club next season, moving somewhere he can be a regular would be the best thing for his career. For someone who has lost so much time, Jones should be looking forward to next season as an opportunity to get going at a new club.

10

Callum O'Hare

Position: AM

Age: 24

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 4,244 (4,149)

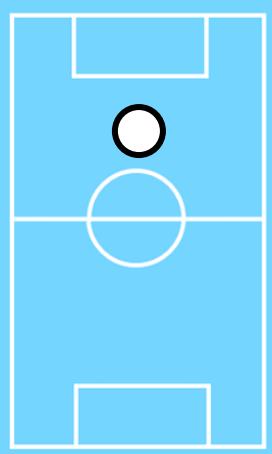
Appearances: 47 (45)

Starts: 44 (43)

Goals: 5 (5)

Assists: 8 (8)

Position Map (This Season)



Over the second half of last season, Callum O'Hare was, statistically, among the best creative players in the Championship. In that regard, this season has been somewhat of a disappointment for O'Hare in not stretching that form over a full campaign, even if it hasn't entirely been a backwards step either.

Callum O'Hare has made himself an indispensable player for Mark Robins due to the combination of work-rate and skill he provides the team in the final third. It is incredibly rare for an attacking midfield player to provide both of those qualities and is a large reason why O'Hare is so well-regarded both inside and outside of the club.

The issue with Callum O'Hare remains that his ability to get the team up the pitch and into dangerous positions is not

matched by his final output. While his lack of finishing ability is well-noted, O'Hare is also not particularly proficient when it comes to picking a final pass, either.

After quite a long period of the season where Callum O'Hare was neither scoring nor creating goals, he has improved in that regard towards the end of the campaign – three of his goals and five of his assists have come since the turn of the year. Still, there is considerable room for O'Hare to improve in the final third.

Still at a good age to take his game up another few levels, the challenge for Callum O'Hare next year will be to finally add that missing level of decisiveness and composure on top of his ability and work-rate.

24

Matt Godden

Position: ST

Age: 30

At Club Since: Summer 2019

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 1,808 (1,716)

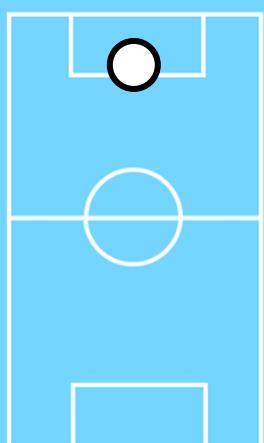
Appearances: 25 (24)

Starts: 18 (17)

Goals: 12 (12)

Assists: 2 (2)

Position Map (This Season)



Matt Godden has further proved this season that he is a striker that can be relied upon for goals. While there remain doubts as to his impact on games beyond scoring, being able to put the ball into the back of the net is an incredibly valuable quality.

Beginning the campaign injured, with Viktor Gyokeres in red-hot form in attack, the pressure was on Godden to make an impact when fit. That is what he certainly did, scoring eight times in his first 15 league appearances this season.

That run of form in front of goal from Matt Godden coincided with a tail-off from Viktor Gyokeres, raising the question as to whether the two could play together. Due to Matt Godden's injury issues this campaign, that question has not been definitively answered. That barren period

between October to January for Gyokeres may have had nothing to do with Godden, and there were a few games where the duo combined really well.

The bigger doubt surrounding Matt Godden at the moment is whether he can stay fit for a full season. This is the third campaign in a row where Godden has endured extended injury absences. While he has shown he can make an impact when fit, those absences make him difficult to build around and accommodate in the way he may be required to.

Godden is likely to remain a useful source of goals for Mark Robins for at least a year or so to come. Even if he can only sustain fitness for short, sharp bursts, Matt Godden will remain a key part of the mix at Coventry City.

17

Viktor Gyökeres

Position: ST

Age: 23

At Club Since: January 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 4,067 (3,930)

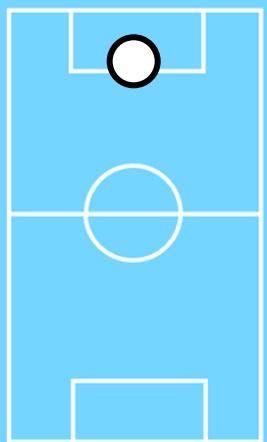
Appearances: 47(45)

Starts: 42 (41)

Goals: 18 (17)

Assists: 5 (5)

Position Map (This Season)



After an underwhelming loan spell last season, it was a bold move by the club to sign Viktor Gyökeres on a permanent deal. The Swede quickly proved the wisdom of that move with an excellent campaign where, for large periods, he has ranked alongside the best strikers in the Championship.

Viktor Gyökeres provides so much in attack that it should not be taken for granted. Big and strong, quick and skilful, with incredible work rate on top of that, Gyökeres is a one-man front-line. The Swede has carried the team through a countless number of games this season by being a presence in the opposing half and making something happen out of mere scraps to feed on.

Despite a good goal return this season, the main area of Viktor Gyökeres' game that requires improvement is his

finishing ability. He has a tendency to hold onto the ball a little too long, often ending up having to snatch at chances or allow defenders to get in position to block his efforts on goal.

As a result, Viktor Gyökeres has been at his best when the team has played on the counter-attack, allowing him more space to attack and get through on goal. In tighter spaces, Gyökeres still has room for improvement. If he can add that to his game, Gyökeres will be a truly unstoppable Championship striker, with the ability to play at a higher level.

At the level he is at already, it appears it will be a challenge for the club to keep hold of Viktor Gyökeres. The type of centre-forward who lead the line, create his own chances, and score, he would be an especially difficult player to replace.

30

Fabio Tavares

Position: ST

Age: 20

At Club Since: January 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 132 (132)

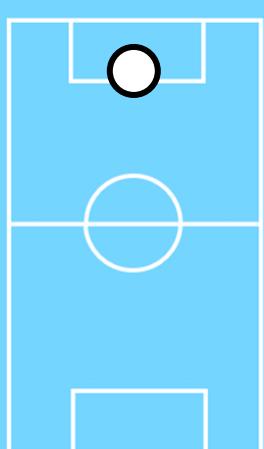
Appearances: 7 (7)

Starts: 0(0)

Goals: 1 (1)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map (This Season)



In prolific form for the under-23 side for much of the campaign, the calls to bring Fabio Tavares into the first-team escalated into a cacophony towards the middle of the season. It was a lot of pressure to put on such young shoulders, but Tavares has shown promise in the appearances he has made for Coventry City thus far.

For much of the season, Tavares' scoring form at youth-level was irrelevant because Viktor Gyokeres and Matt Godden were producing the goods for the first-team. With Godden injured and Gyokeres low on confidence later in the campaign, there was a need for extra zest in attack, which Tavares went some way to delivering.

The most notable thing about Fabio Tavares in the cameo appearances that he has made is his pace. That ability to get in

behind and stretch defences quickly became something that his teammates looked to utilise. Importantly, Tavares has demonstrated - most notably, in his last-minute equaliser against Preston North End – that there is a level of technique on top of that quick and willing running.

Having played largely in fleeting cameos, it is difficult to assess just how big a role Fabio Tavares can be expected to play next season. Just what he can do from the start of games is a big unknown – with a concern being his physical slightness – but that can only be tested via experience.

Tavares could prove a useful option next season, but it would be a big show of faith for him to take a place that could be filled with a more proven senior player.

9

Martyn Waghorn

Position: ST

Age: 32

At Club Since: Summer 2021

Stats Summary – Total (League)

Minutes: 1,392 (1,305)

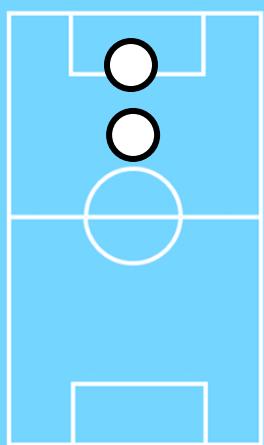
Appearances: 29 (27)

Starts: 11 (11)

Goals: 1 (1)

Assists: 2 (2)

Position Map (This Season)



While Martyn Waghorn wasn't brought in to score goals, a return of just one this campaign (with two assists on top of that) underlines that the experienced striker has made less of an impact than even the most modest expectations of him.

Whether Waghorn's lack of impact has been due to his natural decline as a footballer or unlucky circumstances is somewhat hard to tell. A regular at the start of the season, it took him a while to settle into the team, before suffering an injury just as he looked to have got going.

In that early period of the campaign, Martyn Waghorn's ability to drop just off the centre-forward, Viktor Gyokeres, and knit things together in attack appeared to be integral to the Swede's impressive form. After subsequently missing a

chunk of the season, Waghorn never really got the opportunity to reignite that partnership with Gyokeres.

Since returning to fitness, Martyn Waghorn has struggled to get going again. Maybe that is where a full pre-season would help, but it would take a big improvement for him to make a convincing case to play the regular football he probably needs to get up to the required sharpness.

It is more than likely that, at 32 years old, Martyn Waghorn's days as an effective Championship footballer have come to a close. With a year left on his contract, it is probably in his interests to find a move to a lower level where he can benefit from regular football. Finances could make that a tricky arrangement to find.

19

Tyler Walker

Position: ST

Age: 25

At Club Since: Summer 2020

Stats Summary –
Total (League)

Minutes: 677 (581)

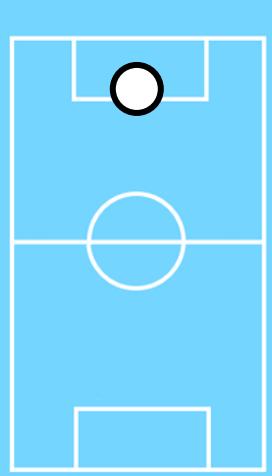
Appearances: 20 (19)

Starts: 5 (4)

Goals: 3 (2)

Assists: 0 (0)

Position Map
(This Season)



After an injury-hit first campaign at the club, where he ended up as top-scorer, nonetheless, the early part of this season was important for Tyler Walker in establishing himself as the first-choice centre-forward he was expected to be when he signed for the club.

A return of two goals in 19 appearances suggests that Tyler Walker has fallen short of the standard expected of him, but it doesn't tell the full story. Often playing 10-15 minute cameo

appearances from the bench, Walker's record when starting – two in four – suggests he could have made a bigger impact had he been entrusted with a bigger role than he was given.

