

# THE SIDEWAYS SAMMY PROMOTION SPECIAL



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# THE JOURNEY IS OVER

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With promotion to the Premier League, a journey of 25 years for Coventry City comes to a close, though it was one that looked like it could have taken much longer at some of the lowest ebbs.

This season may have felt like the natural end to a journey that has been gathering momentum over several years now, this was not a promotion that was expected at the start of the campaign. That it was ultimately won with such ease has really rubberstamped that sweet feeling of being back.

Rather than doing my typical format of season review of looking back at just one campaign, now felt like an appropriate time to look back over the entire post-Premier League era and place this promotion campaign in its full context.

With other media sources focusing on just the campaign itself, or Frank Lampard's impact, or even the rise from League Two, it doesn't quite grasp the scale of this journey that Coventry City have been on. That is why this season review will take the format of a series of articles trying to tell the fully story of the Sky Blues' fall and rise and what it really means to be back in the top-flight.

There will also be player reviews and a look at the two managers who have got the Sky Blues into making this glorious return to the Premier League.

All that is left to be said is to sit back and enjoy!

This was not a promotion that was expected at the start of the campaign

# THE SLOW DEATH

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To truly understand the significance of Coventry City's return to the top-flight, it needs to be understood just what a parlous state the football club was in by the time it started tumbling down the leagues.

This is a story that begins long before Frank Lampard arrived at a team just a few points above the Championship relegation places, before even Mark Robins returned to the club, before that spell in exile in Northampton, and even the arrival of SISU as owners of the football club in 2007, which is often cited as the root cause of Coventry City's descent into fourth-tier football.

The most important statistic in the club's decline up to Mark Robins' second spell as manager was that the club had failed to finish in the top six of any division between the 1969-70 season and 2017-18 season, nearly half a century. Winning the 1987 FA Cup aside, the only reason to support Coventry City was out of loyalty to your local team. Only nine times out of those 47 seasons between those two top six finishes did Coventry City win more games in a league campaign than they lost.

It was almost like the club had made a Faustian pact to stay in the top-flight so long that future generations paid for with a truly miserable experience of following a football club that barely generated cause for excitement.

It was a level of mediocrity and lack of success that was almost unprecedented in English football. While there were only three relegations over that 47-year period, the experience of treading water year-in, year-out was a more soul-destroying experience than dropping down a league. As much as SISU's ownership dragged the club towards the

For the United Kingdom's 9<sup>th</sup>-largest city, it should have been criminal for its one football club to have plummeted to the fourth-tier.

verge of the abyss, they were only accelerating a process that had set in long before they had arrived at the club.

When outside observers note that Coventry City's attendances in recent years are significantly better than historically – as if to accuse Sky Blues supporters of being fair-weather bandwagon joiners – the real explanation is that the club had gone generations without providing a reason for anyone to get behind them. The exception being that FA Cup triumph in 1987.

In contrast to some of Coventry City's local peers – Leicester City, Derby County, Nottingham Forest – who have maintained strong attendance levels for decades despite having spells in the third-tier, the Sky Blues didn't achieve promotions or win trophies during that time to give fans a reason to come back. It engendered a notion that was simply a club destined to fail each year and over the long-run.

By the time Coventry City dropped into the fourth-tier, there were far more reasons to believe that a drop into non-league was likelier than a return to the top-flight. The club was locked in a cycle of decline in ever-decreasing spirals.

It was a series of poorly-timed decisions from the various figureheads involved in the club over the years that saw Coventry City eventually tumble to their lowest ebb. During the Premiership (as it was called) era, chairman, Brian Richardson, had attempted to make the club more than a perennial relegation-battler but a succession of bad signings and managers saw the club end a 34-year spell in the top-flight. As part of that ambition, the club had been committed to building a stadium at the worst possible time with costs spiralling out of control.

Those two factors are what ultimately led to SISU taking over Coventry City in 2007, with the club on the verge of liquidation and with no stake in the ownership of their stadium. The SISU-era began with a last day relegation battle in the Championship that relied upon results elsewhere to save Coventry – at the expense of Leicester City – and never really got much better from that point. After realising that the cost of funding Premier League promotion was more than they could afford, SISU began cutting costs and looking to renegotiate the club's crippling expensive rental agreement at the then-Ricoh Arena.

That began a fight for the future of the football club that accelerated Coventry City's slow death. Relegation from the Championship followed swiftly, then points deductions in successive seasons and over a year in exile in Northampton. In the space of just over a decade, Coventry had gone from top-

flight mainstays to one that was having to battle relegation to the fourth-tier with a team largely filled with youth-teamers.

The spell in exile in Northampton was the final straw for many who had watched Coventry City slowly die, providing them with a legitimate excuse to get out of the habit of watching the club every other week. Coventry may have returned to the stadium built for them just over a year later, but the rot had truly set in for both the team and the club as an entity.

The adversarial approach of SISU's public figureheads over the battle for the Ricoh Arena wound up both fans and decision-makers at the stadium to the point that it was sold to a rugby club from London just to make sure SISU couldn't get their hands on it. A deal that occurred just a few weeks after the club returned to their home. Worst of all, some Coventry City fans even celebrated this decision, believing it would accelerate the departure of SISU as owners of the football club.

Attendances at the Ricoh Arena plummeted to below the five-figure mark, with relegation to the fourth-tier playing out in abject fashion – with another underfunded Coventry City side packed with youth-teamers and cast-offs barely putting up much of a fight to save the club from their fate.

The pattern for this football club had started to become clear for anyone still bothered to observe it. Relegation, one half-hearted attempt to bounce back at the first time of asking, financial cut-backs, a few late runs to safety, dwindling attendances, another relegation. If it could happen in the second-tier and the third-tier, there appeared to be no reason why it couldn't happen in the fourth, maybe even continue forever.

For the United Kingdom's 9<sup>th</sup>-largest city, it should have been criminal for its one football club to have plummeted to the fourth-tier. Instead, it was greeted as an inevitability. The club now tenants in their own stadium and getting worse attendances than their London landlords (although, we'll pretend they weren't handing out thousands of free tickets for the sake of rhetoric). What should have been a cataclysmic disaster had taken place at such slow-motion that there was barely a shrug of the shoulder when it took place.

Coventry City fans had become accustomed to not just losing football matches but this steady, inevitable progression of decline. This was a football club starved of any reason to have hope. A hangman handed his hood and waiting for the floor to fall out under him.

# THE LOWEST POINT?

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There may have been a literal lowest point for Coventry City on the journey down the leagues, but everyone will have their own personal moment where their faith was truly shattered.

While there will be those who will cite losing twice to Forest Green Rovers in League Two – coupled with the fan running onto the pitch to angrily confront Michael Doyle being an iconic image of Coventry City’s spell in the fourth-tier – it was a campaign that came months after the club had sold 40,000 tickets at Wembley as they beat Oxford United in the Checktrade Trophy final. That fan who couldn’t stomach the thought of losing to Forest Green aside, there were signs of life by the time the Sky Blues kicked off their one season in League Two.

Over the preceding five years or so, there were multiple moments the club experienced that, quite frankly, smelled of death. The strongest stench coming from that spell in Northampton.

What had first started as bluster from SISU to try and agree a more favourable rental agreement at the Ricoh Arena soon became a grim reality when on a sunny August afternoon, Coventry City stepped onto the pitch with a team made up of cast-offs and youth-teamers to take on Bristol City with a crowd of 2,200 in attendance, with a handful more watching on from the hill overlooking Sixfields.

That the game ended 5-4 with a statement performance that launched Callum Wilson’s career, underlines that, for a spell, Sixfields wasn’t quite the death sentence it appeared to be. Steven Pressley’s side played some scintillating attacking

Those who still cared were no longer bothered about results, only attempting to make sure the footballing world still knew about Coventry City.

football until a long, hard winter set-in and the reality of the situation soon became apparent.

That team had been built on a house of cards that tumbled when Leon Clarke put in a transfer request to force a move to Wolverhampton Wanderers. Coventry won just two of their following twelve games to fall into relegation danger, with a slew of emergency loan strikers failing to take up Clarke's mantle – made worse by an injury to Callum Wilson – with one, Rory Donnelly, quitting the club after just one training session.

Attendances plummeted to around 1,600, bolstered only by occasional bumper away followings that took up three sides of the stadium. Personally, my lowest point of that Sixfields spell was a 0-0 draw with Shrewsbury Town in March, with Chuba Akpom striding around up front for the Sky Blues expecting goals to come his way with minimal effort and Tom Eaves for Shrewsbury giving the 'home' defence a complete runaround as Coventry held on for a point.

Things soon looked up when a crowd of 30,000 witnessed a 1-0 win the following September over Gillingham as the club returned to the Ricoh Arena. Even just one year away from the ground felt like returning to an alien environment, that spell at Northampton had almost fooled Sky Blues fans into believing they supported some plucky club that was punching above its weight simply to be in League One. That the following home game saw a crowd of around 11,000 showed how much scar tissue remained from that spell in exile, on top of the four decades of near-nothingness that preceded it.

The combination of SISU's continued antagonistic ownership and the sale of the Ricoh Arena to London Wasps saw any enthusiasm over the return fall flat. The reality was that Coventry City were a middling League One club, with their potential limited by their tenancy status.

Another League One relegation battle was followed by the brief moment of hope generated by Tony Mowbray plundering the loan and free transfer market for pure gold to get Coventry City briefly to the heady height of top of League One. However, that dream soon faded thanks to Mowbray completely losing the plot over the winter. With a raft of truly random free agent signings and Mowbray seeming to prematurely give up on any hope of promotion, Coventry tumbled into mid-table.

The iconic moment of that collapse being Darius Henderson – one of several free agent signings seemingly plucked from retirement

– falling over his own feet when sent clean through on goal in a must-win game against Peterborough United.

Mowbray, who came very close to leaving the club for Rotherham United the following summer, had clearly been demoralised by the experience of last year. He proceeded to prevaricate in the transfer market and put together one of Coventry City's worst ever teams. Full of youth-teamers and other teams' cast-offs, the Sky Blues were inexperienced, under-equipped and, somehow even worse, were not even playing in a Sky Blue kit. It led to what was, for the most part, the worst season in the club's history, the absolute lowest point, and it was all rather needless.

After Tony Mowbray walked out – largely to save his own reputation – Mark Venus stepped in on a very clearly reluctant basis, starting well but then overseeing some of awful results, such as a 4-1 defeat away at Oxford United and a 4-0 loss at Cambridge United in the FA Cup.

The team was going only one way, with protests against the owners stepping up in ways that were beginning to disrupt matches. From the rubber pigs at Charlton Athletic, to the whistles against Sheffield United, to a truly poisonous atmosphere in the away end at Northampton. Those who still cared were no longer bothered about results, only attempting in any way they could to make sure the footballing world still knew about Coventry City.

Overseeing much of that was Russell Slade, the worst manager in the club's history. A former PE teacher brought in as an experienced hand to see the club avoid relegation, Slade's methods were utterly outdated. From the constant hoofing into a target-man that didn't exist, to dropping everyone into the penalty area as soon as a lead was accidentally taken. While he oversaw a run to the Checkatrade Trophy final, Slade won just one league game as manager with relegation all but certain by the time SISU front-man, Tim Fisher, took the executive decision to jettison Slade in favour of Mark Robins.

Looking back, that move proved to be the catalyst for the club's recovery. Back then, just a day after another grim 0-0 draw against Shrewsbury Town, it looked a case of too little and too late, with nothing about Mark Robins' track record suggesting he was much better than the Rogues' Gallery of recent managers.

# CHECKATRADE CHAMPIONS

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It was with divine timing that in Coventry City's worst ever season, the team stumbled towards an occasion that would kick-start its revival.

Decades of non-achievement, a year in exile and an almost actively antagonistic ownership of the club seemed to have locked the Sky Blues into a death spiral that no-one could see a way out of.

Three different managers had overseen Coventry City on this journey to the Checkatrade Trophy final, with almost no-one truly being aware of it even happening until the final rounds. Interest in the EFL Trophy was at its lowest as a result of a change in format that saw Category 1 Academy teams join the competition.

In retrospect, the lack of pressure and competitiveness in the competition massively benefitted an incredibly young Coventry City team. In contrast to the league campaign, the Sky Blues were free to let loose, scoring 11 goals in the three group stage games, with the likes of Ruben lameiras, Jodi Jones, and George Thomas finding scoring form having lacked similar confidence amid the brutality of league play.

Even Russell Slade was able to find joy in the competition, winning two of three games – on top of a nervy penalty shoot-out win against Swansea City's under-21s – in stark contrast to his one in 13 record in the league.

Selling 40,000 tickets was the almightiest demonstration of the club's potential that was being wasted.

The atmosphere at the semi-final, at home to Wycombe Wanderers of League Two, was genuinely joyous as those in attendance saw a spirited and youthful Coventry City side outsmart a physically bruising Wycombe outfit. Early goals from Stuart Beavon and George Thomas sent the Sky Blues on their way, and despite the Chairboys pulling a goal back in the second-half, the win was seen out with comfort and composure that it hadn't been apparent these players were capable of.

It led to the one and only notable pitch invasion at the Ricoh Arena, the first truly momentous win achieved at a stadium where Coventry City's slow death had accelerated, marking the first time the place truly felt like it belonged to the club – leasehold status aside. For those who made it onto the pitch, what was most apparent was quite how young these players looked from up close. It was perhaps the greatest achievement of the club's academy getting to the final with a core of largely homegrown lads.

Between the semi-final and final, Mark Robins had returned to the club as manager to little fanfare, or any real impact. Relegation to League Two was all but certain and it looked to be a case of Robins trying to sort out which of the squad he could build a promotion-winning team next season around – with the answer looking to be not that many.

There was little reason to believe that this set of players had much of a chance against an upwardly-mobile Oxford United side who were chasing down the League One play-offs and playing some excellent football in so doing. Nonetheless, Coventry City fans came out in their numbers for the chance to see their team at Wembley for not just the first time in 30 years but maybe for the last time as well.

It had become easy to believe over the years that Coventry City were a diminishing force that may never be able to establish themselves even above third-tier level again. Selling 40,000 tickets was the almightiest demonstration of the club's potential that was being wasted.

With little expectation of a winning result, this was a chance to celebrate this football club – what it once was and could be again in our wildest dreams – ahead of an uncertain future in League Two. That it was an unseasonably sunny day in early April only made that sea of Sky Blue glisten that bit more.

The noise was something else, almost too loud to really make sense of what was happening, everyone in utter disbelief that they were seeing Coventry City at Wembley. It almost failed to

register in the 11<sup>th</sup> minute that Gael Bigirimana had put the ball into the Oxford net to hand the Sky Blues the lead.

What had been a party had suddenly turned into a football match and an unthinkable possibility of lifting a trophy. Oxford proceeded to take the game to the Sky Blues but were up against a team that was starting to benefit from the organisation that Mark Robins and his assistant, Steve Taylor, had been working hard on in the weeks prior. The Yellows had chances up to half-time but nothing to overly bother Lee Burge in the Coventry goal. Hope was growing.

If the Sky Blues were lucky to be ahead at half-time, they took control of the game in the second with the belief really starting to flow. A fantastic break early in the second-half saw Kyel Reid lay the ball into the path of George Thomas just outside of the area, who finished with aplomb with his second touch right in front of the Coventry City end to spark absolute delirium.

Good first  
touch...even better  
second touch!

The Sky Blues weren't just ahead, they had a dominant position in the game. The club that hadn't come close to success in 30 years was now 35 minutes from achieving something.

A good narrative is never without tension and that proved to be the case in the closing stages as Coventry legs tired and the fear of letting the trophy slip from grasp began to raise its head. Liam Sercombe was first to a loose ball in the box for Oxford to set up a grandstand finish at Wembley. What followed was some of the most determined defending seen from a Sky Blues side, aided by brilliant reactions from Lee Burge in goal, in raw defiance of the notion of 'typical Coventry City'.

Extra-time was nearly forced when ex-academy player, Josh Ruffels, had an effort on goal from metres out, but Burge again produced a great save to ensure that Coventry City would be lifting the trophy.

The Sky Blue half of Wembley descended into delirium. Few had come here expecting to see a Coventry City victory but not only had they done so but the team had fully deserved it. It was not only a demonstration of potential in the stands but in the team itself, that with the right manager in charge, it is perfectly possible to win things. The belief that Coventry City were uniquely fated to a lifetime of doom had been utterly shattered.

While the Sky Blues were relegated from League One just a few weeks later, something important had happened at Wembley that day. Coventry City were allowed to win things. The genie had been freed from the bottle.

# FROM THE ASHES

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Winning the Checktrade Trophy had shattered the illusion that Coventry City were incapable of winning anything, achieving promotion across an entire league season, however, was an achievement that would have to be seen to be believed.

That trophy win may have demonstrated the potential of the existing squad, but Mark Robins had already decided before that Wembley date that promotion from League Two would require very different qualities than what he already had available. Before the transfer window even opened, the manager made what would become a characteristic decision of delegating responsibilities to key appointees, with Tommy Widdrington put in charge of recruitment with the brief to build a promotion-winning team.

The first piece of transfer business may well have proved to be the most crucial, with ex-player, Michael Doyle, recruited off the back of a promotion-winning season from League Two with Portsmouth to captain the new-look Coventry City. A vastly experienced and combative presence in the middle of the pitch, Doyle's signing was a statement of intent, that the Sky Blues were looking to move away from being bullied to becoming the bullies in a physical, attritional division.

Doyle would not only captain Coventry City but play an instrumental role off-the-pitch. Both in the signing of new players, with Doyle talking the soon-to-be top-scorer, Marc McNulty, out of signing for Mansfield Town to join the Sky Blues, but also in engaging with fans, regularly attending meetings with supporters' clubs and encouraging others to do so. It is perhaps underestimated the

In the space of just over 12 months, Mark Robins had shattered some key illusions Coventry City fans held.

role that Michael Doyle played in fomenting Coventry's rebirth as a serious footballing entity.

Other key signings that summer were in adding another experienced performer alongside Doyle in midfield, in Liam Kelly, along with the aforementioned Marc McNulty to lead the goalscoring charge. The Sky Blues started the campaign looking much more experienced and serious as a team and ready for the challenge of League Two.

Aside from a thumping 3-0 opening day win over Notts County at the Ricoh Arena, it took a while for the team to come together. Dealt two potentially crippling blows over the winter, in star winger, Jodi Jones, picking up a season-ending ACL injury, and key loan forward, Duckens Nazon, returning to his parent club, all while Marc McNulty spluttered in front of goal. The introductions of youngsters, Jordan Shipley and Tom Bayliss, on either wing, along with McNulty discovering his mojo proved to be crucial in turning around an ailing campaign.

Another key piece of recruitment came off the pitch, with Mark Robins forced into a change of assistant after Steve Taylor suffered a serious medical issue, seeing Adi Viveash brought in on an initial consultancy basis. The former Chelsea youth-team coach oversaw a gradual improvement in standards, away from the defence-first template Mark Robins had typically built around in his managerial career to being better able to control and dominate games.

It was a season of many key moments, with many citing a crucial 1-1 draw against promotion rivals, Mansfield Town, as the star of a run that secured Coventry City's play-off place. Down to ten men within the first 15 minutes and a goal down from the resulting free-kick, a Jonson Clarke-Harris penalty earned a point – to the utter rage of opposing boss, Steve Evans – before the Sky Blues lost just three of their remaining 13 games to secure a first top six finish in around 50 years, albeit in somewhat farcical circumstances in playing out a 0-0 draw with Morecambe that was mutually beneficial for both teams.

Facing their first ever play-off campaign, Coventry City fans were entering the unknown ahead of a double-header semi-final against Notts County. The first leg at the Ricoh Arena kicked off just minutes after an unseasonable bout of rain that rendered areas of the pitch almost unplayable. The Sky Blues were the better team for much of the proceedings, but the ball kept sticking up on the bog of the pitch to curtail attacking moves,

They've got players like McNulty, Clarke-Harris and Doyle on big money, and little squeaky Robins, who says that they don't do all that stuff.

- Steve Evans

then contributed to Jack Grimmer mistiming a challenge out wide early in the second-half to allow Notts County to take the lead.

It looked set to go down on the list of big occasions at the Ricoh Arena that had gone against Coventry City. Until in the dying minutes, Tom Bayliss won a penalty from which Marc McNulty scored, to keep things level in the second leg.

Rallied by Michael Doyle's umbrage at Notts County already having their t-shirts for Wembley printed and looking fully ingrained in the playing style Adi Viveash had been looking to implement, Coventry City produced their finest performance of the campaign at Meadow Lane.

It began with two first-half goals against a Notts County side that looked shellshocked, only spoiled by Jorge Grant pulling a goal back for the home side before the break. Jeopardy soon took over after the interval, with Notts County threatening to take over.

The crucial moment in the tie was undoubtedly a controversial offside call against Jonathan Forte for Notts County that would have levelled proceedings, but Coventry City's reaction to that reprieve suggested that the decision probably mattered less than the home side believed it did. Maxime Biamou and Tom Bayliss finished the job, sparking raucous celebrations in the away stand, with the sense that the job of achieving promotion had already been done.

It may have been unfair to an Exeter City side facing their second League Two Play-Off Final appearance in a row, but with their manager, Paul Tisdale, already set to leave, there was more than a hint of foregone conclusion about the game.

After a tense first-half, centre-back, Jordan Willis, scoring a rare goal, turning to receive a ball on the edge of the area to fire powerfully home, sent Coventry City on their way. It soon became a goal of the season contest, with Jordan Shipley and Jack Grimmer adding sumptuous efforts of their own to leave the Sky Blues in the rare position of being able to enjoy the final 25 minutes of a Wembley appearance in the serene knowledge that victory had already been achieved.

It's a goal of his dreams!

In the space of just over 12 months, Mark Robins had shattered some key illusions Coventry City fans held – that the club was incapable of winning anything and that the cycle of decline was already locked in place. Just what the future held still remained uncertain, for a multitude of factors, but fans had just discovered they had a football team worth supporting.

# THE CURVE OF PROGRESS

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It is easy to look back on it now and believe that Coventry City's eventual rise up through the divisions was inevitable following that first promotion, but it really wasn't.

The club still held a fragile tenancy status in their Ricoh Arena home and were still owned by SISU, who had long exhausted any trust in their abilities. Returning to League One hadn't catapulted Coventry back into relevance, simply restored them to a level that perhaps they shouldn't have been in the first place.

The key difference factor was, of course, Mark Robins. With Tommy Widdrington leaving the club as Head of Recruitment over the summer, he was replaced with Chris Badlan. Along with Adi Viveash looking to implement a more progressive style of play – which had begun to be realised at the tail-end of the League Two campaign – the Sky Blues were quietly evolving as they returned to the third-tier.

Michael Doyle was shuffled out of the first-team picture the following January, with the club building around talented loan players – such as Dujon Sterling at right-back, Luke Thomas out wide and the enigmatic genius of Bright Enobakhare – on top of the emerging talent of Tom Bayliss. The team missed out on the play-offs in their first season back in League One but looked poised to build on that.

No longer a hurt  
animal limping  
from place-to-  
place for its next  
punishment,  
Coventry were  
becoming a  
proud team

That was until stadium issues reared their ugly head yet again. Negotiations for an extended lease agreement between SISU and London Wasps were brought to an abrupt halt when it emerged the former had been unable to drop an appeal to the European Supreme Court over the sale of the stadium to the latter by the council. Coventry City were back in exile, this time in Birmingham.

There was a different feeling about that spell at St Andrew's. Perhaps it was the fact that the stadium was closer in size to the Ricoh Arena than Sixfields was, or perhaps it was because fans were more aware that the exile wasn't purely SISU's fault this time – with the city council and Wasps taking up their share of the blame. Rightly or wrongly, St Andrew's didn't feel like the death sentence that Sixfields did. There was no points deduction or fire sale, just Mark Robins overseeing business as usual.

A solid start to the campaign turned into an excellent run over the winter when the team was forced to switch to a back three at half-time against Fleetwood Town. In an almost entirely different team in complexion and look to the one that achieved League Two promotion, Coventry were stern at the back thanks to Kyle McFadzean's organisation and brute force, dominant in midfield thanks to Liam Walsh's passing and energy, and clinical in the final third thanks to Matt Godden's finishing.

Winning a series of narrow games in early Spring, Coventry City looked set to cruise to a very rare league title, until the Coronavirus outbreak turned the world on its head. The Sky Blues may have been awarded the champions' crown a few months after league play was suspended but it was an achievement that felt hollow.

Coventry were back in the second-tier but looked to be thoroughly outgunned financially as they prepared for a season set to be played behind-closed-doors. Crucial pieces of business that extended summer proved to be tying Callum O'Hare down to a permanent deal, along with Chris Badlan plucking out a gem from the Dutch league, in Gustavo Hamer. However, the team desperately needed to adapt to the level and were handed more than a few reminders early on of the challenge they would face.

Amid a brutal fixture list, Coventry threatened to sink back to League One as Spring hit. However, Mark Robins and Adi Viveash soon discovered a winning formula based around a resolute defence and set-piece threat to see the Sky Blues to an eventually comfy lower mid-table finish, perhaps buoyed by the news they'd be returning to Coventry for the following campaign.

A creative, two-footed midfielder with great technical ability but is also a tenacious and determined player as well in the centre of the midfield

- Mark Robins on Gustavo Hamer's arrival

Re-establishing themselves in the second-tier proved to be another crucial progress marker for Mark Robins' Coventry City. The purse strings over the summer were loosened to bring in the semi-promising loanee, Viktor Gyokeres, in on a permanent deal and Coventry started the following season looking much more look like a team at home in the Championship.

Returning to Coventry this time felt much more crucial and important than it had previously. The Ricoh Arena had been renamed the Coventry Building Society Arena, seeming to ceremonially wipe some of the history of disaster, trauma and underachievement that had been associated with the place.

From the very off of fans returning that season, something was different simply about being in the stadium. Coventry fans seeming to decide that they no longer wanted to be the joke club that people either sympathised with for their plight or mocked for the terrible atmosphere in their home stadium. It began with a rousing level of noise on the opening game of the season, helping turn a 1-0 scoreline around against Nottingham Forest into a 2-1 win with two late goals.

The early part of the campaign was littered with dramatic late goals with fans starting to realise they genuinely had a part to play in cheering on their team to victory. The CBS Arena became noisier and busier, feeling less and less like an echoey wake and more like somewhere that was worth being at.

The Sky Blues may have failed to make the play-offs that season but it was really the discovery of the fans' voice that underlined just how dramatically things had turned around for Coventry City. No longer a hurt animal limping from place-to-place for its next punishment, Coventry were becoming a proud team starting to realise just how significant its potential really was.

Then the following campaign started with the pitch being left unplayable due to a rugby tournament and a 1-0 home defeat to Preston North End.

# ON THE EDGE OF FATE

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The season that fully kicked off Coventry City's final stage transformation into a Premier League ready football club could not have started more inauspiciously.

The Commonwealth Games' rugby-7s tournament had completely ruined the pitch at the CBS Arena, leading to a slew of delayed fixtures that left the team playing catch-up.

Simultaneously, SISU had notably drawn in the purse strings. Mark Robins left to bring in loan players and free transfers, with key stalwart, Dominic Hyam, sold on the final day of the transfer window – seemingly to pay for the club having to fix the pitch themselves, although this has been denied.

An opening day draw at Sunderland was followed by four consecutive defeats, leaving Coventry City rooted to the bottom of the table by September. While that was partially the result of having played three fewer fixtures than much of the rest of the division, the vibes around the team and the football club more broadly were not good. All that good progress over the last five years was in danger of being undone by one particularly bad summer.

Over October, things very quickly turned around. Forced to play three times a week due to the confluence of the pitch-related fixture pile-up and the upcoming winter World Cup, Coventry City won eight out of twelve games to go from the bottom of the division into play-off contention.

As much as fans had wanted to believe in it, it was simply not Coventry City's turn to reach the top-flight.

The team was based around a resolute defence, marshalled again by Kyle McFadzean, leaving the maverick talent of Gustavo Hamer and the bustling running of Viktor Gyokeres to take care of scoring and creating a large portion of the goals. It really did seem to be as simple as 'give Vik or Gus the ball and watch what happens' with the duo producing a series of stellar performances over the course of the campaign to lift Coventry into the play-offs.

Coventry City may have entered the play-off campaign as the underdogs, but with fans having witnessed their team recently win promotion via this method, there was a strong suspicion that fate may well have been in the Sky Blues' favour. It was all further underlined by a tense but fantastic two-leg performance against Middlesbrough, won by an excellent Gustavo Hamer goal.

Heading to Wembley – a ground at which the football club had only lost once, in a meaningless Charity Shield game – there was quiet confidence that history would again repeat itself for the Sky Blues. The long journey was set to come to a close and Coventry City would be back in the big time.

That was all shattered with a dreadfully nervous first-half performance against Luton Town that highlighted that almost the entirety of the squad had not featured for Coventry City in either of their most recent Wembley trips. The fans may have had confidence, but the players were clearly fearful.

Fortunately, it was only a 1-0 deficit, allowing Coventry to rally themselves in the second-half. Viktor Gyokeres and Gustavo Hamer linked up to produce an equaliser in front of the Sky Blue end that generated hope that fate was again smiling on this football club – a feeling further heightened when Luton Town had a goal in the final minutes of extra-time ruled out by VAR.

However, fate is a cruel mistress. The fairytale of the day belonged to Luton Town and their climb from non-league to the Premier League. As much as fans had wanted to believe in it, it was simply not Coventry City's turn to reach the top-flight.

As the team stepped off the pitch at Wembley to appreciative applause from their own fans, it was clear that the following season would have to be very different. A team built around loans, freebies and two star players was simply incapable of being held together for much longer.