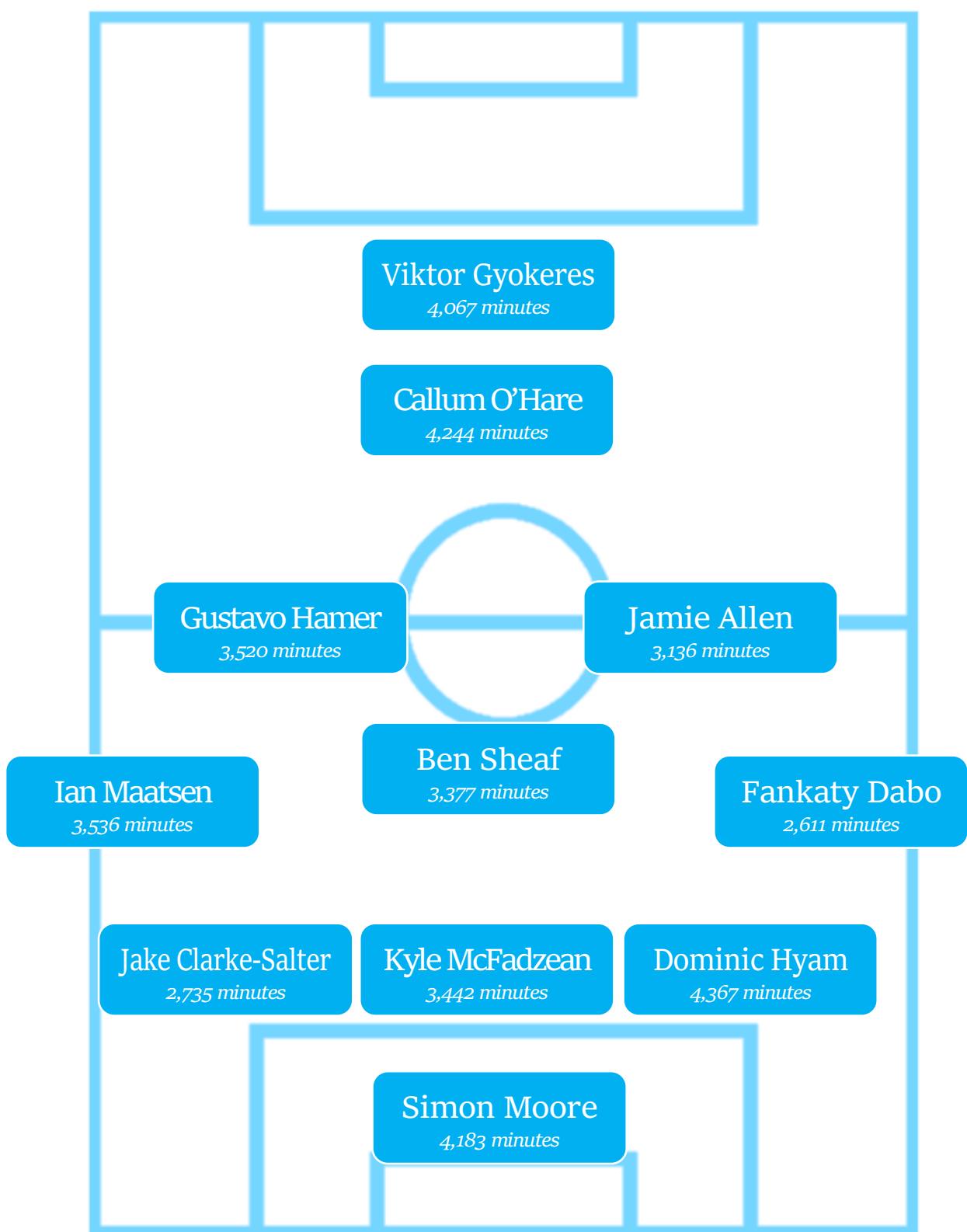
Just why Tyler Walker didn't have that faith placed in him is clear. With Viktor Gyokeres not only scoring goals but leading the line

excellently, Matt Godden was a more effective version of the type of penalty area striker that Tyler Walker is. That is why he was seen as expendable in January.

For his loan spell at Portsmouth to go so poorly suggests that there may be bigger issues with Tyler Walker at the moment, rather than a lack of ability. He is someone who has proved that he can score a lot of goals in the right environment, he clearly hasn't had that this year.

It hasn't quite worked out for Tyler Walker at Coventry City but that doesn't mean he will never make it as a Championship striker. The next year or so will be important in him finding the environment to regain his mojo as the predatory goalscorer he has so recently been.

Most Used Team





Story of the Season

Part One

It's Good To Be Back

8th August – 2nd October

There were two key reasons to look forward to the start of the new season for Coventry City. The first was that it would be a return, after just over a one year absence, for fans attending games following the relaxation of COVID restrictions in England. The second was it would be a return, after a two year absence, for Coventry City to their home city.

A lot had changed since the Sky Blues last played at the Ricoh Arena – which had subsequently been rebranded the Coventry Building Society (CBS) Arena. In the first year in exile, at Birmingham City's St Andrew's Stadium, Coventry City won the League One title, earning a return to the second-tier after eight years in the wilderness. In the second year, the Sky Blues secured survival in the Championship – the only one of the three promoted sides to do so.

For all of the excitement about being able to see the team in the flesh again, expectations as to how the team would perform were modest. Having struggled for long periods of the previous campaign and without significant improvement to the squad, staying up with a greater degree of comfort would have been seen as a productive year.

The main focus of Coventry City's summer transfer activity had surrounded retaining players who had been on loan in the previous season. Just under £2 million was spent on securing the permanent services of midfielder, Ben Sheaf, and striker, Viktor Gyokeres, both of whom had yet to fully convince in a Sky Blue shirt. Of the team's more impressive loan players, the Sky Blues were gazumped by Championship rivals to their signatures, with key midfielder, Matty James, heading to Bristol City and key centre-back, Leo Ostigard, joining Stoke City.

Such transfer activity highlighted that being back in Coventry counted for relatively little for Coventry City within the financial realities of the Championship. If the club was to progress in the second-tier, it would be by taking punts on young players who weren't quite the finished article, rather than building around established names.

The addition of young Chelsea left-back, Ian Maatsen, on loan to replace the previous year's young loanee left-back, Sam McCallum, further highlighted this process. However, Mark Robins also moved to add experience, in goalkeeper, Simon Moore, and striker, Martyn Waghorn, in an attempt to balance out the dynamic of the squad.

Heading into that first game back in Coventry, there was little sense of what this Coventry City side might be capable of. Instead, the focus was purely on celebrating being able to attend games once again in the club's home city. If the team was any good, that would be a bonus.

Against a Nottingham Forest side that had also struggled in the previous campaign, the opening game of the season looked a reasonable test of how much progress the Sky Blues had made over the summer. The starting XI named by Mark Robins for that game was not drastically different to the previous campaign, highlighting that any improvement would largely have to come from the progress of players already at the club.

The first-half of the game was not much of a spectacle, with both sides looking somewhat laboured as they looked to shake off the pre-season cobwebs. The Sky Blues had spells in possession but struggled to carve out chances, Nottingham Forest, meanwhile, looked to make things happen on the counter-attack. There was a lack of confidence and fluency in both teams' execution of their game-plans.

The overall pattern of play was reflected in the game's opening goal, when a promising attacking move for Coventry City broke down at one end of the pitch, affording Nottingham Forest the opportunity to race up the other. Via their impressive young forward, Brennan Johnson, Forest found the confidence and fluency the game has been lacking. He glided with the ball to the edge of the Sky Blues penalty area, before picking out his teammate, Lyle Taylor, with an inch-perfect pass to put the away side ahead from point-blank range. It was an indication that there remained a gulf in quality between the Sky Blues and established Championship outfits.

With Nottingham Forest having opportunities to add to their lead before half-time, being back in Coventry didn't look like it would change anything about this football club. Fans had seen this kind of game at the CBS Arena multiple times over the years, a Coventry City team short on quality, an away side, buoyed by a bumper travelling support, holding them at arm's length. However, as the second-half wore on, so did a desire to rewrite that narrative.

There grew an attitude of defiance in the home stands to get behind the team, rather than let the occasion fizzle out. Whether the team fed off this or their talent was beginning to shine through, Coventry City turned the screw on Nottingham Forest throughout the second-half.

The central midfield duo of Gustavo Hamer and Ben Sheaf were at the heart of everything good that Coventry City were doing. Chances were coming and it was only a sense of toothlessness in attack that placed a comeback in doubt. That was until a bright piece of skill from Callum O'Hare opened up space for a pull-back that eventually fell to Viktor Gyokeres to tie the scores.

With the atmosphere in the stands ratcheted up by that goal, it felt like it would only be the diminishing clock that would deny Coventry City victory. It was thus that, in the dying embers of second-half stoppage time, the sheer desire of every one of a Sky Blue tinge at the CBS Arena sucked the ball into the net.

From a set-piece on the edge of the penalty area, a Dominic Hyam header brought an excellent save from Nottingham Forest's Brice Samba. The ball fell to Callum O'Hare, who fired into a crowd of bodies, only for the rebound to land at the feet of Kyle McFadzean to send an effort that deflected in via combination of goalkeeper and post.

Nottingham Forest
Championship
08/08/2021
Score: 2-1
Scorers: Gyokeres,
McFadzean

It was one of the great CBS Arena atmospheres and one of the great CBS Arena moments. Just what it meant in terms of how the rest of the campaign would look was not clear, but it didn't really matter. It was simply good to be back.

Northampton Town
League Cup
11/08/2021
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Walker

After a midweek League Cup exit to League Two Northampton Town with a second-string side, a trip to a Barnsley side that had finished in the play-offs the previous season was another opportunity to gauge where this side would rank in the Championship this year.

Barnsley
Championship
14/08/2021
Score: 0-1

On top for large portions of the game, with Barnsley resorting to crudely hacking at Coventry City's attacking players to break up the Sky Blues' flow, the Tykes claimed the win from one of the few chances they had. Coventry City had a chance to salvage a point with an injury-time penalty, with Viktor Gyokeres stepping up to the spot ahead of the more established penalty-taker, Martyn Waghorn, and seeing his effort saved.

It was a disappointing result, but the performance was enough to suggest that this Coventry City side had enough about it to steer well clear of danger. Another away trip followed, this time to newly-promoted Blackpool, which represented the first game of the season that the Sky Blues were favourites to win.

With Hamer and Sheaf, once again, dominating in central midfield, this was a game that helped establish another stand-out performer for the team, Viktor Gyokeres in attack. Off the back of that penalty miss, the Swede had cause to be short on self-belief, instead, he gave Blackpool's defence the run-around.

Almost every ball played in Viktor Gyokeres' direction led to vexation in the Blackpool back-line. Gyokeres' combination of physical stature, pace, skill on the ball, and, most importantly, work-rate, made him a relentless presence in the opposing half. Helping his team dominate the first-half, the Swede only had one goal – and one that had a hint of offside about it – to show for his efforts.

Blackpool
Championship
17/08/2021
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Gyokeres

That inability to fully capitalise on the team's dominance over proceedings made for a tense finale as Blackpool sensed the opportunity for a comeback. However, awry finishing from the Seasiders meant that the Sky Blues could enjoy a first away win of the season much earlier than they had in the previous two campaigns, another marker of progress.