There was absolutely no guarantee Coventry City would be back at this kind of stage anytime soon.

Coventry, a city that has spent two decades without Premier League football, is dreaming about the good times returning!

# THE BIG REBUILD

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Viktor Gyokeres and Gustavo Hamer were two players simply too good to continue to play Championship football, their subsequent exit a familiar reminder that if you don't progress as a football club, your top talent moves on.

The summer was defined by those departures but there was another key storyline, Doug King as the club's new owner. He had arrived on the scene the November prior, with nearly a decade of SISU ownership ended via a mere club statement. A complete unknown, billed as a 'local businessman' but really being successful commodities trader who'd shown little interest in football or even the city itself to buying its football club.

There was more than a hint of suspicion surrounding Doug King, with it quickly emerging that he shared an office in London with the brother of one of the owners of SISU. It all felt rather convenient, just like when SISU were able to buy Coventry City out of administration back in 2013. With only grainy LinkedIn photos available of him, there could even have been questions as to whether King was a real person.

The new owner quickly ameliorated the suspicion around him, appearing in press interviews the next day as part of a last ditch effort to secure the CBS Arena and seeming to talk a good game. A couple of months later, King, who had agreed to co-own the club initially, had bought out the rest of SISU's stake in Coventry City, bringing to an end a spell of ownership that nearly brought the club to its knees.

Doug King continued to place himself front and centre throughout the rest of the campaign, even appearing in a video to advertise season tickets for the coming campaign. However, the summer's

The summer saw the Sky Blues make a host of additions who formed the backbone of this season's promotion-winning squad.

transfer activity, with a complete rebuild of the squad required would prove what King was really about as an owner far more than any press interview.

Having only funded a handful of loan signings in January, there was plenty of suspicion as to how willing to back the club with transfer funding King would be. Although there was significant money incoming from the Gyokeres and Hamer sales, Coventry City fans were used to large windfalls not reflecting in the transfer budget.

King quickly proved his credentials in the market, forcing Sporting Club of Portugal into a media war of words in their angst to negotiate for Viktor Gyokeres' purchase. On the eve of Swede's sale, the club swooped over a host of Championship clubs to sign Ellis Simms as Gyokeres' replacement for close to a club-record fee, demonstrating that money in would be matched by money going out.

The summer saw the Sky Blues make a host of additions who formed the backbone of this season's promotion-winning squad. An entirely new-look defence was recruited, made up of Bobby Thomas, Liam Kitching, Jay Dasilva and Milan van Ewijk. Tatsuhiro Sakamoto was swooped for despite the team not playing with wingers. The addition of Ellis Simms in attack was supplemented by breaking the club's transfer record – which had stood for nearly a quarter of a century – to sign Haji Wright.

Doug King made sure that the windfall of the Gustavo Hamer and Viktor Gyokeres sales would be re-invested into the squad. The spending threatened to be manic at times, with the club really zeroing in on their preferred targets. This was highlighted by the pursuit of Liam Kitching, who Barnsley did not want to sell, with the club putting in bigger and bigger bids until they reached a figure of reportedly £5 million, which the League One club simply were unable to refuse. Having spent over a decade seeing Coventry City struggle to spend more than £1-2 million on single player purchases, it was a complete sea change in transfer mentality from the football club.

On the opening day of the season, just four of the starting line-up from the play-off final were named in the XI by Mark Robins – with two, Kyle McFadzean and Gustavo Hamer, gone by January, and Ben Wilson in goal second-choice a few months later. As much as it had been apparent that the play-off final team would be broken up the following year, the extent and pace of change was remarkable.

Predictably, it took time for the team to gel. With Gustavo Hamer sold later in the transfer window, it left the team short of creativity and dynamism in midfield that was badly missed. At times, it appeared as if Mark Robins didn't really know how to get a tune out of some of his players. Particularly, Ellis Simms and Haji Wright in attack, who looked particularly unconvincing in their early months at the club.

Over the winter, Mark Robins was finally forced to abandon the back three shape that had served the team well since that League One promotion season. The combination of playing with wingers – one of which was Haji Wright moved to the left wing – and the return to fitness of Callum O'Hare initiated another second half of the campaign charge up the division.

With the play-offs in sight, Coventry City benefitted from a kind FA Cup draw to find themselves in a Quarter-Final tie with an ailing and injury-hit Wolverhampton Wanderers outfit. The better team for much of the game, two late Wolves goals looked to have killed the dream of yet another Wembley visit. That was until the Sky Blues somehow found two even later goals to deservedly win the tie and earn a fourth visit to the national stadium in seven years, a completely unprecedented run in the club's history.

Here's Simms...  
Here's Wright!

With Manchester United the opposition, the focus was on trying to enjoy the day out with the club back in the spotlight. When United took a three-goal lead in the second-half, it looked like Coventry City fans would only have memories of singing *We'll Live And Die In These Towns* to take from the occasion.

An Ellis Simms effort looked to be mere consolation, before Callum O'Hare reduced the deficit to one. Deep in injury time, the Sky Blues won a spot-kick, which Haji Wright coolly converted to secure a stunning comeback to take the game to extra-time.

Legs looked to be flagging at this point, only for a dramatic breakaway in the dying minutes saw Haji Wright tee up Victor Torp to fire home an extraordinary late winner. However, VAR intervened, spotting a narrow offside against Wright, before Manchester United – and the classless Anthony – won the penalty shoot-out with a sense of inevitability.

A disappointing outcome but a performance that demonstrated that all the ingredients were in place, just a few refinements – and most certainly avoiding another slow start to the campaign – looked to be all it would take to nudge Coventry City over the line.

# MARK ROBINS

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The man without whom Coventry City could have ended up in an unthinkable parlous position.

It all began with a first spell at the club that was successful but brief. Arriving in the wake of relegation into League One and the team in freefall following the amateurish management of messrs Andy Thorn and Richard Shaw, Mark Robins – and assistant, Steve Taylor – quickly brought in organisation and confidence as Coventry quickly moved from relegation danger to the verge of the play-offs. Nonetheless, Robins left the club under something of a cloud, seeming to jump at the first opportunity that came his way, shortly after declaring that he had ‘Sky Blue blood’.

His departure to Huddersfield Town was more understandable in the wake of what happened at Coventry City in the months following his departure, with two points deductions applied and the eventual news that the Sky Blues would be playing their fixtures in Northampton. While he left an impression for that short burst of results he delivered in his first few months in charge, that there were signs of a tail-off shortly before he left and that Mark Robins struggled to make an impact at either Huddersfield or Scunthorpe United suggested that he was a not particularly remarkable manager.

There was more than a hint of desperation on both sides when his return to Coventry City was swiftly announced with the club on the way to relegation to League Two. It may well have been a last throw of the dice from SISU – and certainly from club CEO, Tim Fisher, who quietly left Coventry not long after – while Mark Robins himself had been

Robins was never overawed by individual setbacks, able to make tweaks while still keeping an eye on the bigger picture.

unemployed for over a year after being sacked by Scunthorpe United and recently turned down for the Notts County job.

However, it soon became clear that the impression that Mark Robins' first spell had left – that he was a thoroughly competent, maybe even remarkably competent presence in the dug-out – was exactly what the club needed. A rudderless youthful outfit under previous incumbents suddenly became capable of beating one of the best teams in the division in the Checktrade Trophy final, with just a few weeks of Robins' management in their legs.

From then on, it was a case of Mark Robins quickly identifying the pieces required to achieve promotion. From appointing Tommy Widdrington to take charge of recruitment, dispensing with the core of the Checktrade Trophy winning team to introduce leadership and experience via Michael Doyle and Liam Kelly, then bringing in Adi Viveash as assistant manager, the set of decisions that Robins made between that trophy success and the following September laid the foundations for everything that followed.

The progress under Mark Robins wasn't always linear. That season in League Two saw the team hit with plenty of set-backs as they somehow managed to overcome the weight of expected failure to finish in the play-offs and then play their best football of the campaign over the three games that followed. The team had to quickly evolve in League One in order to make the step up, staff members had to be replaced, on top of the set-back of another spell in exile.

Each knockback Robins was able to take in his stride. Calm, patient, able to see the woods from the trees, Robins was never overawed by individual set-backs, able to make tweaks while still keeping an eye on the bigger picture.

The League One promotion campaign was a testament to Robins' resourcefulness. Forced into a change of plans by the exile to Birmingham, Robins was able to convince players of the calibre of Matt Godden and Fankaty Dabo to join the Sky Blues over offers elsewhere. Furthermore, when the initial tactical plan of playing a 4-3-3 based around the wingers Wesley Jobello and Gervane Kastaneer didn't work out, he altered the system to a 3-4-2-1 that negated the need for wide-men and the team went from strength-to-strength to the point where they were an unstoppable winning unit.

Furthermore, being able to not just adapt to Championship football against better resourced teams in the following years but build a team capable of making the play-off final really was Mark

My aim is to provide a change of fortune in the long term, and build a team not only for now, but for the future of Coventry City

-Mark Robins on returning to Coventry

Robins' zenith as Coventry City manager. That season began with the adversity of the pitch being rendered unplayable and a nightmare fixture pile-up and ended with the team a couple of kicks away from the ultimate glory, built around players that Robins and Viveash had personally moulded into stars.

It really would have been apropos had Coventry City achieved promotion on that day at Wembley. Almost everything looked to have aligned, apart from the fact that Luton Town had a comparable fairytale story to call upon.

For Mark Robins himself, everything slowly begun to change following that run to the play-offs. Forced to build a new team with more money behind it, expectations rose and he was put on a timeline to achieve success that he'd never really had to deal with before.

Without realising it at the time, Doug King's arrival as new owner of Coventry City was the beginning of the end for Mark Robins. Having been used to SISU's form of ownership – almost complete disinterest apart from underwriting losses – which had not only afforded Robins time to build the club in his image but to effectively be the figurehead of the Sky Blues, Doug King's more hands-on approach diminished Robins' role at the club.

in the wake of that decision – and the fact that Mark Robins is struggling, without Adi Viveash, at Stoke City – Robins' sacking looks increasingly justified. Nonetheless, there were reasons to believe Robins could have turned things around, not least because the team had won two of the three games prior to his sacking and took nearly two months to find form under new management.

Even if you want to ignore the wider context of Mark Robins being the man who achieved the crucial steps of ending Coventry City's losing mentality and the most important two promotions to put the club in a position where Premier League football was within the grasp of a handful of good decisions rather than hundreds, it's the fact that the vast majority of the promotion-winning team were players signed and integrated under Mark Robins' watch.

The man who changed it all, it seems conspicuous that there isn't a statue of him at the CBS Arena already.

# A CHAMPION'S MINDSET

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With the core of what would go onto be a rampant Championship winning squad in place by the time that Frank Lampard was appointed, the question just what level of difference did the new manager make?

Flashing back to the appointment of Lampard in November of 2024, it was a questionable move from Doug King – over and above the fact that Lampard was replacing a long-serving and highly-successful predecessor. There was more than a hint of King appointing someone based on their celebrity factor, rather than their tangible achievements as a coach.

Frank Lampard may have got Derby County to a play-off final at this level in his first job, but that success was heavily caveated by having had the pick of some of Chelsea's top youth talents of the time on loan and with it rumoured that his assistant, Jody Morris, really was the one really calling the shots. Lampard quickly moved onto Chelsea and while was a qualified success amid a transfer ban, he struggled once there was investment in the squad.

Already seen as a manager who couldn't quite deliver to expectations even with advantages in his favour, Frank Lampard's spell at Everton did little to demonstrate he had qualities to excel with limited resources. He may have kept them up in his first season, but subsequent struggles highlighted that he may be a little one-dimensional, reliant on

If there was a difference to the Mark Robins era, it was in being able to sustain a strong spell of form for longer

having the best players and of the input of his assistants, rather than possessing any strong managerial talent.

Followed up by a disastrous second stint at Chelsea as a caretaker, with the players having already given up on the season, Frank Lampard was on the verge of becoming a busted flush as a manager by the time he arrived at Coventry City. Unemployed for over a year and having to start again at a much lower level than his past two clubs, the only reason to give Lampard the job over someone like John Eustace – with a strong coaching CV and experience in the Championship – was for name recognition.

Frank Lampard certainly brought charisma in his early weeks at Coventry City and had replaced Jody Morris in his coaching ranks with Joe Edwards – an ex-Chelsea coach who had recently managed Millwall – but just how much mettle there was to go with the impressive façade was not yet apparent. The team squeaked a few narrow wins to push themselves away from relegation danger, but a disastrous showing away at Portsmouth, losing 4-1 despite leading in the third minute, showed that this team couldn't consider itself safe from relegation danger.

January brought improved form, with Frank Lampard switching to a back three to stabilise the defence. Results continued to look more impressive than performances however, with goalkeeper, Oliver Dovin, often called upon to produce big saves to help the team hold onto results.

An early sign of Lampard's impact was the ability to recruit Swansea City captain, Matt Grimes, with the midfielder having looked settled at the Welsh club. It would become a theme of the Lampard era thus far to target quality over quantity in the transfer market.

By March, the Sky Blues were on an incredible run of form, winning ten of eleven games to move quickly into play-off contention. Still, performances were rarely particularly convincing, generating the impression that Lampard may well be a lucky general rather than a talented one. This was further evidenced by Coventry losing games against the stronger opponents they faced on that run – including being utterly outclassed by Leeds United at home.

If there was a difference to the Mark Robins era, it was in being able to sustain a strong spell of form for longer, to be able to take each game as it came, rather than get overly caught up in implications over league position or setting potential club records. However, it was way too early to fully assess whether it

was down to luck or what Lampard was able to impart on the team.

The first campaign ended with holding onto a play-off place, not helped by a series of sloppy away performances in the final weeks were the team looked far too concerned with playing to a set process rather than reacting to what the opposition were trying to do.

Over the two legs of the subsequent play-off semi-final against Sunderland, however, the merits of such an approach were that Coventry City dominated both ties. With Matt Grimes finally looking integrated into the team's style of play, the Sky Blues were able to go to the Stadium of Light with a first leg deficit and completely dominate the Black Cats, who were forced to hold on for grim life until they pinched a last second winner.

While there was some encouragement to take from the manner of the play-off defeat, it is never clear in football when opportunities are going to present themselves. With it still not being apparent what style of play Frank Lampard was looking to instil in the team and lingering uncertainty as to his quality as a manager, expectations going into the summer were not especially high, particularly with a lack of notable incoming transfer activity.

This past season, however, has demonstrated that Frank Lampard has brought a lot of positive qualities to Coventry City. Without making dramatic changes to the squad – the only key additions of the Lampard era have been Matt Grimes in midfield and Carl Rushworth in goal, with Frank Onyeka a valuable loan signing for the promotion run-in – the manager and his coaching staff have improved the players he inherited and turned them into a consistent winning unit.

There is an extent to which Coventry City as a football club had been on the rise, buoyed by Doug King's ownership, enough that Premier League promotion was likely regardless of who was in charge. However, that shouldn't denigrate Frank Lampard's impact since becoming manager. There has clearly been a rise in standards and in the ability to deal with pressure that appears to mirror Lampard's experiences as a player.