With Reading next up at the CBS Arena, it was an opportunity to build on the spirit of that opening day win over Nottingham Forest. Well on top for most of the first-half, a clumsy foul from Fankaty Dabo meant that the away side had the lead going into the break, thanks to a penalty-kick from John Swift.

Once again, Coventry City's players and fans were in no mood to be deterred by this set-back. Another dominant second-half display in front of a fervent home atmosphere left another away team desperately holding on at the CBS Arena. Patient in their approach, the breakthrough eventually came, with Jamie Allen stepping up from the bench to fire home an equaliser.

With the final whistle all but in the referee's mouth, a goal-kick from Simon Moore was nodded down into the path of Gustavo Hamer, the midfielder carried the ball 15-yards forward, and gave the ball to Callum O'Hare. With nothing on Hamer's mind other than forcing a goal, he continued his run forward to receive the ball from O'Hare and break into the Reading penalty area. Laying the ball into the path of Matt Godden, the striker fired home another last-second winner for Coventry City.

Reading
Championship
21/08/2021
Score: 2-1
Scorers: Allen, Godden

In the first two home games of the season, Coventry City had provided more memorable moments than in the entirety of many previous campaigns. The excitement was starting to build.

Still, such a small sample size of opponents meant that it was difficult to gauge how high expectations should now be. An away trip to a Queens Park Rangers side expected to be in the hunt for promotion would probably be a stronger indicator of where this Coventry City was, than the several games prior.

It was another encouraging Sky Blues display. With the confidence to play a positive style against a strong opponent, a number of Coventry City players were making a case for themselves to be considered among the best in their positions at this level – notably, the aforementioned trio of Gustavo Hamer and Ben Sheaf in midfield, and Viktor Gyokeres in attack.

Queens Park Rangers
Championship
28/08/2021
Score: 0-2

However, the Sky Blues were unable to translate a promising display into a lead. Eventually, QPR showed their quality, taking the lead with a good strike from centre-back, Yoann Barbet, after the ball bounced kindly at a set-piece. Lacking the same sense of purpose in the closing stages of the game than compared to those two great home wins, the remainder of the contest was about whether QPR would add to their lead. A second goal came from another good strike, this time from Lyndon Dykes, after a kind bounce, and that was that.

Coventry City were then up against a tough run of games against physical opponents, in Middlesbrough, Cardiff City and Millwall, which would further test this team's mettle. After the novelty of being back, the business of a league season had now begun.

For the next home game, against Middlesbrough, there would be no need for the late drama of previous CBS Arena outings. Boro looked a strong, imposing side, but Coventry City continued to show their own quality. It was only a fantastic triple save at 0-0 from Simon Moore in the Sky Blues goal where there were doubts as to the possibility of winning the game.

Forced to play on the counter due to Middlesbrough's imposing style, that allowed the opportunity for swift Coventry City play on the break. One such moment saw Gustavo Hamer pick out Jamie Allen with room to carry the ball up the pitch. Allen then played a pass into the feet of Viktor Gyokeres, whose touch sent him clean through on goal. Attempting to round the goalkeeper, that moment's pause from Gyokeres allowed Middlesbrough to get defenders on the line, only for the Swede to bisect the Boro duo with his finish to put the Sky Blues ahead.

Middlesbrough
Championship
11/09/2021
Score: 2-0
Scorers: Gyokeres,
Waghorn

Looking comfortable from that point onwards, Martyn Waghorn made sure of the win with a smart finish after being played through on goal by Viktor Gyokeres. It was another test passed for this Coventry City side.

A Cardiff City team similar in set-up to Middlesbrough were next up at the CBS Arena. Similarly, the Bluebirds' physicality forced Coventry City to enact a counter-

attacking game-plan, which seemed to suit the qualities of Viktor Gyokeres, in particular. The Swede's deceptive pace and skill made him a devastating prospect with space to run into.

Cardiff City
Championship
15/09/2021
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Gyokeres

Underlining his growing confidence in his ability, there looked little doubt once Gyokeres received the ball with room to attack mid-way through the first-half that he would score. A pacey low effort from the Swede beat the opposing goalkeeper, which was enough to earn a fourth home victory out of four for Coventry City, ratcheting up the belief that this may prove to be a special season.

Millwall
Championship
18/09/2021
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Gyokeres

In the following game, away at Millwall, Viktor Gyokeres snaffled himself another impressive goal to put the Sky Blues ahead. However, that lead was quickly surrendered, and a tired-looking Coventry City team seemed to lack the verve required to move back ahead, with the game playing out as a 1-1 draw.

There was an expectant mood ahead of a Friday night kick-off at the CBS Arena against newly-promoted Peterborough United. The timing of the game meant that Coventry City could, briefly, move to top of the Championship with a win, with many home fans expecting their team to put on a show against struggling opposition.

It threatened to be a frustrating evening, with Peterborough United putting in a resolute first-half performance and occasionally threatening to make something happen on the counter-attack. Coventry City were being asked to break through a deep-lying opponent and were struggling to find the inspiration required to do so.

Peterborough United
Championship
24/09/2021
Score: 3-0
Scorer: Hamer, Gyokeres
(2)

However, those nerves were soon cast aside with a seven-minute blitz from the Sky Blues. First, Gustavo Hamer rounded off a sweeping back-to-front counter-attack, that he initiated, to put Coventry City ahead. Then, it was time for Viktor Gyokeres to make his presence known on proceedings. After converting a Todd Kane cross to make it two, Gyokeres poked the ball past Dai Cornell in the Peterborough United goal to make it 3-0.

For a few minutes, Coventry City were top of the Championship.

While results the following day meant that position would be short-lived, the pertinent point was that the Sky Blues were showing that they were among the better teams in the division. Over nine games, the team had been dealt various challenges and risen to them. With a solid back-line that had been improved by the presence of Simon Moore in goal, an attractive midfield trio of Ben Sheaf, Gustavo Hamer and Callum O'Hare, and one of the form strikers in the division in Viktor Gyokeres, this looked a genuinely good team that could find different ways to win games.

Not everything would go this team's way, with the following game, away at Luton Town, highlighting that off-nights remained a possibility for Coventry City. After conceding an early penalty, the Sky Blues were unable to settle into the game and were ruthlessly punished for it. The Hatters added another three before the half-time break, with a fifth coming in the second-half.

Luton Town
Championship
29/09/2021
Score: 0-5

After such a chastening, the prospect of facing an expensively-assembled, and third-placed, Fulham side was far from a welcome one. This was underlined in the first-half, as the Cottagers kept Coventry City at arms' length, before scoring mid-way through via a Kyle McFadzean own goal that had been forced by the presence of Aleksandar Mitrovic.

Having looked so unable to lay a glove on Fulham in the opening exchanges, what followed in the second-half was especially remarkable. Catching the away defence cold as they looked to pass out from the back, Callum O'Hare set up Viktor Gyokeres to level the scores. Just four minutes later, Matt Godden had put the ball in the back of the net from the penalty spot, after taking a tumble in the box.

Fulham
Championship
02/10/2021
Score: 4-1
Scorers: Gyokeres (2),
Godden, Maatsen

Fulham looked utterly bewildered by Coventry City's suddenly-found intensity and were unable to re-establish their earlier dominance of proceedings. An emphatic Ian Maatsen strike confirmed the direction of the three points,

before another Viktor Gyokeres goal capped off an impressive victory.

11 games in, 22 points and third-place. With little expectation heading into the campaign, Coventry City had proved themselves to be among the better teams in the division. This team may have been over-performing relative to expectations, but they had showed over an extended period that they deserved to be near the top of the table.

Part Two

Reality Bites

16th October – 29th December

After an international break in which Viktor Gyokeres had joined up with the Sweden squad, Coventry City were back in league action against Blackburn Rovers, looking to further establish the team's credentials as one of the better sides in the Championship this season.

However, the Sky Blues looked somewhat leggy at Ewood Park and fell behind to neat piece of play from Blackburn Rovers' Joe Rothwell. That same player was at the heart of affairs as he caught Ben Sheaf in possession soon after and set up Sam Gallagher to put Rovers in a commanding position at half-time.

Coventry City improved after the break, with Tyler Walker tapping in a low Todd Kane cross to half the deficit. Given the trend with this team this season, there was a sense of inevitability about the eventual equaliser. This time, a Liam Kelly shot smacked the crossbar and deflected in off Blackburn's goalkeeper, Thomas Kaminski. With time left on the clock, it was something of a surprise that the Sky Blues didn't look to chase a winning goal. It was a good point on the road, nonetheless.

Perhaps the most significant thing to come out of that game, however, was Viktor Gyokeres taking a meaty blow to the ankle in a challenge from Blackburn's centre-back, Jan-Paul van Hecke (that probably should have been punished with a penalty). The Swede hobbled through the rest of the game, and it was apparent in the following match, against Preston North End, that the knock was a hindrance to his explosive style of play. The problem was that Gyokeres was so important to the team, there was little option but to continue to play him.

When Tyler Walker put Coventry City ahead at Deepdale just before half-time, it appeared that Gyokeres' diminished impact would not be much of an issue. However, a fatigued second-half performance from the team as a whole invited a rousing Preston North End comeback to turn the game on its head. A congested fixture list was starting to have its impact on the Sky Blues.

It was something that again reared its head in the home game against Derby County. On top for much of the first-

Blackburn Rovers
Championship
16/10/2021
Score: 2-2
Scorers: Walker, Own
Goal

Preston North End
Championship
20/10/2021
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Walker

Derby County
Championship
23/10/2021
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Godden

Hull City
Championship
30/10/2021
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Godden

Swansea City
Championship
02/11/2021
Score: 1-2
Scorer: McFadzean

half, it took a Matt Godden penalty to put the team ahead. Unable to sustain control of proceedings in the second-half, Coventry City succumbed to an equaliser and were fortunate to hold onto a point in the closing stages. It brought an end to the 100% run at home, the reality of the season was beginning to mount.

Even in victory on the road at Hull City, similar issues presented themselves. Taking the lead early through Matt Godden, the Sky Blues spent much of the rest of the game holding on against a side struggling for confidence. That Coventry City held onto the win said more about the inadequacies of a newly-promoted Hull side, than what the Sky Blues were able to do.

It was building up to some kind of nadir, with the midweek home game against Swansea City encapsulating the Sky Blues' sudden loss of the verve that had defined them just a month ago. A possession-hungry Swans outfit dominated the early stages of the game, with Coventry City unable to lay a glove on them. Before the Sky Blues could settle into proceedings, Swansea City were already two goals up.

Despite pulling a goal back before half-time via a set-piece, there felt little chance of a Coventry City comeback. This was not the Sky Blues side that had started the season, with a first home defeat of the campaign underlining this swift decline in performance level.

For all of the sense of drift at Coventry City, they had only moved down one place in the league after that underwhelming run of form. Although, they were now closer to 7th place than 2nd, it was still relevant to bear in mind that the Sky Blues were in a vastly better league position than anyone had anticipated earlier in the campaign. If this was the inevitable rocky patch, anything close to a return to the early season form would make for a memorable campaign.

Of course, the longer this run went on, the more difficult it would make it for Coventry City to turn things around. Doing so just before the November international break, with a lower mid-table Bristol City side the opposition at

the CBS Arena, looked as good an opportunity as any to restore the good vibes around the team.

If the players themselves had seen the game as an important juncture of the campaign, perhaps that pressure had got to them in the first-half of the contest. On top, but looking nervy and stilted in possession, it was hardly a surprise that they were stung on the counter-attack just before half-time, with Ian Maatsen pulling Callum O'Dowda down in the box, getting himself sent-off, and Chris Martin scoring from the resulting spot-kick. It looked, already, as if the Sky Blues had let this opportunity to get back into form get away from them.

However, Coventry City looked improved in the second-half for their man and scoreline disadvantage. Perhaps the situation had sharpened the mind, encouraging greater urgency, with the Sky Blues taking the game to Bristol City and playing with a purpose that had been lacking earlier in the contest.

Early in the second-half, Viktor Gyokeres won a penalty for the Sky Blues, which Matt Godden converted to level the scores. Now looking to be well in the ascendancy, it was against the run of play where Bristol City appeared to kill-off the Coventry City comeback, with Andi Weimann firing past Simon Moore.

In a manner typical of the early part of the campaign, the Sky Blues remained relentless in their quest to turn the game around. When a ball fell to Callum O'Hare in the penalty area following a set-piece routine, the midfielder finished with an aplomb that had not been seen from him in the months prior.

A promising three-on-two situation in the game's dying stages looked to be Coventry City's moment to claim the win. However, Tyler Walker elected to shoot when he probably had better options either side of him. For most teams, that would have been game over. Not for Coventry City.

With a free-kick in the opposing half deep in second-half stoppage time, the Sky Blues resisted the urge to pump the ball into the Bristol City penalty area. Instead, Liam

Bristol City
Championship
06/11/2021
Score: 3-2
Scorers: Godden (2),
O'Hare

Kelly strolled forward, waited for the opportune moment to then play the ball into the path of Matt Godden, who found himself in enough space to finish emphatically past Daniel Bentley to secure an incredible comeback.

In a season of come-from-behind Sky Blues wins, this looked to be the most remarkable one of all. Without the benefit of early season energy, with confidence low, and, most notably, a man down, Coventry City demonstrated not only their continued propensity to keep going in difficult circumstances, but also their quality as a footballing outfit. It felt like a victory that would give the Sky Blues the shot in the arm that they had needed.

In that regard, the international break may have arrived at a bad time for Coventry City, meaning that they headed into a tough tip to Bramall Lane without the benefit of momentum. Despite a promising performance, with Ben Sheaf and Viktor Gyokeres standing out against a team that were in the Premier League the previous year, an inability to convert in front of goal saw the game play out as a drab 0-0 draw.

Sheffield United
Championship
20/11/2021
Score: 0-0

That was followed up with another toothless display at home to Birmingham City the following Tuesday. In front of a lively, local derby, atmosphere and with Gustavo Hamer standing out with his dominance over proceedings, Coventry City never really looked like scoring against their obdurate opponents. Despite Birmingham going down to ten-men late-on, the stalemate was barely threatened by the Sky Blues.

Birmingham City
Championship
23/11/2021
Score: 0-0

The sense of a promising season in danger of fizzling out persisted throughout much of a tough away trip to Bournemouth. In a game of few chances, conceding from two of them against a physically and technically dominant opponent looked to be game over. Even with Bournemouth having a man sent-off, anything close to a turnaround did not appear to be forthcoming.

That was until Matt Godden sparked panic stations among the Bournemouth ranks by snaffling home a chance in the penalty area to halve the deficit. With the home side dropping deeper and deeper, Coventry City accepted the

Bournemouth
Championship
27/11/2021
Score: 2-2
Scorers: Godden, Kane

invitation to chase an equaliser. On a blustery afternoon on the South Coast, all it took was a floated Todd Kane ball towards the Cherries' goalkeeper that sailed into the back of the net to turn what had looked a certain defeat into a valuable point.

It was another galvanising moment in Coventry City's season, but it was important that the Sky Blues built on it in a manner that they hadn't after that Bristol City comeback. The answer to whether they would was a swift 'no' in the following home game against West Bromwich Albion.

West Bromwich Albion
Championship
04/12/2021
Score: 1-2
Scorer: McFadzean

Against a physically imposing and intense opponent, the Sky Blues were caught out by a ball over the top to allow Karlan Grant to put the Baggies ahead. A second soon came, from a throw-in routine, meaning that Coventry City had left themselves too much work to do against a good team in order to pull off yet another dramatic comeback. A second-half Kyle McFadzean goal failed to turn the tide.

Now on a run of two wins in 10 games, this was more than just a bump in the road. Whether it was because Coventry City were struggling to adjust with the challenges that come from being in a lofty position, a lack of squad depth, or simply because the team weren't as good as they had looked in the opening two months of the campaign, what had worked so well early in the season no longer looked to be applicable. If this run went on much longer, there was a danger of all that good being completely undone.

If Coventry City were short on confidence, they didn't look it in their trip to Huddersfield Town. Well on top for long stages of the game, it made it especially frustrating that they were hit with a sucker punch from Huddersfield's one good attacking move to fall behind at half-time. Impressively undeterred in the second-half, the Sky Blues had the Terriers on the ropes but appeared unable to land the knock-out blow.

With an undeserved defeat on the cards, a Jodi Jones cross in second-half stoppage time found its way to Matt

Huddersfield Town
Championship
11/12/2021
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Godden

Godden to secure a point that was the least the team deserved. It may not have been the win that had been hoped for, but there was enough about the performance to suggest that Coventry City had the means to get out of this poor run they had found themselves on.

It was unhelpful then that the Sky Blues saw their following two games postponed due to a spike in COVID cases across the country. Not spared themselves from the Omicron variant, a Coventry City team missing a handful of players, as well as several of those playing looking short on fitness, laboured through a dull home contest with Millwall just after Christmas.

Millwall
Championship
29/12/2021
Score: 0-1

With neither side creating much of note, Coventry City let the game slip away from them late-on, by failing to adequately deal with a Millwall set-piece from just inside the home team's half. Slipping to a defeat that made it two wins in twelve games, the season really was in danger of spiralling out of control.

Part Three

Playing Well...

8th January – 12th February

A further COVID-enforced postponement, to the New Year's Day game against Luton Town, meant that Coventry City had another gap in their fixture schedule. Given the lifeless nature of the performance against Millwall, a break looked like exactly what this team needed.

It hadn't just been a drop-off in results over the past two months, performances looked to be getting worse and worse. Lacking confidence, the team also looked short on ideas. With players such as Viktor Gyokeres and Callum O'Hare out of form, the team lacked other route through with which to create and score goals. As helpful as a break could be, the onus was on Mark Robins to impart upon the team the fresh ideas that could turn this bad run around.

The FA Cup tie at home against Derby County was, effectively, a warm-up fixture for the Sky Blues ahead of the resumption of the league schedule a week later. After almost a month without regular football, getting fitness back into the players' legs was the priority in this game. Against a Derby side that had played throughout Coventry City's break, it was hardly surprising that the Rams looked the sharper, dominant team.

With Derby County well on top, a key theme of the game was the ease with which their right-back, Festy Ebosale, tortured Fankaty Dabo on Coventry City's left side. With Dabo not only being played out of position but looking to be carrying a knock, it was a complete mismatch. Fortunately for Coventry City, Derby County couldn't find a way to translate that into the clear-cut chances and goals to crystallise their dominance over proceedings.

That meant that Dominic Hyam's first-half header from a corner-kick was enough to secure FA Cup progress for Coventry City. While a cup run was not a priority for Mark Robins, securing a first win in seven games would hopefully prove to be a first step towards turning the campaign around.

Travelling away to a Peterborough United side in reasonable form at home, the first fixture following the resumption of the league schedule was not a straightforward one. However, the Sky Blues looked far

Derby County
FA Cup
08/01/2022
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Hyam

more energetic and proactive than in their last league outing. This forced multiple errors from the Posh defence, with Gustavo Hamer eventually putting Coventry City ahead with a fantastic strike from outside the penalty area.

The Sky Blues' energy in the press continued to be a theme throughout the rest of the contest, with Peterborough unable to match the away team's intensity. Not long after Hamer's opening goal, it was pressure from Ben Sheaf that turned the ball over in a dangerous area, with the midfielder playing in Matt Godden to put Coventry City in a commanding position.

Towards the end of the first-half, Peterborough United rallied, scoring from a well-taken effort from Jorge Grant from the edge of the area to give themselves the scent of a comeback. However, Coventry City regained their composure after the resumption of play in the second-half, forcing much of the game to be played in the Peterborough half.

Spurning some good chances to kill the game off, Peterborough eventually did Coventry City's job for them, with Nathan Thompson turning a Todd Kane cross into his own net. With the confidence flowing back into Sky Blues legs, a brilliant stoppage time run from Viktor Gyokeres saw the Swede play Godden in for a second goal to add a final flourish to the scoreline.

Those back-to-back wins had clearly gone a long way to restoring Coventry City's self-belief, as was apparent in the following home game against a bang-in-form Queens Park Rangers outfit. Controlling large portions of the game, the Sky Blues were playing the kind of energetic and effervescent football that they had earlier in the campaign. The only thing missing was a goal.

That lack of killer instinct in the final third – not helped by Matt Godden dropping out of the team in the days prior, due to appendicitis – proved to be costly against a good Queens Park Rangers side. From the Hoops' first period of control in the first-half, Andre Gray was played through for an excellent finish to put them ahead.

Peterborough United
Championship
22/01/2022
Score: 4-1
Scorers: Hamer, Godden
(2), Own Goal

Undeterred by that blow, Coventry City continued to take the game to QPR in the second-half. That pressure eventually told, with a corner-kick falling to Jordan Shipley on the edge of the penalty area, sitting up nicely enough to allow the makeshift left wing-back to fire emphatically home to spark raucous celebrations in the CBS Arena stands.

Those celebrations proved to be a little too raucous, with a steward falling and knocking his head badly, sparking an extended break in the play. In the grander picture, the sense that the stoppage killed Coventry City's was less important than the steward making a swift recovery. From a purely footballing perspective, it was a moment highly unfortunate in its timing.

With Queens Park Rangers putting in a resilient defensive effort, the Sky Blues could not find a way through. From one of the few attacks that QPR mounted over the remainder of the contest, their excellent midfielder, Chris Willock, found enough space to fire past Simon Moore and secure a win that was almost entirely against the run of play.

Queens Park Rangers
Championship
22/01/2022
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Shipley

As gutting as it was to lose in such a manner, it was the kind of performance that demonstrated that this Coventry City side had the ability to trouble some of the best teams in the league. The lack of composure in the final third was a source of frustration, with Viktor Gyokeres, the team's only fit striker, badly out of form in front of goal. However, there was a sense that it wouldn't take much for the Sky Blues to hit scoring form and move back up the league table.