# TEAM OF THE ERA

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## **GOALKEEPER – KEIREN WESTWOOD**

The gold standard of goalkeeping for Coventry City for well over a decade, Keiren Westwood repeatedly saved the Sky Blues' skin during the underachieving Chris Coleman years. Part of the post-SISU takeover recruitment drive of young, up-and-coming lower league talent that was intended to deliver Premier League football – or turn a profit as part of the process of getting there – Westwood's sharp reflexes made him the kind of goalkeeper who routinely made impossible saves to turn certain defeats into points. Clearly of a higher standard than the quality of the squad around him, the club's poor management saw him leave on a free when he could have been sold at a premium in the years before.

*Honourable Mention: Carl Rushworth*

## **RIGHT-BACK – MILAN VAN EWIJK**

Over three seasons with the club, Milan van Ewijk has played pretty much every game and only played at anything below a high standard during an early bedding-in period. The Dutchman has been a complete presence at right-back for much of his time at the club.

Excellent on the ball, explosively fast and intelligent in his positioning and timing in the challenge. On top of that, Van Ewijk's long throws have been a key piece of the formula that has helped delivered a return to the Premier League for this football club, and he's also a huge character who has helped create the post-match routines that may long outlast his time with Coventry City.

*Honourable Mention: Fankaty Dabo*

## **CENTRE-BACK – KYLE MCFADZEAN**

Had it not been for a poor first-half from the team against Fleetwood Town with him sitting on the bench, Kyle McFadzean's time at Coventry City could have been remembered very differently. Signed as an experienced centre-back to lead the defence, McFadzean had looked slow and error-prone in his first months at the club. Coming on to play in the middle of the back three, McFadzean never looked back.

Leading the team to the League One title, establishing themselves in the Championship and then making a run to the play-off final, McFadzean constantly defied his age and expectations to keep his place in the side. A dominant, organising presence in the defence, he's arguably yet to have been fully replaced.

*Honourable Mention – Scott Dann*

### **CENTRE-BACK – DOMINIC HYAM**

Signed as a back-up player in League Two, Dominic Hyam looked nervous and unconvincing in the fourth-tier for much of his first season at the club. The centre-back flourished in the final weeks of that campaign and would go on to make 169 league appearances, helping the club win another promotion and establish itself in the Championship.

A calm and composed presence in defence, the cool to Kyle McFadzean's fire, Hyam was the kind of player that was more appreciated by Coventry City fans themselves than outside audiences who didn't pay attention to the consistency of performance. Sold to fund a new pitch at the CBS Arena, it's always felt like Hyam's time at Coventry ended prematurely.

*Honourable Mention: Ben Turner*

### **LEFT-BACK – DANNY FOX**

Another one of the early SISU signings at Coventry City that seemed to signal an intent to get into the top-flight the smart way, Danny Fox arrived from Walsall – alongside Scott Dann – and established himself as one of the best left-backs outside the top-flight in his time at Coventry City.

A solid defender with excellent crossing ability from both open play and set-pieces. Another player that SISU's lead at the club, Ray Ranson, failed to sell at the right time, Fox was sold to Celtic slightly below his value in order to avoid him running his contract down and was then replaced by loan players, underlining how short-term that initial influx of cash under SISU really was.

*Honourable Mention: Stephen Warnock*

### **CENTRAL MIDFIELDER – MATT GRIMES**

The first signing of the Frank Lampard era, the captain of another Championship club, Matt Grimes' addition was a statement of intent from Coventry City that they were serious about challenging for promotion under the new manager.

After a slow adaptation period, the team adapted to Grimes' considerate approach from central midfield in his first full season. Dropping in between the two centre-backs and keeping play moving via a series of short passes, Grimes could be constantly relied upon to play the team out of danger and onto the front foot. A quiet, considerate leader, Matt Grimes led the team by example and into the Premier League.

*Honourable Mention: David Thompson*

### **CENTRAL MIDFIELDER – MICHAEL DOYLE**

In 265 league appearances in his first spell at the club as Coventry City settled into lower mid-table status in the second-tier, Michael Doyle was a functional presence in midfield, tending to operate alongside Stephen Hughes.

His second spell at the club, following relegation to League Two, cemented Doyle's status as an inspirational figure and legend. Having chosen to still live in the area in his seven years away, Coventry City meant a lot to Michael Doyle. On top of being the ruthless, assertive leader in midfield that befit his experience, Doyle was key in re-connecting fans with players away from the pitch, which kick-started the club's importance within its own locality.

*Honourable Mention: Liam Kelly*

### **WINGER – TOM BAYLISS**

Tom Bayliss emerged from Coventry City's academy at just the right time to kick-start the team's promotion challenge in League Two, which had looked to be ailing. The midfielder added energy and quality with his bandy legged running, which was timely in the wake of Jodi Jones picking up a season-ending injury in December.

Bayliss took that quality into League One, moving from the right wing position where he had initially gained minutes for the team into a central role where he could really open up games with his dramatic running with the ball from the middle of the pitch. Looking ready for Championship football, Bayliss' career subsequently stalled after his big move to Preston.

*Honourable Mention: Tatsuhiro Sakamoto*

### **ATTACKING-MIDFIELDER – GUSTAVO HAMER**

The quality that Gustavo Hamer showed from minute one at Coventry City went a long way to putting the club into the position it is now in. A hugely enjoyable player to watch, capable of affecting the game from any position in midfield, whether it was in putting in big tackles, picking big passes or scoring brilliant goals, Hamer was the kind of player for Coventry that was impossible to ignore.

That Gustavo Hamer struggled for discipline and clearly enjoyed himself off-the-pitch adds to the folklore of him being this flawed genius. Whether he'd be capable of the same heights he reached without it is debatable but is perhaps why he has remained a Championship player despite his quality.

*Honourable Mention: Callum O'Hare*

### **WINGER – GARY MCSHEFFREY**

For a spell of four years, Gary McSheffrey was the youngest every Premier League player, having made his debut for the club in the top-flight. In the ensuing campaigns, McSheffrey threatened not to make the grade for the Sky Blues.

It took the management of Micky Adams to convert McSheffrey from a nippy striker to a left-sided forward for the youngster to flourish. It was in that period that McSheffrey become the poster child for the strength of the academy in the years following top-flight relegation.

The forward returned after a spell at Birmingham City and while he's remembered as a diminished force, he enjoyed some productive scoring and creative seasons before he was offloaded as part of cost-cutting measures following exile to Northampton.

*Honourable Mention: Ephron Mason-Clark*

### **STRIKER – VIKTOR GYOKERES**

Whoever decided to sign Viktor Gyokeres after an underwhelming loan stint has to go down as having made one of the smartest transfer decisions in the club's history. The Swede returned that summer looking a transformed entity, physically powerful and psychologically intense, Gyokeres seemed desperate to repay the faith the club showed in him. That goal against Wigan Athletic at the CBS Arena, where he received the ball in his own half, muscled off three defenders and fired home epitomised everything that was good about Viktor Gyokeres – powerful, determined and skilful. For all of the talented strikers Coventry have had over the years, none have gone on to compete at the elite level like Gyokeres has done.

*Honourable Mention: Callum Wilson*

# THE MOMENTS THAT WON IT

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Now feels like the appropriate time and look back over the past season and how the Championship title was won.

How Coventry City went from promotion outsiders to the dominant team in the division. The points at which decent form turned into an almost unassailable position at the top of the league. How the team overcame jeopardy and eventually waltzed to the title.

One of the key moments for the 25/26 campaign occurred during the back-end of the year before. Bramall Lane, a 3-1 shellacking by Sheffield United. First-choice goalkeeper, Oliver Dovin, attempted a Cruyff-turn to deceive Blades forward, Tyrese Campbell, only for his opponent to completely and unnecessarily wipe him out, leading to an ACL injury that Dovin is yet to return from.

The upshot was that it forced Coventry City onto the loan market for a new goalkeeper, ultimately leading to bringing in Carl Rushworth on loan from Brighton & Hove Albion. After a sticky start, Rushworth never looked back after a gutsy clean sheet against Leicester City in September, becoming a dominant presence between the sticks.

While Oliver Dovin is a strong goalkeeper in his own right, it is hard not to argue that Rushworth has gone on to have an indelible impact on Coventry City's recent campaign. The loanee not only produced saves at key moments that very few goalkeepers are capable of but seemed to provide

28<sup>th</sup> March 2025

<b>Sheffield United</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Coventry City</b>	<b>1</b>

this determined, assured presence between the sticks that communicated assurance to the players in front of him. It's hard to say how different things would have been with Dovin in Rushworth's place, the only evidence being the utter brilliance the latter provided in the former's stead.

Looking at the season itself for key moments, it was the 7-1 win over Queens Park Rangers in August that truly kicked off Coventry City's automatic promotion aspirations. On the day it was confirmed that the CBS Arena was now owned by the club, the team produced a ruthless performance to ground a decent QPR side into dust. Playing with intensity and quality, Coventry demonstrated the attributes they would soon become famed for.

In the autumn, the Sky Blues produced a run of form that planted them on top of the league table, a position they would only surrender, briefly, once for the rest of the campaign. It began with a confident 3-0 home win over Birmingham City and was bookended by that crucial 1-0 victory away at second-place Stoke City.

Coventry built a close to unassailable position at the top of the league over that period thanks to a multitude of factors. Starting with Carl Rushworth's brilliance in goal, the Sky Blues became absolute demons in the press, led by the intense running of Brandon Thomas-Asante. On top of that, the team were dominant from set-pieces, whether that was corners delivered by Matt Grimes and Victor Torp, or Milan van Ewijk's long throws. It meant that if Coventry were in tight games, they could sneak a goal from somewhere, or if they were ahead, they could steal into a dominant position.

An away trip to Middlesbrough looked the last opportunity for the chasing pack to reel Coventry City in. The Sky Blues led by two goals in the first-half, with the opening goal from Ellis Simms an absolute thing of beauty from the lung-busting run made by Victor Torp to set it up to the thunderous finish the striker produced. However, that lead was wiped out just after half-time and Boro looked in the ascendancy.

Tommy Conway completely fluffing on open goal proved to be one of the key turning points of the campaign for Coventry. Shortly after, the Sky Blues scored twice to wrap up a 4-2 win that seemingly left the rest of the division with too much to do.

Over the winter, the wins slowed down and the lead was gradually ground down by the chasing pack. A 3-0 away defeat to Ipswich Town began to point towards some of the weaknesses in this Coventry City side. Namely, an increasing reliance on set-

### 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2025

**Coventry City** 7  
**Queens Park Rangers** 1

### 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025

**Stoke City** 0  
**Coventry City** 1

### 25<sup>th</sup> November 2025

**Middlesbrough** 2  
**Coventry City** 4

pieces as almost the sole source of creativity along with the defensive line being left far too high as the team looked to chase goals.

On top of that, a flu outbreak in the squad – which looked to have been particularly poorly managed – absolutely ravaged Frank Lampard’s available options over the Christmas period and into January. Those who were still available for selection were ground down until they had little left and that cost Coventry the intensity they had heavily relied upon had gone badly missing.

From Birmingham City rattling three past the Sky Blues on New Year’s Day to Queens Park Rangers gaining a form of revenge for the 7-1 with a 2-1 reverse at Loftus Road, Coventry were getting reeled in at an alarming pace and Frank Lampard was starting to look short on answers for the malaise.

By the time Middlesbrough visited the CBS Arena in November, Coventry City had been knocked off their perch at the top of the league and were in danger of the wheels falling off completely. Right from the off in that game, the Sky Blues looked to have the bit back between their teeth – buoyed by the extra midfield running provided by new signing, Frank Onyeka – a Haji Wright hat-trick restored Coventry’s top spot and from there, they never seemed to look back.

In the final months of the season, Coventry produced gutsy away wins at Sheffield United and Swansea City while the rest of the chasing pack spluttered. By Easter, it was a matter of when and not if the Sky Blues would achieve promotion. While some nerves began to set in, leading to goalless displays against Hull City and Sheffield Wednesday, there was nothing that could really stop this team winning promotion.

A Bobby Thomas header from a set-piece late-on against Blackburn Rovers secured the point that ended Coventry City’s 25-year wait for Premier League football and from then on, the confidence returned as they secured the league title with a series of free-flowing performances.

In the end, it was a convincing title victory. A runaway train that gathered momentum until it was absolutely unstoppable. Coventry City were deserved champions by some distance, certain in themselves while others quested for identity.

### 16<sup>th</sup> February 2026

<b>Coventry City</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Middlesbrough</b>	<b>1</b>

### 17<sup>th</sup> April 2026

<b>Blackburn Rovers</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Coventry City</b>	<b>1</b>

13

# THE SQUAD

# BRAD COLLINS

Goalkeeper

#40

The writing was on the wall for Brad Collins as soon as Ben Wilson was chosen ahead of him for last year's play-off campaign. The goalkeeper had more than enough opportunities to establish himself as the first-choice goalkeeper but simply proved too short on confidence to provide the assurance in goal that this team needed.

It feels harsh to say, but there has never been a moment since Brad Collins dropped out of the team for the last time that the move has been regretted. After a good run when he initially came to the club three years ago, Collins lost all confidence in his abilities and ultimately became too big of a liability to be allowed to continue.

Even when Collins had one last run in the team just over 12 months ago, it was only under the duress of Oliver Dovin and Ben Wilson being injured. The goalkeeper had his moments during the back end of the 24/25 season, key clean sheets against West Bromwich Albion and Portsmouth, and showed good skills in his distribution, however, there remained a constant fear that Collins was not only close to making another mistake but one that would see him lose all confidence too.

A loan spell at Burton Albion this season was just what Brad Collins needed to save



○	○	○
Appearances	Goals Against	Clean Sheets

his career. A year on the bench to stew over all his mistakes that put him in that position could have proved disastrous for Collins, who clearly suffers from brittle confidence.

Released after the end of the campaign, Brad Collins should be able to find himself a decent move as first-choice at Burton Albion, or another League One club. To be brutally honest, that was probably always his level, as his time at Coventry City has demonstrated.

# OLIVER

# DOVIN

## Goalkeeper

#1

A goalkeeper picking up a serious injury is a rare enough occasion that few clubs truly account for. The problem for Oliver Dovin is in leaving his seat at the table vacated while the team went on to achieve promotion, he's left himself a mammoth task to reclaim his spot.

The Swede was even left unregistered in the first-team squad for the second half of the campaign, to make space for January signings, which meant it has not even been proved yet whether he has recovered sufficient fitness to play regular first-team football yet. There's a possibility that Dovin may have already played his last game for Coventry City, through no fault of his own.

As impressive as Carl Rushworth has been this season in Dovin's stead, it is easy to forget how impressive the latter had been during his first season at the club. The Swede endured a somewhat difficult start to life at Coventry after arriving from Hammarby but won his place back in the team and produced a number of excellent goalkeeping displays that were essential to the team's run to the play-offs.