Against Stoke City in the following home game, it was another positive, energetic and controlled performance from the Sky Blues. However, it was a display that threatened to be defined by Viktor Gyokeres finding a way not to score after intercepting a Stoke City defensive pass in the first-half to go clean through on goal.

The Swede, and the Sky Blues, eventually got the reward for their efforts in the second-half, when Gyokeres sent an effort on the edge of the penalty area past Jack Bonham in

Stoke City
Championship
25/01/2022
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Gyokeres

the Stoke goal. With the Potters unable to muster much of a response, it was an impressive victory for Coventry City against a play-off rival, especially given the mounting injury list amid a congested fixture schedule.

The streak of good performances continued into a tough away trip to a Middlesbrough side in imperious form under the management of Chris Wilder. With Viktor Gyokeres causing mayhem in the Boro back-line, the Sky Blues always looked a threat when playing the ball into the opposition half.

Middlesbrough
Championship
25/01/2022
Score: 0-1

However, the familiar issue of not matching finishing ability with performance level cost Coventry City the chance for a statement result. With Kyle McFadzean missing from close range after a corner-kick in the second-half, Middlesbrough broke down the other end and worked their striker, Andraz Sporar, into enough space to score the game's only goal.

Another frustrating defeat, but there was time enough left in the season to believe that results could eventually meet the level of performances, putting Coventry City back in the play-off picture.

As much as the upcoming FA Cup tie with Southampton was an opportunity to demonstrate what this Coventry City team could be capable of against Premier League opposition, it was an unhelpful addition to the fixture list for such a thin squad. Taking the lead thanks to an impressive first-half performance, leading to a well-worked move that set Viktor Gyokeres up to score, the Sky Blues looked increasingly fatigued as the game wore on.

That might not have mattered had Southampton not scored an absurdly well-taken goal from Stuart Armstrong in the second-half, an effort from outside the area which seemed to defy the laws of physics in the way it bent past Simon Moore. However, what was already an unwanted fixture was extended into extra-time as a result of that equalising goal.

Doing well to limit Southampton to very few chances despite being clearly out on their feet, Coventry City were eventually knocked out of the FA Cup thanks to another

Southampton
FA Cup
05/02/2022
Score: 1-2 (aet)
Scorer: Gyokeres

slice of Premier League quality, this time from England international, Kyle Walker-Peters. As impressive a performance it was from the Sky Blues, losing the game over 120 minutes was the last thing they needed.

For the first-half in the following game against Blackpool, Coventry City looked impressively fresh, taking the game to a good team. However, those familiar issues in front of goal meant that the Seasiders could hit the Sky Blues with a sucker punch on the counter-attack, with Gary Madine tapping home a rebound after a swift break.

Just when frustrations with this team's toothlessness were beginning to mount in the CBS Arena stands, a long Simon Moore kick found its way to Viktor Gyokeres, who levelled the scores just before the break.

Blackpool
Championship
08/02/2022
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Gyokeres

If the hope had been that the goal would allow Coventry City to kick-on and turn the game around completely, fatigue reared its head in the second-half, seeing Blackpool take control of proceedings. Fortunately, that dominance from the away side led to few chances of note, seeing the game play out as a 1-1 draw.

12th in the table, but only four points off the play-offs, the time was nigh for Coventry City to dig out wins in a more consistent manner than they had in recent months. A trip to a struggling Reading side looked an opportunity to put three points on the board and kick-start a run of form, but the Sky Blues' fatigue saw them on the back-foot for periods of the game, with the Royals taking the lead in the first-half through a criminally unmarked Lucas Joao.

In danger of letting the opportunity, and perhaps the season, get away from them, a Gustavo Hamer strike from the edge of the area, deflecting in off Dominic Hyam, meant Coventry City could re-set themselves at the break. Quickly moving ahead in the second-half, with Michael Rose heading in a Hamer corner, the Sky Blues fell into the trap of retreating and inviting pressure from a desperate Reading side.

Coventry City's lead was quickly wiped-out, with Andy Yiadom heading in from a corner-kick, setting up a nervy contest between a Reading side in dire need of a win and a

Reading
Championship
12/02/2022
Score: 3-2
Scorers: Hyam, Rose,
Maatsen

Coventry City side lacking in energy. A slice of fortune fell in the Sky Blues' favour, with Reading's Junior Hoilett picking up two silly bookings in quick succession, handing Coventry City a man advantage.

The Sky Blues quickly took the opportunity to make that count, with a good move finding Ian Maatsen, whose effort took a heavy deflection on its way into the goal. Nonetheless, Reading threatened to grab themselves a point, with Tom Ince missing an open goal.

It was a fortunate win for Coventry City, given some of the bad fortune they had endured in the weeks' prior, they were more than happy for things to fall in their favour this time around. It meant that the play-offs remained within reasonable distance with 17 games to play.

Part Four

One Step Forward, One Step Back

15th February – 6th April

The time was nigh for Coventry City to put a run of form together that would bolster their case for a top six finish. The fixture list would remain congested until the start of April, meaning it wouldn't be easy for such a thin squad, but the team had showed recently that they could make the play-offs on talent alone. The Sky Blues just needed to gather a fair wind behind them.

Starting with a trip to a Cardiff City side in lower mid-table, Coventry City had a good opportunity to build on that win over Reading. On top for large periods of the first-half, a penalty appeal and a Callum O'Hare chance were the closest the Sky Blues came to scoring.

Once again, the team tired as the game wore on, allowing a Cardiff City side showing little ambition the ability to weather what little pressure Coventry City could build. It looked like being another game where it just wasn't going to happen in front of goal for the Sky Blues, with a hammer blow coming from an excellent strike from Cardiff City's left-back, Joel Bagan.

Cardiff City
Championship
15/02/2022
Score: 0-2

Out on their feet, Coventry City succumbed to a two-goal defeat, with Cardiff catching them on the counter for another well-taken goal, meaning that the Sky Blues were back to square one in their quest for play-off form.

The impact of that poor result and the relentlessly brutal fixture schedule was apparent in the following game, at home to a struggling Barnsley side. Against an opponent looking to sit deep and hold onto anything they could get, the Sky Blues looked to be short of the ideas and cutting edge required to break the Tykes down.

Barnsley
Championship
19/02/2022
Score: 1-0
Scorer: Hyam

In danger of dropping more points against a supposedly beatable opponent, a late Dominic Hyam goal bailed out Coventry City and gave the team something to build on heading into a trip to a Bristol City team in good form.

Taking the approach of sitting back slightly more than they ordinarily would, in order to lend themselves space on the counter-attack, Coventry City enacted their game-plan against the Robins just about to perfection in the first-half at Ashton Gate. Taking the lead through a well-executed break finished off by Ian Maatsen, it looked as if this might finally be the first occasion since September

where the Sky Blues would string together league victories.

Against an enthusiastic home response in the second-half, Coventry City's back-line began to wobble. At just past the hour mark, the home side grabbed the goal that they deserved, with Chris Martin heading powerfully in after a well-worked short corner routine. The game only looked to be heading in one direction.

Bristol City
Championship
22/02/2022
Score: 2-1
Scorers: Maatsen,
Gyokeres

With Simon Moore in good form in the Coventry City goal, the Sky Blues did well to ride out a further spell of Bristol City pressure. What looked to be a decent point on the road turned into victory, when Gustavo Hamer intercepted a pass midway inside his own half, charged up to the edge of the opposing penalty area and picked out Viktor Gyokeres for a last-minute winner.

It was a clutch moment from the team that threatened to be the kick-starter for this elusive run of form.

At home to Preston North End the following Saturday, the Sky Blues initially looked to be buoyed by that midweek victory. However, the familiar inability to turn a few good spells into chances and goals meant that the away side gained control once Coventry City's legs tired towards the end of the first-half. It was a contest made more difficult for the Sky Blues by the spate of physical and niggly fouls that Preston used to knock the home side out of their rhythm.

Preston's approach threatened to cost them the game, with centre-back Liam Lindsay sent off after picking up two yellow cards, providing Coventry City the opportunity to up the ante in the closing stages. Quickly after the resulting free-kick, however, the Sky Blues lost possession, allowed Preston North End to counter-attack, and Fankaty Dabo lunged in needlessly to concede a penalty and get himself sent off. With the Lilywhites going on to score from the spot, it looked another case of the Sky Blues following up a forward step with a backwards one.

Looking spent, of both fitness and ideas, there looked to be no way out of the hole that Coventry City had dug themselves into. Throwing on youngster, Fabio Tavares,

Preston North End
Championship
26/02/2022
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Tavares

as a last roll of the dice, the first thing the forward did on the pitch was to seize on a loose ball in the penalty area from a set-piece and fire emphatically into the top corner.

Another remarkable late goal in Coventry City's season, but the need for late heroics in the first place was hampering the team's ambition of making the top six. Just how valuable that point would be rested on the results in the next few games.

Starting with a trip to mid-table Swansea City, the Sky Blues were, somewhat surprisingly, cautious in their set-up. Providing a possession-hoarding side with all the encouragement they required to knock the ball around and build up a rhythm. It eventually saw the Swans work a wonderful move in the first-half for Jamie Paterson to hand them the lead.

There were chances for Coventry City to level the scores before half-time, with Viktor Gyokeres, most notably, fluffing his lines from an excellent opening. It proved to be especially costly, with Swansea City scoring goals either side of half-time to kill off the contest. That the Sky Blues had further chances to add to the one goal, scored by Gustavo Hamer, that they mustered made it an especially frustrating afternoon, borne of the team being too passive.

If there was one game that epitomised the growing issues that Coventry City were having at both ends of the pitch, it was the home game against Luton Town. Generally, the better team for much of the early exchanges, Michael Rose allowed a long goal-kick to float over his head, which sent Luton Town's Elijah Adebayo clean through to finish with a level of composure that the Sky Blues could only dream of. Forced to chase the game over the remainder of the contest, it was as much a lack of composure and finesse from Coventry City as it was the defensive fortitude of the opposition that kept the Sky Blues scoreless.

It was increasingly looking like this wouldn't be Coventry City's season. The hectic fixture list and a spate of injury issues were not helping, but the bigger issue appeared to be a slightly lax attitude at either end of the pitch. The team weren't playing that much worse than the standard

Swansea City
Championship
05/03/2022
Score: 1-3
Scorer: Hamer

Luton Town
Championship
08/03/2022
Score: 0-1

they had set earlier in the campaign, but they had developed a bad habit of finding it hard to score and making themselves easy to score against.

Falling one goal down at home to Sheffield United due to dozy set-piece defending, the Sky Blues looked set to demonstrate these fatal issues once again. Spurning a host of excellent chances against a strong team, Coventry City at least found an equaliser to take into half-time, with Michael Rose sending Viktor Gyokeres clean through to score.

Sheffield United
Championship
12/03/2022
Score: 4-1
Scorers: Gyokeres, O'Hare
(2), Godden

Something miraculous happened in the second-half, Coventry City took their chances. With, the least reliable finisher in the Sky Blues squad, Callum O'Hare, grabbing himself two goals, there was no better indication that it was finally a good day in front of goal. Against a shell-shocked Sheffield United back-line, the win was rounded off by Matt Godden, with Coventry City finally grabbing the kind of statement result their play over the last few months had deserved.

Three points off the play-offs, this was another opportunity for Coventry City to string together the kind of form to make the leap into the top six. When Hull City scored from their first attack in the following game, it was apparent that another chance to build on a good result had escaped the Sky Blues' grasp.

With the caveat that it was a game overseen by under-23s coach, Luke Tisdale, due to the senior coaching staff being absent through COVID, and with Ben Sheaf having to fill in at centre-back, it was a return to an increasingly familiar kind of home game for Coventry City. After conceding early, the Sky Blues had to scramble in search of an equaliser. A second Hull City goal before half-time meant that there would be little scope for comeback.

Hull City
Championship
16/03/2022
Score: 0-2

Mark Robins returned to the side-line for a trip to Derby County but oversaw a tired performance from the Sky Blues against an opponent desperately scrapping for survival. The Rams threatened to overrun Coventry City, with their young winger, Malcolm Ebiowei, causing no end of problems, however, the one piece of attacking quality that the Sky Blues produced saw them take the

Derby County
Championship
19/03/2022
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Godden

lead, with Matt Godden producing a confident finish after a smart interchange with Callum O'Hare.

Although Derby County moved up a gear or two in the second-half, Simon Moore had little to do in the Coventry City goal. Just as the hope was building that the Sky Blues could eke out a valuable away win, Derby's Tom Lawrence won a soft penalty, from which he scored, to see the game finish as a draw.

Coventry City were running out of time to close the gap to the play-offs, which was now at six points. A home game against sixth-placed Blackburn Rovers offered a big opportunity for this team to put themselves in a good position heading into the final month of the campaign. Starting well against what looked a beleaguered Tony Mowbray-managed side, Callum O'Hare forced an own goal to put the Sky Blues ahead.

Well in control of proceedings, a second goal before half-time would have been nice but there looked little sign of life from their opponents. That was until Mowbray introduced attacking duo, Bradley Dack and Ben Brereton Diaz, from the bench, leading to a stark move up through the gears from Blackburn Rovers. Almost immediately after the second-half kick-off, Dack had levelled for Blackburn, who suddenly looked like cutting through Coventry City's defence every time they entered their half.

Somehow, Blackburn didn't muster a goal during a period of momentum after that equaliser and the game looked in danger of playing out as a draw that didn't really suit either side. However, the away side found what looked to be a late winner, through Scott Wharton, from a corner-kick, with Coventry City, once again, looking short on inspiration against a team attempting to see out a lead at the CBS Arena.

Blackburn Rovers
Championship
02/04/2022
Score: 2-2
Scorers: Own Goal,
Gyokeres

Fortunately, Blackburn Rovers' desire to kill the game off via timewasting, rather than another goal, was punished in the ninth minute of second-half stoppage time, with Fankaty Dabo sending in a teasing cross for Viktor Gyokeres to secure an equalising goal. As welcome as avoiding defeat was, just like the recent Preston North

End game, it was a piece of late heroics rendered less impressive by its need.

It left Coventry City heading into a midweek trip to a red-hot Nottingham Forest side needing to pull off an unlikely victory to keep their play-off hopes alive. Remarkably, the Sky Blues were the better team throughout much of the opening exchanges, with Viktor Gyokeres and Callum O'Hare having excellent chances to put the team ahead.

However, it was with a crushing inevitability that Nottingham Forest scored with one of the few attacking moves they mustered in the first-half to punish Coventry City's lack of killer instinct at the other end. Keeping the Sky Blues at arm's length from that point onwards, a second-half goal from Forest looked to have signalled the start of the end of the season for Coventry City, with the play-offs all but unobtainable.

Nottingham Forest
Championship
06/04/2022
Score: 0-2

Part Five

A Final Flourish

10th April - 7th May

With hopes of the play-offs all but over, Coventry City made the trip to 1st-placed Fulham with little expectation of either a performance or a result. Encapsulating just why the Sky Blues had been unable to last the course, Mark Robins was forced to name two goalkeepers on the bench. Against a side that had over £50 million of talent among their substitutes, it was hard to foresee any other winner than the Cottagers.

In the event, this Coventry City team demonstrated just what they have been capable of all season in executing a performance of determination, energy and skill. For all of Fulham's possession, it was the Sky Blues that looked the more likely team to score in the early stages. On this occasion, Coventry City grabbed the goal their play deserved, with Michael Rose heading home a Gustavo Hamer corner.

Wreaking havoc on the counter-attack through Viktor Gyokeres and Callum O'Hare, with Hamer and Jamie Allen getting up ably in support, there were opportunities to add to the lead. Eventually, Gyokeres hit a shot that bounced up just in front of Fulham's goalkeeper, Marek Rodak, to make it 2-0 going into the break.

Fulham
Championship
10/04/2022
Score: 3-1
Scorers: Rose, Gyokeres,
O'Hare

There was a response from Fulham, but Coventry City held firm at the back and continued to look a threat on the counter. It was somewhat against the run of play when Fulham grabbed a goal back, via Bobby Reid, but Callum O'Hare made sure of the victory after Gustavo Hamer played him through on goal in second-half stoppage time.

Within the space of 90 minutes, Coventry City's season had gone from finished to very much alive.

A trip to former landlords, Birmingham City, offered a chance for Coventry City to keep up the pressure on the top six. On a sunny Good Friday in front of yet another sell-out away attendance, it looked perfectly set-up for the Sky Blues to breathe further life into their campaign.

2-0 down by the 39th-minute mark, Coventry City looked like they had again stumbled when presented with an opportunity to close down the top six. Somehow level at half-time, this game was yet another example of the indefatigable spirit of this Sky Blues outfit.

Birmingham City
Championship
15/04/2022
Score: 4-2
Scorers: Sheaf (2), Rose,
O'Hare

Eventually, the spirit, and quality, of this Coventry City side won out against a lifeless Birmingham City. Moving up a gear or two in the second-half, another Michael Rose goal from a Gustavo Hamer delivery nudged the Sky Blues in front. While Birmingham remained a threat from set-pieces themselves, a swift move from Coventry City in second-half stoppage time, with Callum O'Hare on hand to poke the ball into the back of the net, made sure of the win.

This Coventry City team were now in the ascendancy at just the right time of the season.

Over the course of the remainder of the Bank Holiday weekend, excitement grew ahead of the upcoming home game against Bournemouth. Tickets sold fast, making it the highest-attended game at the CBS Arena this season. As tough an opponent as promotion-chasing Bournemouth looked to be, there was a confidence that this Coventry City side had the ability to beat them.

Racing out of the traps upon kick-off, the Sky Blues' energy threatened to overrun their more experienced and expensive opponents. Chances came and went, but it looked a matter of time before the breakthrough would be found.

Then, Bournemouth mounted their first attack of the game and scored.

Not to be deterred, Coventry City kept up in their efforts to harry their opponents and create chances. This was not the first time that the Sky Blues had found themselves behind at home, they knew they could find a way back into this.

Then, Bournemouth mounted their second attack of the game and scored.

2-0 down at half-time was not a fair reflection of the balance of the contest. As much as Bournemouth showed their quality through that greater clinical touch, there was still enough about this Coventry City performance to hold out hope that a comeback could be mounted – after all, the

Sky Blues had recovered a two-goal deficit to draw the reverse fixture.

Then, Bournemouth mounted their third attack of the game and scored.

That final hammer blow knocked the stuffing out of Coventry City, with the rest of the game a case of both teams going through the motions until the final whistle. To have built such excitement around the team and fallen flat was a disappointment, however, the league table showed that there was still a chance to make the top six. It wouldn't be easy, but it was within the Sky Blues' power to do so.

Bournemouth
Championship
18/04/2022
Score: 0-3

The 0-0 draw with West Bromwich Albion that followed underlined a lot of the issues that would prevent Coventry City from making the play-offs this season. With opportunities to create good chances and score goals, the Sky Blues were overcome by hesitancy and let the game pass them by. On top of that, the concession of a last-minute penalty highlighted the lack of concentration at the back that had also been issue for this team.

Ben Wilson pulling off the club's first penalty save in five years in the last minute of an away game against a semi-local rival should have been one of the moments of the season. However, that it was something that was required to hold onto a draw in a game that the team needed to win was enough to render it a footnote in a campaign that promised more than it delivered.

West Bromwich Albion
Championship
23/04/2022
Score: 0-0

Coventry City served up a further reminder of both why they were in the play-off hunt for much of the campaign and why they didn't make the top six, in defeat at home to Huddersfield Town. On top for much of the first-half, the Sky Blues squandered three clear-cut chances to take the lead. It was with a sense of cruel inevitability that Huddersfield went on to score with their first effort on target.

From a losing position, Coventry City laboured but were unable to find a way to break through a well-organised Terriers back-line. Conceding a penalty after a rash lunge from Ben Wilson, the stand-in goalkeeper could not

Huddersfield Town
Championship
30/04/2022
Score: 1-2
Scorer: Gyokeres

replicate his heroics of the previous week. That meant that Viktor Gyokeres' late goal was nothing more than a consolation and the Sky Blues headed into the final game of the season with a bottom-half finish still a possibility.