On top of being a strong shot-stopper, Oliver Dovin is also excellent with the ball at his feet. While not in possession of a particularly powerful kick or throw to start



0	0	0
Appearances	Goals Against	Clean Sheets

attacks, Dovin's ability to receive the ball under pressure in the goalkeeping position and find a team-mate was peerless at times.

Just how much a difference Carl Rushworth made over Oliver Dovin will always be a hypothetical question. Because Rushworth has been so good, it has obscured that Dovin was producing similar levels of outstanding goalkeeping displays the season before.

The combination of Carl Rushworth returning to his parent club and Coventry City getting promoted means that the club cannot really risk finding out what state Oliver Dovin is in. The sensible play would be to loan Dovin out to another club this coming season in order to rebuild his fitness and confidence.

# THE STOPPER

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**Carl Rushworth**

**#19**

**73.2**

Save%

**123**

Saves

**6.72**

Goals Prevented

Coventry City entered last summer looking for a stop-gap solution in goal. They ended up with the man who would win the division's Golden Glove award and put in a number of key goalkeeping performances that transformed a good season from Coventry into an outstanding one. That is the difference a genuinely brilliant goalkeeper can make.

It's easy to forget now that Carl Rushworth's start at Coventry City was far from convincing, with some fans even questioning his place in the team after his first few appearances. Getting caught out at his near-post from a free-kick away at Derby County, then completely missing a cross to hand Queens Park Rangers a consolation goal in the 7-1, Rushworth really didn't look like the presence in goal that he'd go on to become.

It all seemed to change around a strong display away at Leicester City, where Carl Rushworth made a series of excellent saves, that the goalkeeper earned the trust of fans and players alike. It is quite remarkable how quickly the goalkeeper's season turned around from that point onwards.

While the Sky Blues were going goal-crazy over the autumn, Carl Rushworth managed to play a crucial role in making the big saves that bought the team time to kill the match at the other end. One of his best performances of the campaign came away at Millwall, where the home side looked to have rallied after going 1-0 down. Making a series of saves to deny the Lions any momentum, the Sky Blues went on to score three goals in the last 25 minutes to turn a tight contest into a cozy scoreline.

That was just one example of why Carl Rushworth went on to be named the club's Player of the Season despite how many goals the team scored. Those goals scored didn't happen in a vacuum, they came because Rushworth was able to keep teams out at the other end, frustrating opponents until the gaps opened up that the attackers could exploit.



46

Appearances

45

Goals Against

17

Clean Sheets

Going on to keep 17 clean sheets to earn the Golden Glove, it really could and should have been more had the team's defensive confidence not completely gone to the wayside over the middle of the campaign. There was only so many saves that Rushworth could make with the team leaving yawning gaps to exploit in front of him, with a run of one clean sheet in nine games over the middle of the campaign the result of the team's loss of defensive shape for a spell.

Returning to his parent club, Brighton & Hove Albion, this summer. One of the stories over the coming months is whether Carl Rushworth will or won't return. As much as Rushworth has made it clear he would like to stay, it's a decision that will come down to how much Brighton are asking for. Coventry's survival prospects would be bolstered significantly by signing Rushworth permanently

# BEN WILSON

Goalkeeper

#13

Fully content in his role as second/third-choice goalkeeper and general vibes man off-the-pitch, Ben Wilson failed to play a single minute of league football – though that may have partially been driven by a drive to allow Carl Rushworth to win the Golden Glove award once promotion and the title were sealed.

While Ben Wilson has had his spells at Coventry City as first-choice and would be well within his right to seek opportunities elsewhere, it seems like Wilson's career history may have made him cautious about dropping down to a lower level. Having started at Sunderland and been around the Cardiff City first-team in his younger years, Wilson struggled on loan spells elsewhere and found himself playing in the National League North before signing for the Sky Blues seven years ago.

Since dropping out of the first-team shortly after the play-off final defeat to Luton Town, Ben Wilson has clearly been happy with his role as a support presence around the squad. A big, positive personality, Wilson's impact around the squad can be hard to fully assess from a fan's perspective but there is clearly a reason why both Mark Robins and Frank Lampard have kept him around.



3

Appearances

3

Goals Against

1

Clean Sheets

Likely to be third-choice next season with the club in the Premier League, Ben Wilson's prospects of playing meaningful first-team football look more remote than ever – even in the cup competitions. Now that Coventry City are stepping up a level, having a senior option available as emergency back-up is an insurance policy the club can afford to take up.

Unless something remarkable happens over the coming season, expect to see more of Ben Wilson on City Unseen than on the pitch.

# KAINE

# KESLER-HAYDEN

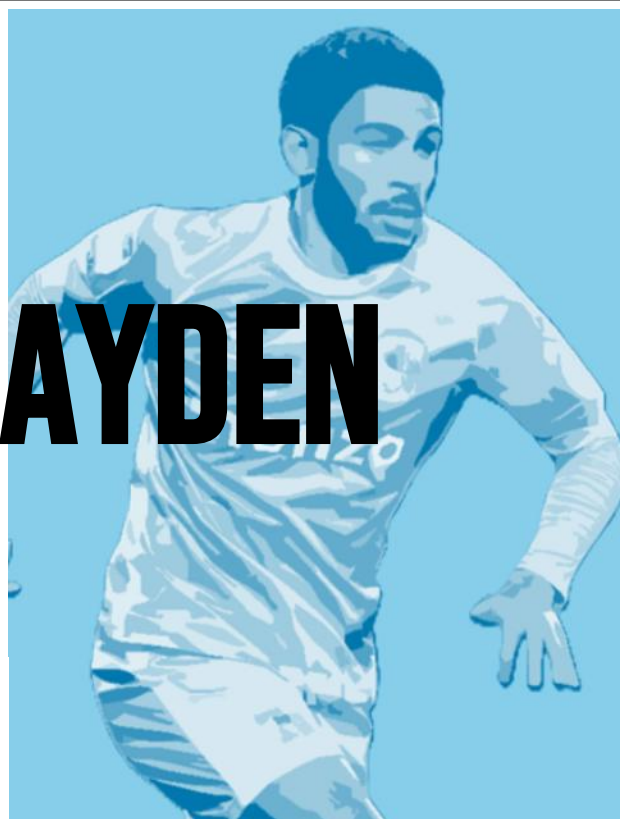
Right-Back

#20

Brought in as the replacement for Milan van Ewijk while the Dutchman was still in the building, Kaine Kesler-Hayden has been left as a very strong cover option at right-back for the campaign and rarely had the chance to show what he's truly capable of.

When he has played, Kesler-Hayden has shown quality going forward – particularly, in how he can get into shooting positions from right-back/right wing – but has rarely had his defensive credentials tested. On the few occasions he has been the team's sole option at right-back, Kesler-Hayden has looked a little weak in one-against-one situations and not as strong positionally as Milan van Ewijk is, probably a result of him having played much of his football as a wing-back rather than full-back.

That the team has won promotion and thus ensured Milan van Ewijk will be sticking around for a while longer is the worst thing that could have happened for Kaine Kesler-Hayden's prospects of establishing himself as first-choice at Coventry City. The club are now in a situation where if Van Ewijk were to leave or pick up a long-term injury, they could well be shopping for a right-back option ahead of Kesler-Hayden, with him being unproven for Coventry at Championship level, let alone in the top-flight.



24

Appearances

2

Goals

1

Assists

There is probably enough about Kaine Kesler-Hayden to be trusted as the back-up option at right-back heading into a Premier League season, the question is how happy the player might be to stick around that role. While he has looked a positive presence around the camp despite being a first-choice quality player in a second-choice role, he is at a crucial phase in his career where he may want to seek regular football. Kesler-Hayden could well be someone who ends up being offloaded during the summer to facilitate his own career ambitions.

Unless Kaine Kesler-Hayden has incredible stores of patience, it looks like it could well be a case of right player, wrong time. Someone signed to proactively to fill a vacancy that has yet to materialise.

# MILAN VAN EWIJK

Right-Back

#27

Having barely missed any football since signing for the club three years ago, Milan van Ewijk has been a classy, assured presence for Coventry City from minute one.

Looking almost certain to leave the club last summer, it has to be said that Doug King was fully justified in demanding a premium for the Milan van Ewijk's services. The Dutchman added another level to his play this season, in finding a consistent end product in setting up chances, seeing him finish the campaign as the team's top assist-provider. It's incredible to see someone who was already a top-performer get even better.

It is the combination of pace, technical assurance, tactical discipline and composure that marks Milan van Ewijk out as someone who so obviously belongs at a higher level. While he possesses rapid speed, it's not something he relies upon from either an attacking or defensive perspective. Whether it's in being in the right position to prevent opposing wingers getting a run on him or in using the ball well to combine with team-mates going forward, Van Ewijk oozes class on top of his



44

Appearances

0

Goals

8

Assists

natural physical qualities. That he also possesses a big, long-throw feels an afterthought, as useful as it is.

While other players have caught the headlines more than Milan van Ewijk, that's almost because the Dutchman's qualities have been somewhat taken for granted. In the rare periods of the past few years when he's not been available, Van Ewijk's absence really has been felt. Coventry City simply aren't the same time without him in the side.

Heading into the Premier League, there seems little doubt that Milan van Ewijk will be able to make the step up with ease – perhaps the player in the squad most certain to make the jump. Someone who's almost felt like a well-kept secret at Coventry during his time here, the secret may soon get out of the bag next year.

# JAKE BIDWELL

Left-Back

#21

18 months ago, Jake Bidwell was firmly established as the team's first-choice at left-back and someone who could be reliably trusted to produce a level of quality. Towards the back end of the 24/25 campaign, it became apparent that Bidwell has lost a step of pace, and the subsequent form of Jay Dasilva saw the defender reduced to a bit-part role this campaign.

It has been a season of select few highlights for Jake Bidwell given how little involvement he's had. Rarely handed meaningful minutes by Frank Lampard over the course of the campaign. It was telling that when Jay Dasilva picked up a three-game ban over Christmas, Bidwell wasn't the automatic first pick, with the manager alternating between three different options to cover the hole in the side.

'Mr Dependable' for Coventry City became no longer so through a combination of age and the form of his alternate option in the position. The memories that Jake Bidwell leaves behind at the club are of how he helped the Sky Blues transition from newcomers in the division to eventual promotion contenders, a regular in the years leading up to that play-off final defeat to Luton Town.



13

Appearances

0

Goals

1

Assists

A solid and reliable option at left-back who could be relied upon to keep his side of the pitch tied down and occasionally get forward and put in telling deliveries, a drop in athletic capacity quickly saw him exposed. A different style of play to the high defensive line, possession and pressing that Frank Lampard looked to implement may well have seen Jake Bidwell make more appearances over the past 18 months, but he leaves the club having past his expiry date by at least a season probably.

It's a testament to his professionalism that he hasn't looked to force a move or proved a negative dressing room presence despite his time at Coventry City having looked so clearly up for quite a while. The kind of professional attitude that can be rare in football these days, Jake Bidwell leaves the club having in a better position than where it was upon his arrival, thanks to his efforts.

# MIGUEL ANGEL

# BRAU

Left-Back

#33



Not even trusted to play at left-back during pre-season, there were early indications that Miguel Angel Brau was not ready for Championship football and that has proved unfortunately to be true.

Miguel Angel Brau rarely seemed to understand what was expected of him in any position he played, whether that was at left-back or further forward. When played in defensive positions, he'd linger too far forward. When played in advanced roles, Brau would float away from the action.

The closest Miguel Angel Brau came to establishing himself in the team came when Jay Dasilva picked up a suspension over the Christmas period. A half-decent showing at wing-back away at Southampton was followed up by a confused display against Ipswich Town. The Brau experiment seemed to come to an end on New Year's Day, when he was brought on to replace an injured Kaine Kesler-Hayden, and was outmuscled by Charlton Athletic's Charlie Kelman to cost the team an equaliser that put pressure on top spot.

From then on, Miguel Angel Brau barely featured in matchday squads and, when he did, didn't look in serious contention to get onto the pitch. Looking a classic case of a player brought in from an overseas league

12

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

lacking the physicality to compete in English football, it seems unlikely that Brau will feature in Coventry City's Premier League squad next season and will most likely be loaned or sold back to his home country.

It can't have helped Brau that Jay Dasilva made the left-back position completely his own over the course of last season, limiting the Spaniard's ability to pick up important minutes to help him learn his craft. However, the evidence that has been laid out suggests that Brau didn't really deserve any more opportunities than he got.

Brought in as a project player last summer, the club's current status means that Miguel Angel Brau will go down as an unfinished project in a Coventry City shirt.

# THE MOST IMPROVED

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Jay Dasilva

#3

**3,552**

Minutes Played

**86.7%**

Pass Completion

**202**

Defensive Contributions

A positive spell of form towards the end of last season aside, Jay Dasilva looked a player who'd had more than enough opportunities at Coventry City to prove his quality and repeatedly failed to hit the mark. Someone that fans were fed up of seeing pull on the shirt, had Dasilva left last summer, he would not have been remembered positively.

Jay Dasilva really is the epitome of the work that Frank Lampard and his coaching staff have put in since their arrival. It underlines how the manager has made the most of what he's inherited, raising the team's level via trust and time in the training pitch.

From looking horrifically exposed for much of this time at the club due to his short stature, Jay Dasilva has graduated to being a truly composed and classy presence at left-back who is no longer the weak point in the back four. He has developed a real determination, looking sharp in his positioning while being forceful in the challenge when he needs to be.

The technical side of Jay Dasilva's game was less in doubt. The full-back has always looked composed on the ball and capable of knitting spells of possession together with his ability to receive the ball under pressure and to pick out team-mates with ease. That has continued while the defensive side of Dasilva's game has improved, to make him a truly classy presence at left-back.

It may have helped Jay Dasilva that the competition he's had at left-back over the past year or so has been a diminished Jake Bidwell and a Miguel Angel Brau getting used to Championship football, but Frank Lampard would not have allowed Dasilva to keep his place in the side had he not improved his game to the degree that he's been able to.

This last campaign for Jay Dasilva goes to show why players should never be written off. All it can take is for a change of circumstance – in this case in manager – for someone to go from looking surplus to



43

Appearances

0

Goals

3

Assists

requirements to one of the team's key players.

Whether Jay Dasilva gets the chance to prove himself in the Premier League that he's earned remains to be seen. There is likely to be competition brought in for Dasilva over the summer with the club's Premier League funds. As much as Frank Lampard may want to demonstrate loyalty to those that got the team promoted, Dasilva's lack of physicality and height makes him someone at risk of struggling in the top-flight.

It wouldn't be entirely surprising were Jay Dasilva to continue to improve and hold onto his place in the team, only next season will provide a much greater test of both his quality and determination. Regardless of what happens next season, Dasilva has come on leaps and bounds over the past 18 months.

# LIAM KITCHING

Centre-Back

#15

It's easy to forget that Liam Kitching is yet another key Frank Lampard success story. The centre-back had been out of favour and on the verge of leaving the club upon 18 months ago but has gone on to be a regular starter in a title-winning campaign.

The left-footed centre-back started the season strongly, forming a forceful defensive pairing with Bobby Thomas. Both Liam Kitching and Thomas are capable of being aggressive and imposing, but it's the latter who's tended to take on the meat and potatoes role of stepping onto opponents while Kitching has offered cover in behind and moments of quality on the ball.

At his best, Liam Kitching is close to the complete package at centre-back. A physical presence who can also bring the ball out of defence or pick out cross-field balls – on top of having that extra value of being left-footed. The downside is that he can be impulsive in the challenge, risking leaving the defensive line exposed when he times things wrong. This proved to be an issue over the winter wobble, with Kitching losing a level of confidence and instead finding himself in risky areas,

Having signed a new contract during the campaign, Liam Kitching will be around Coventry City's Premier League squad next



40

Appearances

2

Goals

0

Assists

season, the question is how big of a role he'll play. While he's showed he can be a strong performer, when on form, at Championship level, the extra pace in the top-flight is a concern given Kitching's rash streak.

As it stands, Kitching will be playing alongside a partner, in Bobby Thomas, who'd also be adapting to Premier League football, which could make that adaptation all the more difficult. With Kitching being slightly less physical and less of a presence from set-pieces, it seems that he's set to be the one to miss out on a starting place to a potential new signing, or two, in his position.

A key part of the promotion-winning side, Liam Kitching is one of a handful of starters who faces an uphill challenge in proving themselves at a higher level this coming season.

# JOEL

# LATIBEAUDIÈRE

Centre-Back

#22



Looking completely surplus to requirements over the first half of the campaign, Joel Latibeaudière returned to the team during a crucial phase of the promotion battle to steady the ship and steer the team back on course to the Championship title.

A short and slow centre-back who's not the best on the ball, it's easy to see why Joel Latibeaudière had found himself so heavily out of favour at Coventry City for a large part of last season. However, the defender seems to possess intangible qualities that steady and aid his team-mates that only really became apparent when he was brought back into the side while others were struggling.

One of those players who seems to be higher-rated by his team-mates than what can be observed from the stands, Joel Latibeaudière will be able to reflect upon a campaign where he ultimately played quite an important role in winning promotion and the title, even within the limited minutes he was handed. He will be remembered as one of the key players who kept their head calm while others were struggling with the pressure of a wobble – albeit that might have been aided by having had little involvement while the team's form was collapsing over the winter.

16

Appearances

0

Goals

1

Assists

That may well provide Joel Latibeaudière a sweet note on which to end his time at Coventry City. Having largely been an underwhelming addition to the squad since joining as the big summer 2023 rebuild, shunted around from position to position and rarely making an impression. This was the campaign where he proved he had a valuable role to play. The unfortunate thing is that, in so doing, he's probably negated his place in the squad for the coming campaign.

As someone who had a glowing youth career but has struggled in the senior game, Joel Latibeaudière has to look back at this campaign as a positive in helping himself carve out a role. While it may not be with Coventry City, there will be a place for him somewhere in the Championship next year to gain the regular football he should be playing at his age.

# BOBBY THOMAS

Centre-Back

#4

Seen by many as not just the team's best centre-back but a talismanic figure, Bobby Thomas remains an inconsistent presence in central defence who can vary between completely dominant to liability.

For much of the campaign, Bobby Thomas can look back at possibly having played his best football for the club from a purely defensive stand-point. Forming a powerful centre-back pairing with Liam Kitching in the opening months, Thomas dominated opposing centre-forwards and played a key role in making the team an intimidating set-piece threat at the other end of the pitch.

Nonetheless, Bobby Thomas was one of many who struggled during the team's winter wobble. Affected by the illness bug that swept the squad over December, Thomas looked positively out of sorts at his worst last season. Looking less dominant physically and exposed, like many others were, by a poorly-enforced high defensive line, Thomas was rightly taken out of the team for a spell while Frank Lampard to shore up the defence.

That he was quickly restored over the final months of the campaign underlines that Bobby Thomas is seen as the team's most important centre-back. Offering a level of



35

Appearances

3

Goals

4

Assists

relentless aggression that others in the defensive ranks seem to lack, Thomas quickly settled back into the team as the Sky Blues returned to the well-oiled unit they had started the season as.

Having been mooted for a Premier League move over the past year or so – largely because his goals from set-pieces make him a name media sources are aware of – the coming season will represent a huge step up for Bobby Thomas, nonetheless. That ability to dominate opponents physically will be diminished, while also potentially leaving him in unfavourable foot-races against quick and skilful forwards. It will test whether Thomas is a top-flight calibre player or simply a strong Championship defender who's benefitted from a good set-up around him.

# LUKE WOOLFENDEN

Centre-Back

#26



Having spent so much effort over the summer trying to bring in Charlie Hughes from Hull City, Luke Woolfenden arrived as a late back-up option in order to allow healthy cover at centre-back over the course of the season.

The issue that Luke Woolfenden has faced during his first year at Coventry City is that he hasn't shown himself to be an improvement on the players ahead of him in the pecking order, putting in a handful of performances that were borderline disastrous. A slow defender playing in a team with a high line, that sense of Woolfenden not being a particularly well thought through panic signing has heightened in the months since his arrival.

In fairness to the player, he can point to a lack of opportunities to settle into the team. Arriving late in the summer when the preferred defensive pairing was established, Woolfenden was only getting involved in situations of emergency, which made it harder for him to slot into the side.

The closest Luke Woolfenden came to establishing himself in the starting line-up was around the spring, when Liam Kitching had fallen out of favour and Bobby Thomas had picked up an injury. While Woolfenden didn't let himself down during the couple of

18

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

games he was allowed to play in, he didn't make enough of an impression to hold onto his place for the rest of the campaign.

It's hard to find a way to frame the signing of Luke Woolfenden as anything other than an underwhelming one. Someone who didn't fit into the team's style of play nor was any better than the players he was competing with. Whether it would have been any different had Woolfenden been handed more of a chance to establish himself is impossible to tell.

With a central defender or two likely to be on the team's shopping list this summer, Luke Woolfenden's time at Coventry City looks set to be a short one. While he has been a signing made in a successful season, he hasn't made much contribution to the team's campaign.

# JAMIE ALLEN

Central Midfielder

#8

Kept on for another season last summer, Jamie Allen played a bit-part role this campaign, only really utilised in case of extreme emergencies and barely featuring over the second half of the campaign.

The midfielder is one of several consummate professionals who've stayed around the squad this past campaign, not kicked up a fuss, and contributed when called upon. One of the first names off the bench over the first half of the season, the arrival of Frank Onyeka nudged Jamie Allen far enough down the pecking order that he didn't figure for much of the rest of the season until promotion was confirmed.

Really, it was the arrival of Matt Grimes that spelled the beginning of the end for Jamie Allen at Coventry City. Allen had initially found success under Frank Lampard as that pivot point at the base of the midfield, keeping play ticking over to stop the team getting stuck in slow possession. However, Grimes was simply able to do that same job far more effectively, then it became a case of Allen being second/third-choice in every other midfield role.

The value that Jamie Allen has provided this campaign – and for much of his team at Coventry City – is his versatility in midfield.



25

Appearances

1

Goals

2

Assists

Capable of playing in defensive, box-to-box or advanced positions, Allen has plugged gaps in teams and enabled others to flourish. What has seen him reach the end of his time at Coventry is the club reaching a position where they can recruit specialists ahead of Allen in every role he fulfils.

Jamie Allen leaves Coventry City with plenty of goodwill in the bank, having played important roles during League One promotion and the run to the play-off final. That he's continued to remain useful right up until his final months at the club underlines his qualities as both a footballer and a professional, unfortunately one that the club has outgrown.

# KAI ANDREWS

Central/Attacking Midfielder/Winger

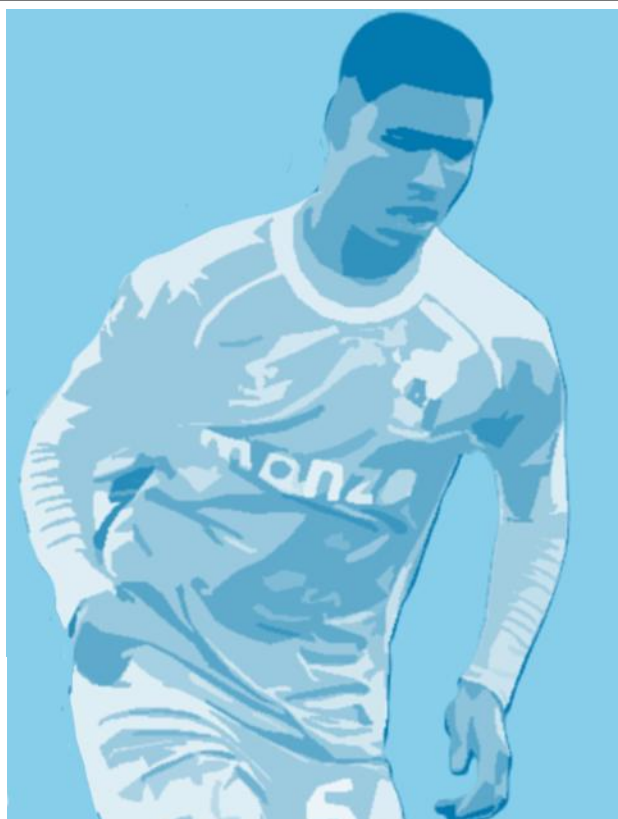
#54

Kai Andrews has looked impressive in the limited minutes he's been handed in a Coventry City shirt but has struggled to make that next step due to the pressures of the club competing for promotion.

A versatile midfielder who can play in a number of roles through the middle or out wide, Andrews possesses great skill and poise with the ball at his feet. It might be harsh to say but the next step for him will be the toughest, in converting promising moments to a tangible impact.

Two loan spells – both in Scotland – have shown that Kai Andrews can hold his own in competitive senior football, but his impact has been limited to the odd, impressive appearance while otherwise fighting for minutes on the pitch. With Coventry City's level continuing to improve, the bar Andrews has to reach in order to feature for the first-team seems to be ever increasing.

Still at a young enough age to believe he can reach first-team level over time. It feels as if the next loan move for Kai Andrews will be an important one. This will be where he has to demonstrate he can not only play regular football but influence matches for whoever he plays for. Realistically, Andrews is going to have to



10

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

show he's something special wherever he lands next year in order to hold any prospect of making the grade at Coventry City.

Long gone are the days that academy players have time to learn their craft with the Sky Blues. With the club making the step up to the Premier League, it is going to take truly exceptional talent to break through from the academy into the starting XI.

# JOSH ECCLES

Central/Attacking Midfielder

#28

Without being a regular starter this season, Josh Eccles has, nonetheless, made some telling contributions that kept Coventry City on track for promotion.

Converted into an advanced midfielder due to Eccles' energy and tenacity when pressing, the academy graduate stepped up with some useful goals to keep the team going over the winter. His goals against West Bromwich Albion and Charlton Athletic perhaps the most important in helping the team on the way to victory when performance levels overall had dropped a little.

Nonetheless, Josh Eccles in this advanced role has clearly not been a preferred option for Frank Lampard, with the player dropping out pretty much whenever better options became available. This was not only because Eccles is short of the technique to operate in tight areas and pick tough passes, but also as Eccles' eagerness to and press opponents often left space behind him.

In that sense, the shift to a more advanced role may have done Eccles more harm than good. While he added some goals to his CV, Josh Eccles also wasn't in a position to get the time on the ball to develop his craft as a midfielder. Operating in a position where



35

Appearances

4

Goals

1

Assists

alternatives were always going to be preferred, Eccles may well have dropped down the midfield pecking order.

It seems a 50/50 question as to whether Josh Eccles will stick around the first-team next season. While it seems his technical shortcomings may only be further exposed at Premier League level, his energy and versatility could prove valuable in plugging gaps over a tough campaign to come.

It's not always a case of having the most skilful players filling every position in the team. Sometimes effort and running are needed to provide the platform for others to succeed. Don't be surprised if Josh Eccles is giving the chance to carve out a niche for himself in the squad – signing an entirely new team for the coming season may not be realistic.

# THE METRONOME

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**Matt Grimes**

**#6**

**2,873**

Passes

**87.5%**

Pass Accuracy

**201**

Defensive Contributions

The first signing of the Frank Lampard era, Matt Grimes arrived at the club as not just the captain of a fellow Championship team but as someone who could control games via his mastery of the short passing game.

It took some time to fully integrate the team into Matt Grimes' style of play, but this past season has seen Coventry City reap the benefits of doing so. Without becoming a team that hoards possession for the sake of it, Coventry now control matches when they need to, playing out from the back with composure and making capable of resisting opposing presses.

It hadn't been the easiest of integrations for Matt Grimes. A midfielder who isn't there to produce big tackles, passes or goals, there was confusion among the fans to see Grimes drop in alongside the centre-backs when the team was in possession. There were some ropey displays from both team and player in his first few months, but it was the play-off semi-final second leg against Sunderland that proved to be an indication of what was to come.

That composed display became the standard for this campaign. The true value of Grimes became apparent over the late autumn to early winter period, where in a series of tight matches, the midfielder helped snuff out opposing threat with his passing and positioning. Without producing big moments, it was Grimes' ability to receive the ball and find a team-mate that killed games off and maintained top spot.

Matt Grimes struggled as much as anyone over the middle of the winter. A drop in the team's energy levels left the midfielder with additional running to do out of possession to try and plug gaps in Coventry's high line, often seeing him in one-against-one situations with opposing forwards who were able to beat him for skill or pace.

The addition of Frank Onyeka looked to have worked wonders for Matt Grimes, who not only was able to re-focus on his ability to help control games via his short



48

Appearances

2

Goals

2

Assists

passing but added an element of aggression to that made him less likely to be exposed in defensive situations.

In leading Coventry City to a comfortable league title, Matt Grimes has proved himself one of the best midfielders in recent Championship history and justified his decision to leave a cozy gig at Swansea. Whether he can make that step up is likely to depend on the cast of characters around him.

In the right environment, Matt Grimes' passing and experience could prove crucial to a survival bid in giving Coventry a different gear to just sitting back. In the wrong environment, he could be left badly exposed for his relative lack of pace and physicality.

Matt Grimes' ability to adapt to a higher-level could have a key impact on Coventry City's survival prospects next year.

# THE SEASON CHANGER

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**Frank Onyeka**

**#16**

**33**

Points Won

**1**

Game Lost

**8**

Goals Against While On Pitch

Making his debut for Coventry City in the 3-1 home win over Middlesbrough, it is very easy to draw a line between before Frank Onyeka and after. The midfielder the influence that slingshotted the Sky Blues over the line for promotion.

The team was badly missing a physical presence in central midfield by the time that January came around. A 2-1 defeat to a Queens Park Rangers side that danced through Coventry's limp central area underlined the urgency to plug that gap.