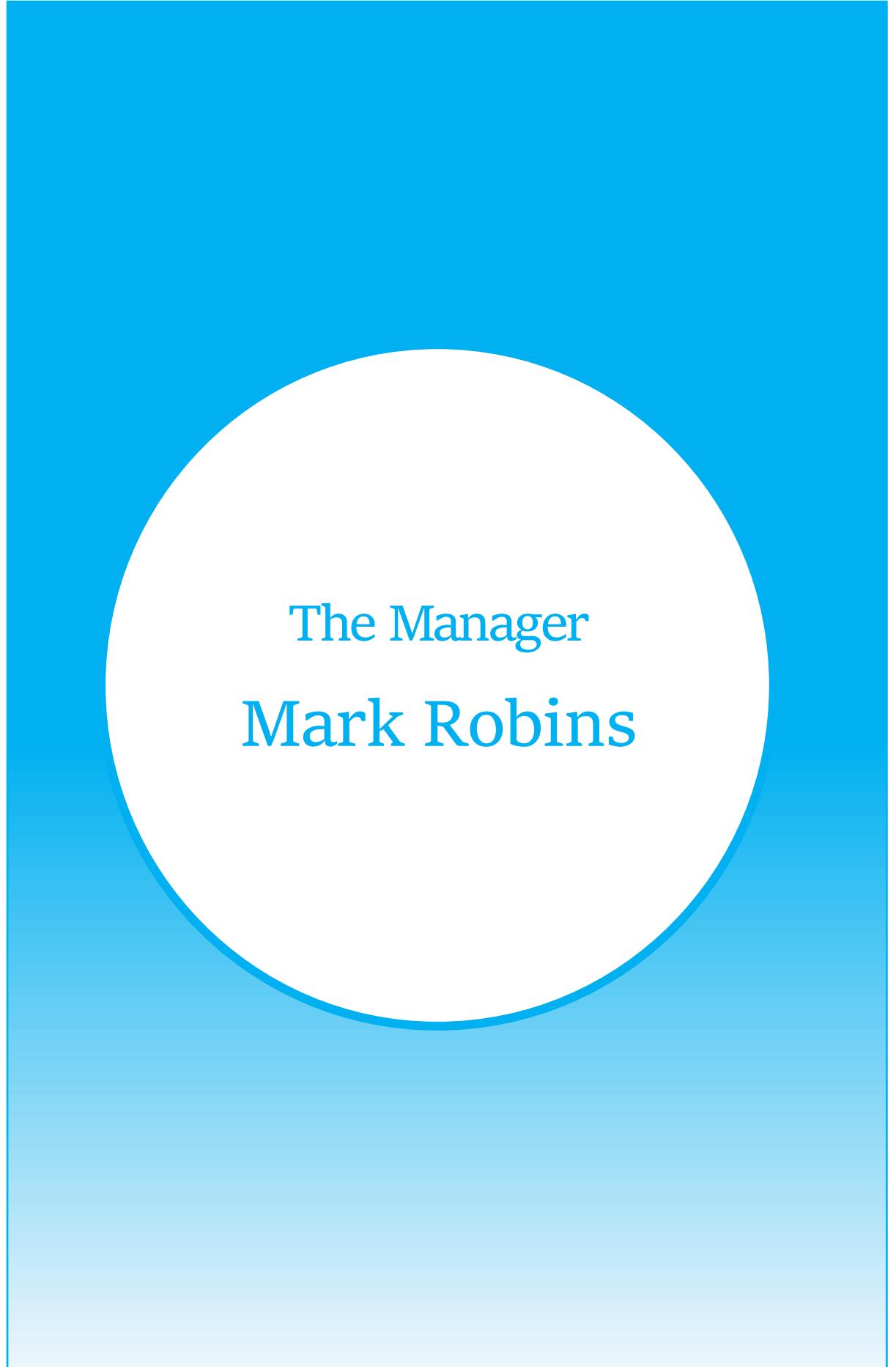
Coventry City looked motivated on their visit to Stoke City to avoid such a fate. Playing with a combination of energy and inhibition, the Sky Blues were well on top for much of the first-half, with Jamie Allen springing Viktor Gyokeres behind the Potters' defence to put the team ahead.

With chances to add to the lead coming and going, it was true to form that Coventry City would be punished for their profligacy. A sloppy pass in midfield allowed Stoke City to counter and score from one of the few chances they created all afternoon.

Stoke City
Championship
07/05/2022
Score: 1-1
Scorer: Gyokeres

Despite having chances to win the game in the second-half, a draw and a 12th-place finish felt fitting for the team's efforts over the course of the campaign. A good team but lacking the killer instinct to put opponents away on a consistent basis, the Sky Blues weren't quite at the level to consider themselves one of the better teams in the division.

Progress had been made over the previous campaign; it was hard not to feel a level of regret that Coventry City weren't quite able to take a further step that looked within their capabilities this season.



The Manager
Mark Robins

It has been another season of progress under Mark Robins' management, and one of the most difficult years in which to achieve it.

For the most part, Mark Robins has entered campaigns with a sense of forward momentum from the previous one. This time around, the team had struggled the previous season and had little means with which to improve over the summer. That the manager found a way to take another step forward is an incredible achievement.

It really is remarkable how Mark Robins has raised the bar at Coventry City over the five years he has had in charge. Now is as good a time as any to take stock of that.

When the club was on its way into League Two upon Mark Robins' return to the club, Coventry City looked fated to a decline of ever-decreasing circles. Reversing that streak with promotion from League Two would have been an achievement enough to make him a club legend, that he quickly followed that up with another promotion says a lot about Mark Robins' desire for forward progress.

Whereas it now feels like Coventry City are at their natural level in the Championship, second-tier football looked a wild fantasy five years ago – and even upon return to League One a year after that. A year ago, it was hard to foresee the Sky Blues being much more than a team scraping to survive at this level, a year later, and there is genuine disappointment that this club didn't make the play-offs.

Before the specifics of what Mark Robins has done at Coventry City can be analysed, the biggest job that he has done at this football club is to consistently raise standards. There may be a time where the limitations he has to operate under will make further progress an impossibility, but it is hard not to believe that he will continue to find ways to take this club to the next level.

It is a combination of ambition and pragmatism that has marked Mark Robins' ability to progress Coventry City as a football club.

The ambition has seen him set out targets for the club that other managers would be cautious to. It is that ambition that has driven the continual increase in standards at the football club.

However, Mark Robins' pragmatism has meant that he has been able to adjust to set-backs. Whether it's been individual defeats, occasional poor runs of form or missing out on transfer targets, Robins has been able to maintain progress in spite of having to often deviate from the preferred route.

This season was a case study in Mark Robins' ability to carve a path forward for Coventry City. With a team that struggled last year and having missed out on several top transfer targets, it would have been easy to adopt a cautious approach. Instead, the team not only started in excellent form but played an attractive style of football. There aren't many managers who would have believed that was possible.

The players clearly relish the trust that Mark Robins has placed in them. Even

during the poorer runs of this campaign, the team stuck to a consistent style of play in the belief that the results would eventually come. The mid part of the season underlined this, with the team on a poor run of two wins in 12 games, they bounced back with a run of dominant performances to put themselves back into play-off contention.

With just a little more luck, in terms of converting chances and avoiding injuries, then this set of players could have made the play-offs. While those factors point towards the limitations that the manager has to operate under, that Mark Robins has agreed a further stay at the club indicates that he believes that there is a way to push forward within those limitations.

At this early stage of the summer, it can be almost certain that Mark Robins is working tirelessly to source improvements to the squad. While it is likely that a key player or two will be sold, it is unlikely to be the setback for this manager that it would be others.

It really shouldn't be taken for granted what an incredible job Mark Robins has done at Coventry City. Without him, the club was one bad managerial appointment from non-league football. With him, the Premier League doesn't seem a ridiculous possibility. Moreover, Robins has provided a point of continuity during a period where the world of football both inside and outside Coventry City has been in a state of flux.

There is, of course, the possibility that Mark Robins has taken the club as far as he can. If mid-table in the Championship

is the final destination, it is going to take a while (in my opinion) to get bored of that.

There have been so many reasons and excuses during Mark Robins' reign at Coventry City not to believe that forward progress was possible, yet he has consistently been able to find a way forward. This season has represented another forward step, one more would surely put for a convincing case that Mark Robins is the club's best ever manager.

With Mark Robins in charge, this is a golden era for Coventry City. Let's enjoy it for all it's worth.



Most Important
Player

Gustavo
Hamer

Incredibly, there were doubts over Gustavo Hamer's ability heading into this season. Having seen his form tail-off at the end of a bruising first year in English football, there were Coventry City fans wondering whether Hamer was a flash in the pan. The midfielder quickly demonstrated that it was that drop in form last year that was the aberrance.

A wonderful passer of the ball, an excellent reader of the game and capable of stepping forward to create and score goals, Gustavo Hamer has just about everything in his locker that could be wanted in a central midfielder. His most important quality, however, is his desire to take hold of games and bend them in his team's favour.

Gustavo Hamer is a player who will rarely do something flashy for the sake of it. Whether it's nonchalantly volleying a 35-yard pass, turning past an opponent in the centre of the pitch or taking on a difficult shot, every action that Hamer takes on the pitch is purposeful. There are games where things don't come off for him, but even at his worst, that desire to take responsibility over proceedings does not diminish.

A return of three goals and nine assists this season does not tell the full story with Gustavo Hamer. The number of games he has looked to drag the team up the pitch has been almost countless. During the more difficult spots of the campaign, Hamer has continued to be willing to carry this team by the scruff of the neck. For the players around him, they know he is someone they can give the ball to with the best chance of making something happen. That is why he has

been this team's most important player this season.

The biggest caveat surrounding Gustavo Hamer is his disciplinary record. Picking up 14 yellow cards this season and banned for three games as a result, Hamer has yet to show a level of control when it comes to bookings. Having occasionally looked last season to rein it in, Hamer seems to have embraced his wild streak for much of this campaign. Perhaps it is impossible to separate the wildness from the brilliance, perhaps that is why this has been his best season for the club.

Another summer of Gustavo Hamer at Coventry City inevitably leads to further speculation as to his future. It has been apparent from very early on that his long-term future is not at this club, why, in my opinion, fret over how long he may spend at Coventry City?

Players who combine Gustavo Hamer's technical excellence with a genuine drive to utilise that ability to influence games are rare. It speaks to Hamer's desire to maximise his potential that he took a step up this season after signing a contract extension, when other players may have been content to slip into a comfort zone.

What makes Gustavo Hamer my player of the year is that he has been the most consistently able to demonstrate his best level over the course of the season. Other players in the team have had patches of good form here and there, Hamer has consistently shown quality and consistently been able to influence games.



Most Important
Player

Ben Sheaf

There was understandable underwhelm following Ben Sheaf's permanent signing for the club over the summer. It was not just that the midfielder had cost the team a number of goals through individual errors the year before, but that he had so rarely shown what he might be capable of at his best. Ben Sheaf looked like a player a little too content to let games pass him by.

Whether, or not Mark Robins had much choice in the matter of signing Ben Sheaf permanently, the manager deserves a lot of credit for sticking by him and has been rewarded by the player emerging as a midfielder capable of a genuinely outstanding level of performance in the Championship this season.

There can be no better demonstration of Ben Sheaf's improvement this season than in the away win against Peterborough United in January. It was Sheaf who spotted an opposing midfielder dallying on the ball, bullied him off it, drove forward and assisted Matt Godden for the game's second goal. From bullied to bully, that moment was a visual manifestation of Ben Sheaf's transformation as a footballer over the course of this campaign.