Frank Onyeka may have been billed as a central midfield enforcer, but what he brought was energy and occasional moments of quality carrying the ball forward. His impact was less about being a gritty defensive midfield presence and more about injecting energy into the middle of the park that had been badly lacking.

Set to sign on a permanent deal following promotion, whether Frank Onyeka can make the same impact in the Premier League is a topic for debate. While he already has 75 top-flight appearances to his name, that was as a bit-part player for Brentford rather than as an essential player he could well be for Coventry City.

Occasionally outfought and outsmarted by Championship midfielders, the concern is that Frank Onyeka's lack of tactical discipline could be a bigger issue at a higher level. The only caveat being that he didn't look fully fit during his loan spell nor had much time to adapt to Coventry's style of play.

A full pre-season – with Nigeria not playing at the World Cup – could do wonders for Frank Onyeka as he looks to fully establish himself as a Premier League player. He's not going to be able to rely on charging around the pitch powered by pure vibes, but his work-rate could prove invaluable to a team looking to fight for its place in the league.

While there are nitpicks to be had about Frank Onyeka's individual performance



14

Appearances

1

Goals

1

Assists

levels for Coventry City, it would be churlish to argue that he's not been an impactful signing. Brought in to fill a hole in the team, Coventry have only lost one game that Onyeka has been involved in as they eventually sauntered towards the title.

In future seasons, the addition of Frank Onyeka is going to become one of those pieces of transfer folklore that will be cited as a reason to make changes in the January window. While there has been a narrative around him that may not stack up to the performances he's produced, there is a distinction with Onyeka to be outlined between performances and impact – he has most certainly made a positive impact at Coventry City.

# JACK RUDONI

Attacking Midfielder

#5

After a breakthrough first year at the club and turning down offers elsewhere to stay at Coventry City, this was supposed to be the campaign where Jack Rudoni announced himself as one of the best players in the Championship. However, an injury-hit year has seen Rudoni relegated to the role of strong contributor, rather than sole stand-out.

Some notable performances along the way – most memorably, a quick-fire brace against Derby County on Good Friday that put Coventry on the verge of promotion – Jack Rudoni will probably look back on this campaign as a somewhat disappointing one from a personal perspective. Between a couple of long spells out injured, Rudoni has looked short on fitness for much of the year often looking like he’s playing within himself.

Ending the campaign in a shoulder sling while he gets the treatment he requires to address that long-term injury issue, the hope is that Jack Rudoni’s fitness will be in a better place by the time the new campaign comes around. He is one of a handful of the current squad that the management will be hoping will make the step up to Premier League football, a division where being at full fitness will be especially important.



33

Appearances

7

Goals

6

Assists

It may seem a trite thing to say but this campaign has shown the difference between a fully-fit and a half-fit Jack Rudoni. While he can still get into the penalty area to score goals from midfield, his ability to move the ball quickly and get away from opponents in the middle of the pitch is hugely dependent on his fitness. At full capacity, Rudoni can cut through teams with his tall, elegant frame. At any less than that, he can look hesitant.

If Rudoni cannot reach his highest standard of fitness next year, he may struggle to get himself time on the ball and the team will be left desperately short on creativity through the centre of the park. He may not be able to get away with relying purely on making late runs into the penalty area to make an impact at a higher level.

# BEN SHEAF

Central Midfielder

#14

It's easy to forget that Ben Sheaf featured for Coventry City this past season. Someone who had been a talisman of the team for so long but has been quickly moved past.

Sheaf never really had the chance to adapt to Frank Lampard's style due to a combination of injury and the addition of Matt Grimes. By the time that Wrexham put in a big offer for his services, Sheaf had already been relegated to a bit-part role, making the fee too good to refuse.

Ben Sheaf has gone on to have a strong campaign at Wrexham, playing an important role as they narrowly missed out on the play-offs. In another universe, Sheaf would have avoided the injury issues that plagued his final years at Coventry City and played the kind of role that Matt Grimes did. That metronomic passer and physical presence at the back of the pitch to set the tone for the team.

A player who'd been a key part in establishing Coventry back in the Championship and pushing towards promotion, it shows how fast football moves on that he's barely been an afterthought at the CBS Arena in the year since he was sold.



1

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

# VICTOR TORP

Central Midfielder

#29

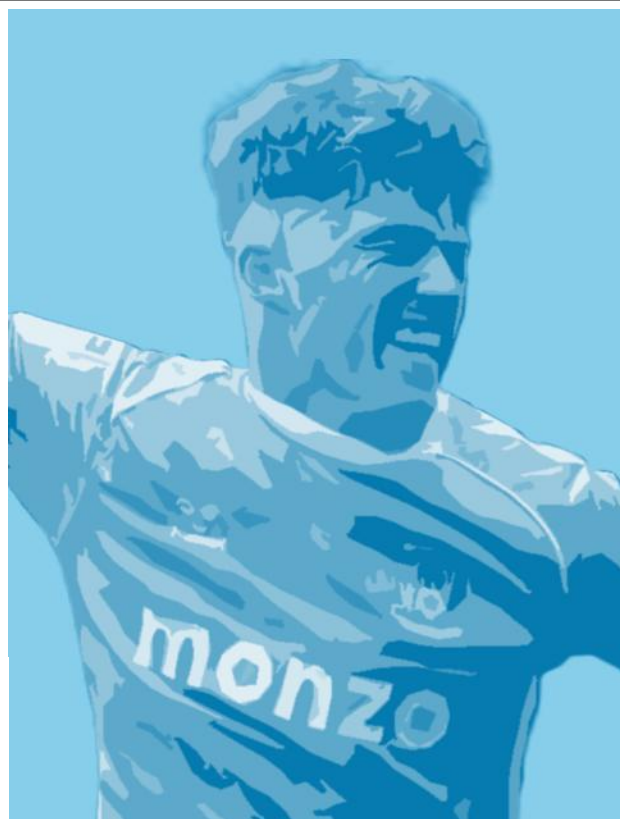
An excellent first half the campaign for Victor Torp gave way to a frustrating final few months. At his best, Torp showed his quality as a freakishly good ball-striker, at his worst, he drifted through games. Mostly, this was close to a stand-out campaign for the Dane.

Victor Torp's primary skill, in manipulating the football with unerring accuracy, proved a reliable route to goal in the opening months. One of the division's top-scorers by October, almost all of Torp's goals have been works of art.

Those goals may have provided the headlines, but his set-piece delivery and passing were also key elements of Coventry City's success for the first half of the campaign. Once the goals dropped off, the assists started to materialise, and it was only a poor run of form over January that cost him his place in the team to the newly-signed Frank Onyeka.

By the time that Onyeka arrived, Victor Torp was in need of a rest. Grimes' deep-lying role forced a lot of physical workload on Torp and as someone who's not the most dynamic or forceful out of possession, that box-to-box role gradually took its toll.

A couple of positive contributions in the final weeks of the season, however,



41

Appearances

10

Goals

7

Assists

underlined how good Victor Torp had been for Coventry City this campaign and why he deserves his place as part of a Premier League squad. On a technical level, Torp should be one of the first names on the team-sheet. He will need to improve his physical presence and stamina levels to force his way into a top-flight team.

As much as Victor Torp could well be up there with some of the best open-play and set-piece ball-strikers in the game, the dynamic of the team next season is likely to force him to add further physical capacity in order to give himself a platform to succeed. Getting the best out of Torp next season could be one of the things that nudges Coventry City towards survival as the quality is undoubtedly there.

# ROMAIN

# ESSE

Winger

#14

Brought in to reduce the workload on Tatsuhiro Sakamoto and Ephron Mason-Clark, a large part of Romain Esse's impact can be assessed by the improved form of the aforementioned duo over the final months of the campaign.

As for the player himself, Romain Esse started strong in a Coventry City shirt, scoring twice in his first three appearances but was largely relegated to a bench role due to Tatsuhiro Sakamoto's form and a couple of unconvincing displays from Esse himself. A player of immense flair, Esse has looked like someone who needs a settled run in a team to learn when and where to harness it.

Someone who can delight and frustrate in equal measure, Romain Esse is the kind of player who will constantly attempt the impossible in the hope that it will come off. When it did, Esse provided Coventry City with a point in difference in attack they otherwise didn't have. The trouble was that Esse's repeated attempts to try the complicated when the simple would do could also kill attacking momentum.

Having got his move to a Premier League club 18 months ago, it was apparent over that it was a move that came too early for him. The talent is clearly there but he lacks



18

Appearances

2

Goals

1

Assists

the match experience of how to correctly harness it. For a team chasing down points for promotion, it was ultimately a case for Romain Esse of not being in a patient enough environment that he required to flourish in.

Romain Esse's association with Coventry City looks like it will come to an end with his short-term loan spell expiring. While he will be looked back upon by many as a frustrating player, there were more positives than negatives to take from his tie with the club. With another season or two of regular Championship football under his belt, Esse could well become the kind of maverick attacking midfielder Crystal Palace had hoped they'd signed in 2025.

# RAPHAEL BORGES RODRIGUES

Winger

#17



Having been around the club for over a year without featuring for the senior team, the summer finally provided Coventry City fans a glimpse of why Raphael Borges Rodrigues was signed.

With Tatsuhiro Sakamoto injured in August, Raphael got his chance to impress in both the League Cup and off the bench in the odd league game. The winger provided direct running and enthusiasm on the right side of the pitch, even grabbing himself an assist during the 7-1 thrashing of Queens Park Rangers.

Given the team's lack of depth out wide, it was surprising that Raphael Borges Rodrigues was allowed to head out on loan on summer transfer deadline day, joining Wigan Athletic in League One. The spell with the League One club can, at best, be described as a qualified success. Raphael was able to play regular football but mostly featured at wing-back, where his performances were solid but not outstanding.

With Coventry City achieving promotion to the Premier League, Raphael Borges Rodrigues' chances of becoming a first-team squad member for the club look to have drifted even further. Signed as a low-cost punt on potential, Raphael's long

4	0	1
Appearances	Goals	Assists

adaptation period may well have cost him his chance of fighting for a meaningful place in the squad.

Likely to be available for a transfer this summer to recoup some of the money on his investment, Raphael Borges Rodrigues looks to have arrived at a slightly awkward time in his career and the club's trajectory to have made a fair stab at making an impression at Coventry City.

# JANOAH MARKELO

Winger

#24

After two wingers arrived on loan in January, the addition of another shortly before the end of the window was more than a little surprising. Seemingly a deal that the club had been planning that was brought forward, Janoah Markelo barely featured over the final months of the campaign.

Featuring off the bench on a handful of occasions, Markelo has looked a direct runner and willing crosser down the left wing but simply hasn't been on the pitch long enough to make an impact. With the club now promoted to the Premier League, the question is how can someone who struggled to get into a Championship team expect to impact games at a higher level?

In fairness, Markelo arrived at Coventry City at the end of January having not played a competitive match for nearly two months. That quest for fitness looks to have been why didn't feature for the team any sooner, along with the team's exit from the FA Cup meaning that there weren't any low pressure matches for Janoah Markelo to build his fitness with.

It felt more than a little notable that when Coventry City were presented with the trophy and handing out medals in the final home game of the season, Janoah Markelo



5

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

was nowhere to be seen – with even the fourth-choice goalkeeper, Luke Bell, announced onto the pitch for the trophy lift. The final couple of games, once promotion had been won, looked like the perfect opportunity to Markelo to build up minutes but he wasn't even included in matchday squads.

It could well be the case that Janoah Markelo was having some form of injury treated, making pre-season the truer indication of where his status is. Given the club's league position at the top of the table when he arrived, Markelo was seemingly someone brought in with an eye of making an impact in the Premier League. The only thing that can be said based on his first few months at Coventry City is there's no way of telling either way whether he is a top-flight quality player.

# EPHRON

# MASON-CLARK

Winger

#10

After a slow start to life at Coventry City, Ephron Mason-Clark has emerged as one of the team's most important attacking players,

Someone who combines skill on the ball with the upper body strength to muscle off opponents, Ephron Mason-Clark has become hugely valuable for this team in being able to receive the ball in the final third and carry it into dangerous areas. A return of ten goals and six assists in the league this campaign doesn't quite feel an accurate reflection of Mason-Clark's true level of performance.

Much of this past campaign has involved Ephron Mason-Clark being the team's most reliable outlet in converting possession into threat with his blustering runs on the left side of the attack. A lot of Coventry's goals in open play have come either directly or indirectly from Mason-Clark receiving the ball under pressure, creating space and either getting a shot off or cross into the penalty area. There have been plenty of times where that initial shot or cross hasn't led to a goal directly but the chaos that has caused in later phases has done so.

From looking someone a little out of his depth at Championship level initially, Ephron Mason-Clark has emerged as one of



43

Appearances

10

Goals

6

Assists

the best wingers in the division this past campaign. While he's not the fastest, Mason-Clark's physical profile makes him someone who could well impact games at Premier League level, if he's afforded the time to adapt.

Increasingly, the decision to agree to Peterborough United's terms of keeping him on loan for half a season looks a wise move by Coventry City to secure a unique talent. It has allowed the club to recruit someone reaching the peak of their powers, playing a key role in a promotion campaign and looking ready to make the step up.

It's been a slow burn, but Ephron Mason-Clark has to be seen as one of the key signings in the post play-off final rebuild era for Coventry City. Someone who has grown and raised the team's level through his progress.

# TATSUHIRO SAKAMOTO

Winger

#7

Another key signing of the post play-off final rebuild era, Tatsuihiro Sakamoto has been a reliable outlet for the team on the right wing in his three seasons.

The Japanese winger is an industrious presence both on and off the ball. Whether it's his diligence in his defending, or in the skill he shows to repeatedly beat defenders and create space to get crosses into the box, Sakamoto has established himself as a firm fans' favourite because of how reliable his performances are.

After a slow start to the campaign, Tatsuihiro Sakamoto seemed to raise his performance levels after the loan signing of Romain Esse put his place in the team under threat. The winger produced a series of stand-out displays over the final months of the campaign, demonstrating that he has an end product to go with his excellent approach and all-round play.

A key element of Tatsuihiro Sakamoto's time at Coventry City has been his relationship with Milan van Ewijk down the right wing. The duo have an excellent understanding in how to dovetail down that side of the pitch. Whether it's in how they can double up against opponents when pushing forward or how one will drop to cover the other to make sure the team doesn't get caught out,



37

Appearances

7

Goals

3

Assists

they have a preternatural understanding of each other.

Tatsuihiro Sakamoto's industry is going to be important in helping the club make the step up to the Premier League. While the winger isn't the fastest, his work-rate could make him an important piece in the puzzle of a likely relegation battle. Sakamoto is someone who has showed that 100% effort is non-negotiable for him and that quality is likely to be especially important in the coming campaign.

Someone signed after the club had gone on a scouting trip to look at another player, Tatsuihiro Sakamoto has been a huge success at Coventry City who has helped the team grow into a Championship-winning outfit. While he might not be one of the team's star performers, he is reliable in what he provides, making him someone managers love to work with.