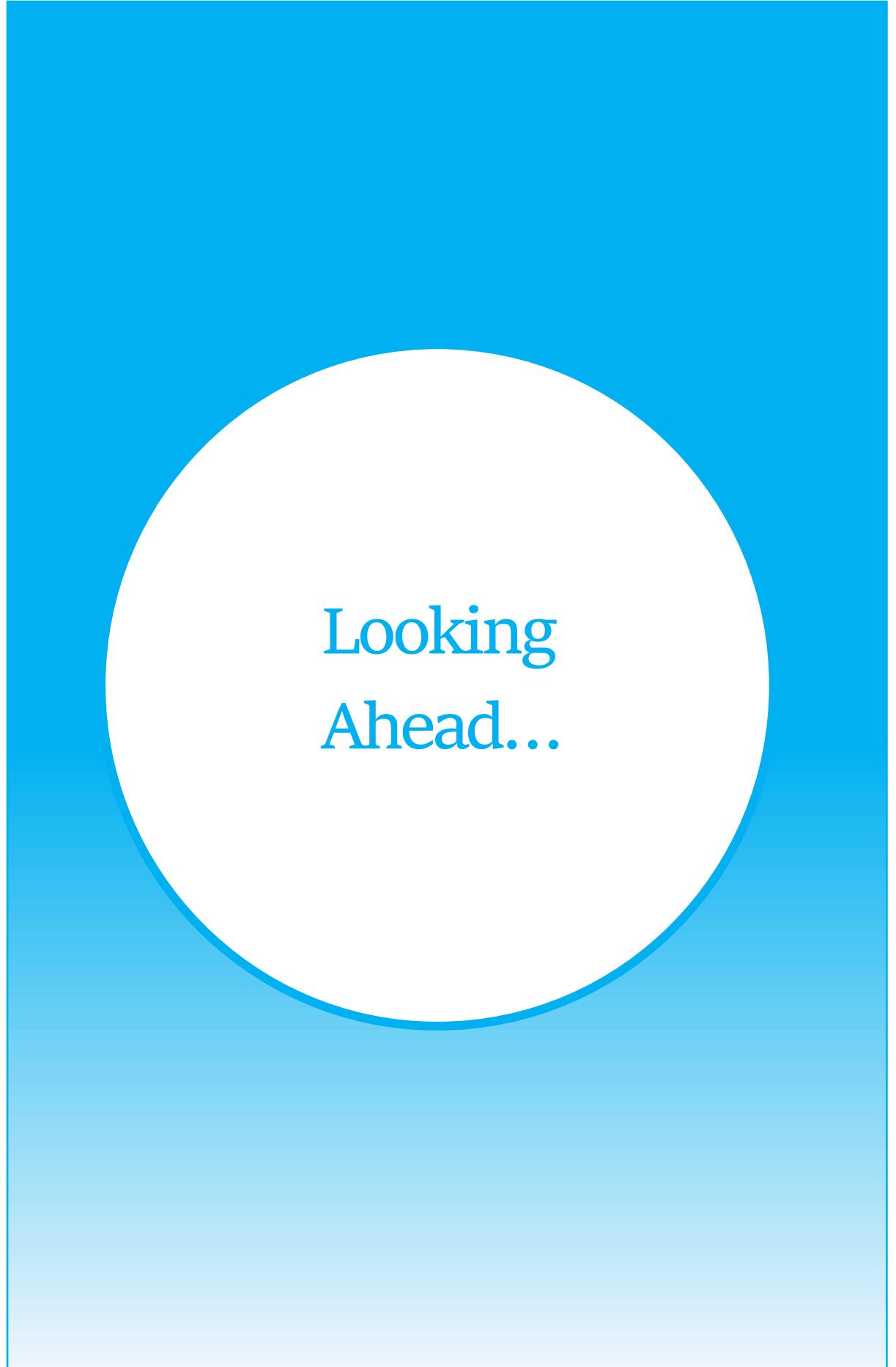
That level of assertion has been the main area of improvement in Ben Sheaf this season. His ability to pass the ball had never really been in doubt, it was just whether he could ally that with the ability to stamp his mark on games. Almost from the off this season, Ben Sheaf looked more willing and forceful in the challenge, becoming the master of his domain in central midfield. That has been a key reason why there have been so few

mistakes from Sheaf this season, because he has been able to play 10-20 yards further up the pitch.

Just why Ben Sheaf hasn't quite achieved a reputation as one of the team's stand-out performers – with Gustavo Hamer, Callum O'Hare and Viktor Gyokeres considered by most to be the 'big three' – is perhaps because he plays in a manner that does not draw attention to himself. Ben Sheaf is the kind of defensive midfielder who prefers an interception over a lunging tackle, he is the kind of ball-playing midfielder who prefers to keep the ball rather than risk playing a more eye-catching pass, when pressing further forward, he is perhaps a little reticent to take shots on.

It doesn't make Ben Sheaf any less valuable to this Coventry City side, in fact, it could be argued that he is the type of player who draws excellence out of those further ahead of him. Sheaf's willingness to do the dirty, behind-the-scenes, work was further epitomised this year by the handful of games he filled in, adeptly, at centre-back.

If there is further improvement in Ben Sheaf to come, he will no longer be considered something of a well-kept secret among Coventry City fans. Having added consistency and authority to his game this season, Sheaf has all the tools in place to achieve further progression next year.



Looking
Ahead...

After a season that was, for the large part, above the expectations of most, the hope is that Coventry City can look to build on it next time out. However, that will be easier said than done.

Already, there is speculation linking the club's best players with moves away, which means that the task may be to maintain a squad of a similar level to this season, rather than looking to add what have been felt are the missing pieces to the current one. Even if everything goes to plan over the summer, it should not be an expectation that Coventry City will be able to challenge for the top six.

That might seem like a lack of ambition, but the reality is that the Sky Blues remain a small fish in the big pond that is the Championship. The three relegated teams from the Premier League will vastly outgun Coventry City financially, along with the better-resourced teams who were in the division last year, plus there are strong teams gaining promotion from League One. There is a likelihood that the Championship will be a stronger division next year, the first task for Coventry City will be to meet that level of improvement.

Not that there shouldn't be confidence in the ability of Mark Robins to elevate the team to that challenge. The manager has continually found ways to improve the squad during his time at the club, which has, at times, involved key players having to be sold. However, there is always a chance in football that plans can go awry, and a team can find itself struggling when they had been expecting to make progress.

If Coventry City are to take the next step over the coming season that is being hoped for, a lot is going to have to go right over the summer – which may not become apparent until a few months into next season.

Holding onto all three of Viktor Gyokeres, Gustavo Hamer and Callum O'Hare shouldn't necessarily be seen as something that has to happen at any cost. The club's recent transfer activity – most of which has been loans and free transfers – would suggest that there may not be much room to add quality to the squad without that injection of money that a big sale could provide. Furthermore, if the club is running on a model of buying young players with potential and selling them on for profit, a key part of that process is spotting the opportunity to maximise the profit when selling players, which may arrive this summer.

The important part for Coventry City this summer will be whether the players brought in can address the issues in this team that became apparent over the course of the season. Namely, it has been a lack of a clinical touch in front of goal and a tendency to leak silly goals at the back.

While those may seem issues that the vast majority of teams want to improve on each year, it may only take a nudge in either direction for Coventry City to solve both. If the team can be more clinical in front of goal, it puts less pressure on the defence. If the defence can become tighter, it puts less pressure on the attack. The big decision for Mark Robins to make over the summer will be in which

direction he looks to push the team towards.

At the back, there is a chance that it could be a similar set of players to recent years. With Simon Moore and Ben Wilson in goal both under contract for next season, along with Dominic Hyam, Kyle McFadzean and Michael Rose, the manager may have limited scope to make swinging changes at the back. Continuity may not be the worst thing in the world, as these players have shown they can be solid, reliable defenders when on form.

With Jake Clarke-Salter reaching the end of his loan spell, at least one centre-back looks set to be signed. It may be a case of adding Clarke-Salter permanently, or a similar, left-footed, centre-back to balance out the back three. However, Jake Bidwell has shown he can fill in there, which could allow the focus to shift onto finding a long-term replacement for Kyle McFadzean, a dominant centre-back who can provide leadership at the back. That one player may have the potential to provide the authority required to stamp out some of the defensive sloppiness that has undermined periods of this season.

At wing-back, Todd Kane, Fankaty Dabo and Jake Bidwell are all contracted for next season, meaning that there is also limited scope for change in that area unless Mark Robins, unexpectedly, moves one of them on. That means there will be a vacancy for a fast, dynamic left wing-back to replace Ian Maatsen, but the presence of Jake Bidwell means that the club can take a longer-term view in that position if an ideal Maatsen replacement is not readily available.

In Ben Sheaf, Liam Kelly, Jamie Allen and Josh Eccles, there is an argument that the club wouldn't have to go out and find a permanent replacement for Gustavo Hamer, should he be sold, but that would probably be too huge a leap of faith to make in the majority of those midfielders. As much as Ben Sheaf and Jamie Allen have made great strides this season, none of those players quite possess the quality of running a game and bending it to their will that Gustavo Hamer does.

Furthermore, Liam Kelly is getting older and looking increasingly out of step with the rest of this Coventry City team, and Josh Eccles has suffered injury issues and is still unproven as a Championship player – and may even end up as a right wing-back. Even if Gustavo Hamer were to stay, there would be an argument to add one other central midfielder to the squad to raise the bar of quality, even if it wouldn't be a priority.

Further forward, this summer is surely the time to add another attacking midfielder of quality to the squad. Even though Mark Robins has largely moved away from the 3-4-2-1 system that would have required a partner for Callum O'Hare in that area of the pitch, adding someone who can do either or both of competing for O'Hare's place or acting as a game-changer from the bench would be an invaluable addition to the squad. This season has shown that the current options in that area of Jamie Allen, Jordan Shipley and Jodi Jones aren't of the standard to fulfil that function in the squad.

In attack, Coventry City could start next season with two strikers that ended the

previous campaign with double-figures for goals, in Viktor Gyokeres and Matt Godden. That is a good place to start, (provided Gyokeres stays) adding stronger competition or alternatives that provide something different could be the key to unlocking greater attacking potential in this Sky Blues side.

Despite Martyn Waghorn and Tyler Walker being on the books for next season, neither look to provide Mark Robins with either the alternative source of goals or a point of difference in attack to persevere with. It may be that the finances of potential exits for both players could force the manager to keep at least one around, but it would be a surprise if either player plays much of a role next year.

Another physical centre-forward, or someone who can drop deep and link the play well, could be the missing piece of the formula for Coventry City. If Viktor Gyokeres stays, that would allow the Swede to play in his best role of just off the shoulder of opposing defences. If Gyokeres leaves, then that type of striker would still be of benefit for Matt Godden.

In Fabio Tavares – as well as Danny Cashman, Ryan Howley, Jack Burroughs and Will Bapaga – there may be a few young players around the squad next season that could surprise with their impact. Just how much of an impact cannot really be accounted for, but the exciting thing about pre-season is the chance that young players can return having made huge strides forward and provide the manager with quality they were not anticipating to have.

Unless the club ends up selling more than one of its key players, this could well be a summer focused on adding two or three players of genuine quality to the squad, rather than a complete overhaul. However, it is possible that Mark Robins has a bigger squad turnover in mind.

Ahead of what is set to be another congested calendar next season, due to the timing of the Qatar World Cup, it is going to be a campaign that will, again, test Coventry City's squad depth as much as their overall level of quality. Just what may lay in store will not become fully apparent until a few months' time. Fortunately, I will be around to preview it in all of its glory.

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