# YANG

# MIN-HYEOK

Winger

#18

The first of three wingers signed in January, the addition of Yang Min-hyeok proved to be almost completely unnecessary, with the South Korean barely featuring in the league – especially after the permanent addition of Janoah Markelo.

The hope was that Yang Min-hyeok, off the back of a promising loan spell with Portsmouth, would provide competition for Ephron Mason-Clark out wide, perhaps offering the ability for Frank Lampard to completely change up the wingers in the final half hour of matches and take advantage of tired defences. In practice, Yang looked too physically slight – to an almost alarming degree – to make an impact for the Sky Blues and quickly fell out of favour as the pressure in the promotion race increased.

That Yang Min-hyeok had made an impact for other Championship clubs – both in his time at Portsmouth earlier in the campaign and at Queens Park Rangers the previous year – shows that the Korean probably could have done a job for the team if afforded more patience. The issue for the player was that team was in a high pressure situation and weren't invested in his development. A case of good player, wrong time, perhaps.



4

Appearances

0

Goals

0

Assists

Some of the blame for Yang Min-hyeok's failed loan spell must surely go to whomever at his parent club, Tottenham Hotspur, thought he was likely to go from a relegation-threatened team in the Championship to a promotion chasing one and play meaningful minutes. For Coventry City, there's at least been the benefit of Yang having temporarily reduced the workload on Ephron Mason-Clark, who quickly returned to form after January.

Yang Min-hyeok is will not have left a lasting impression at Coventry City, through no fault of his own. A young player who needed game time, he'll have to hope his parent club picks a better destination for him this coming season.

# NORMAN BASSETTE

Striker

#37

Remember when Coventry City fans thought Norman Bassette was the second-coming of Viktor Gyokeres because he...er...ran around a lot?

The Belgian made himself hugely popular in his first months at the club last season for trying really hard and basically following the archetype of what a fan would do if they had the opportunity to play for the club. The problem was that Bassette seemed to lack any talent when the ball actually landed at his feet.

Two loan spells this past campaign have done little to prove the Norman Bassette-believers' impression that the striker is some great talent who'd been unlucky not to get more chances at Coventry City. One goal in twelve games at Reims in Ligue 2 over the first half of the campaign saw the loan ended early. Two in 16 at Kaiserslautern in the German second-tier was a slightly better return but hardly world-beating.

That loan deal with the German side may not be made permanent but there looks to be interest elsewhere. It seems like Coventry City fans have already seen the last of Norman Bassette, his exit seemingly not contingent on the club's promotion to the top-flight.



0	0	0
Appearances	Goals	Assists

Another gamble of a signing that has been made over the past few years, Norman Bassette showed some initial promise in a Coventry City shirt but never backed that up with meaningful quality. The question is just how much money the club can receive for him to begin to recoup that initial outlay on him.

# ELLIS SIMMS

Striker

#9

It had looked as if Ellis Simms had run out of chances at Coventry City at the start of the campaign. However, the striker learned over this past year how to make an impact with limited minutes, reaching double figures and scoring some important goals on the way to the title.

Ellis Simms has looked like a high maintenance player for much of his time at Coventry City. Someone who needs to be at peak confidence in order to impact games and a run of starts to build said confidence. With Haji Wright signed at the same time for a higher fee, the American has tended to be favoured, and Simms' opportunities have had to be managed around Wright being the main centre-forward. That has cost Simms the chance to fully build a head of steam.

Looking a firm third-choice at the start of the campaign, with Brandon Thomas-Asante's versatility starting to see him favoured ahead of Simms, he eventually learned to plug away in the minutes he was handed and gradually found a groove.

Ellis Simms' work-rate and physical presence made him a useful point of difference in attack to the more enigmatic pace that Haji Wright offered. Someone who could attack crosses and bring others



46

Appearances

14

Goals

2

Assists

into play, Simms became more reliable in tough games when physicality was needed in the final third.

The goalscoring for Ellis Simms this season came in patches - two goals in two games in October, five in three in November, three in three in January, then a hat-trick on the final day - but his performances even without scoring became more reliable as someone who could provide a focal point in attack.

That streakiness, however, could well make him the striker the club look to sell over the summer to make room for someone better able to impact Premier League games. With both Haji Wright and Brandon Thomas-Asante unproven at Premier League level while also being a little more reliable, the team might not be able to afford the patience Ellis Simms requires to adapt to a higher level.

# BRANDON THOMAS-ASANTE

Striker/Winger/Attacking Midfielder

#23



Brandon Thomas-Asante's first season at Coventry City had proved underwhelming, with both Mark Robins and Frank Lampard struggling to find a role for the forward and the player himself struggling to make an impact without a settled place in the team.

One of the team's most dangerous attacking players last season – especially over the first half of the campaign – Brandon Thomas-Asante emerged as a truly valuable part of the team's attack. Starting the season on the right wing, Thomas-Asante found scoring form both there and in a withdrawn forward role.

The Ghanaian forward's pace and energy became key assets to the team's play. Whether it was in how he led the team's pressing with his ability to cover ground though his pace and exuberance, or in his willingness to operate as effectively a second striker in whichever position he started at, offering another presence and scoring threat in the penalty area. At his best last season, Brandon Thomas-Asante was the team's star player.

That he wasn't in serious conversation for player of the season was down to a combination of an injury over the winter months, followed up by a three-game retrospective ban shortly after his return.

34

Appearances

13

Goals

4

Assists

That cost Thomas-Asante some of the momentum that he'd built over the first half of the campaign, relegating him to a supporting role in the final months.

Still, the forward's raw attributes and his enthusiasm make him someone who could be an asset at a higher level. Even if Brandon Thomas-Asante might not be a regular starting player next year, his ability to operate in different attacking positions and offer raw pace and exuberance should make him capable of making a positive impact as one of the first changes on the bench.

He might not be the most refined of footballers, but when the team is likely to be in a battle against the drop, Brandon Thomas-Asante looks to have the willingness and attitude to play his part for the team.

# HAJI WRIGHT

Striker

#11

After missing a big chance in the final minutes of normal time against Sunderland in the play-off semi-final last year, the knives were out for Haji Wright – as they so often have been – but the American has recovered to produce a campaign where he was again the team’s top-scorer.

Coventry City fans have struggled to warm to Haji Wright, who can be a frustratingly inconsistent player lacking a touch of elegance even when playing well, but the numbers have repeatedly shown that he produces the goods regardless of the methodology it takes to get there.

Haji Wright started the campaign looking to have the bit between his teeth in order to earn a place in the United States’ World Cup squad. Eight of Wright’s 17 league goals came before the October international break, with the striker never quite seeming to find the same level of consistency following that – not helped by picking up an injury around November.

Still, his hat-trick against Middlesbrough at the CBS Arena in November is what kick-started Coventry City’s ailing campaign, underlining what he is best at as a centre-forward. Boasting excellent movement and pace, Wright terrorised a high Middlesbrough defensive line.



43

Appearances

18

Goals

2

Assists

Facing Premier League defences next season that will look to step up on Coventry City, there’s every reason to believe that Haji Wright will be able to make the leap to top-flight level. The concerns are that his capriciousness could make him hard to trust in key moments, along with whether he will need to exert more physicality more often in order to get into games.

The club’s record signing, Haji Wright’s contributions over his three years with the Sky Blues have gone a long way to earning Premier League football. It’s only a lack of refinement to his game that has kept some fans cool on him. Wright is someone who has the quality to make the step up but may need a level of patience that some don’t want to afford him to continue making an impact for the club.

# FRANK LAMPARD

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Heading into this season, Frank Lampard had made a positive start to life at Coventry City, but it wasn't clear whether he was reaping the rewards of the hard work that Mark Robins had already put into building the club up or whether he'd made a genuine impact in his own right.

A positive run of form over the winter months that propelled Coventry from the fringes of the relegation place towards the play-offs may have been the headline impact, but performances hadn't been entirely convincing along the way. It could have been argued that this was simply already a good squad starting to regress positively towards its mean level of performance.

If there was a positive sign of what was to come this season, it was in the second leg play-off semi-final performance away at Sunderland. With the home side preparing to roar themselves to Wembley, Coventry proceeded to completely dominate proceedings with a controlled approach in possession. Notably, the one signing made at that point, Matt Grimes, dictated the tempo of the game and the Sky Blues ground Sunderland to dust over the 90 minutes, eventually forcing an equaliser despite some sub-par performances from the attacking players that night.

It stung to lose that game in the final minute of extra-time, but it ultimately laid the groundwork for the season to come under Frank Lampard. A summer to get fitness into players' legs and become better-adapted to the style of play Lampard and his coaching team were looking to introduce meant that Coventry were able to sustain and

Lampard's success has been no fluke, just a combination of hard work and charisma.

improve upon that Sunderland performance over the course of a full campaign.

More than that, Frank Lampard has acted as a key figurehead at the top of the club who has been able to absorb pressure and project confidence. The notion of 'Frank Lampard's Coventry City' had become something of a meme for both Coventry and opposition fans, but there was value in the club being synonymous with its manager.

While it may have taken a little of the shine off the successes as they were seen as Frank Lampard's, when pressure came on the team, it was Lampard who was shouldering it.

During that winter wobble, there was clearly a delight from opposing fans, but it was less directed at Coventry City and more at Frank Lampard. As someone who has dealt with the pressure of being a famous name for almost the entirety of his footballing career, Lampard was uniquely equipped to shoulder the pressure being at the top came with.

Often a target for opposition fans, it's only really been the Southampton away game where Frank Lampard lost his cool at the singling out he received for vitriol. Given what has become known about that football club and its players, that was an understandable slip from Lampard.

On top of instilling the team with a stronger winning mentality, Lampard and his coaching staff have introduced a more modern style of play in keeping with the top clubs. With the full-backs tucking into midfield and Matt Grimes dropping into alongside the centre-backs to control build-up play from deep, the rest of the team is free to flood forward and overwhelm opponents.

A key feature of Coventry City's attacking play under Frank Lampard has been the threat from crossing positions. This has come from players having options in possession to create spaces for crosses, along with players being free to flood the opposing penalty area.

With a big set-piece threat on top of that, Coventry City methodically became the best team in the Championship. While other teams may have sporadically played football that was a little more pleasing on the eye, Coventry had a number of routes to goal and were never reliant on one player and scored more than anyone else. Any argument that any other team in the Championship was actually 'the best' in the division has to end at the points tally and goals scored column.

This wasn't a team expected to take the league by storm, Frank Lampard and his coaching staff turned it into one largely through good coaching. The job Lampard has done with Coventry City has deservedly been recognised by most of the end of season rewards. Lampard's success has been no fluke, just a combination of hard work and charisma.

This past 18 months has gone some way to shaking off Lampard's previous reputation that his managerial career was simply a case of benefitting from opportunities that his playing days earned him. In recruiting him during a nadir in his coaching career, the worry now is that Frank Lampard may look to cash in on that boost to his stock the club has provided.

In the wake of Mark Robins spending seven years at the club, the concept of a Coventry City manager leaving for a better opportunity may seem like a betrayal to some. However, the truth is that most managerial spells end after 18-24 months and if someone can deliver a stronger position within that time-frame, they're justified in moving on rather than risking tarnishing their reputation by hanging around until they get sacked.

As much as Frank Lampard talks about his connection with Coventry City, fans shouldn't forget that he is someone looking to build his career as a manager. The prospect of heading into the Premier League with one of the division's lowest budgets and few proven players at the level will surely give Lampard cause to consider whether he can fulfil his longer-term ambitions with Coventry. A lot of promising managerial careers have come a cropper after a bruising campaign in the top-flight with a newly-promoted club.

Frank Lampard and Coventry City has proven to be a great combination of right club, right manager and right time. That is not always the case in football, which can be a capricious sport. Whether it ends soon or goes on for much longer, there can be little doubt that Lampard has genuine quality as a football manager.

# LOOKING AHEAD

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When Matt Grimes lifted the Championship trophy at the end of the campaign, it was a moment that could well have changed Coventry City as we know it.

The notion that this was a club that always underachieved, lived in a haunted half-full stadium and never won anything may have been gradually eroding away but Premier League football will accelerate that process to its natural conclusion but at the cost of adding a whole new slew of anxieties.

The top-flight is a very different place in 2026 to the one Coventry City exited in 2001. England's top clubs now exist as this gilded elite above pretty much the rest of world football. Eyes around the globe are on this division in a way no other sporting league is. It is a hyper-globalised, corporate environment, not just the top division of English football.

The most obvious thing to be prepared for is just about everyone suddenly having an opinion on Coventry City. It is a trend that has been building over the past few years – just look at some of the nonsense under every single Twitter post from the club these days – but it will only accelerate once the exhausting Premier League content machine kicks off in the weeks before the campaign starts and preview content starts being spewed out. Even people who don't know much about football will have an opinion on Coventry.

There will be little honeymoon period for Coventry City to adapt to top-flight football. Every reaction to the slightest moment of weakness will be completely out of proportion, rendered by the dizzying global scale of the Premier League. Sky

This coming season needs to be about building on the existing foundations in place that can cement Coventry City's status

Blues fans are going to have to develop tough skin to accept that not everyone's opinions about the club are worth taking heed of.

The World Cup will at least buy some break in the tedious build-up of transfer gossip that has threatened to make it a long, boring summer for the Sky Blues. It will afford some shelter from the ever-hungry news media machine gorging itself on content when really there's nothing happening.

By the time that fans take their places at the CBS Arena for the first home game of the Premier League campaign, the place will feel very different to the one they walked away from after that trophy lift. More corporatised, better set up for media, likely a changed atmosphere that will take some getting used to. That was already a process taking place over the past few years as attendances increase, but the Premier League will add a more aggressive shine to it.

For Coventry City fans, there remains something within our power, the atmosphere of home games. This past campaign has shown how easily the club could become just like any other one that has grown accustomed to top-level football. Support being conditional on the performance of the team, long moments of quiet, an arrogant expectancy of looking to be entertained. It doesn't have to be like that.

One of my main hopes for the upcoming campaign is that a likely relegation battle will inspire the fanbase to make noise again. It could feel like the whole world is against us at times, offended that this club has the gumption to think it can compete at the highest level. The Sky Blues are going to be the underdogs in just about every game they face next year, hopefully a move away from expecting to win every week will see the atmosphere of those first post-COVID seasons return, when Coventry found its voice again.

As for how the team will do, it's impossible to say at the time of writing. While Leeds United and Sunderland showed this past season that promoted clubs can compete in the Premier League, the past five years or so have shown that those two are exceptions to the rule. Most of the promoted teams have been relegated and barely come close to surviving, the expectation should be that anything above that would be an achievement this coming season.

It's clear that Coventry City are not in a position to be able to replace the entire squad with Premier League-ready players – not that such a strategy would be sensible. As such, expectations have to be scaled back from trying to replicate Sunderland, or even

Leeds United, and more towards how Coventry can find their own way to compete in the top-flight.

There will be a balance to be struck between tweaking the style that got the team promoted and not changing so much that the team loses its identity. If Coventry approach games like they did this last season, they could be picked off against higher quality opponents. Equally, if Frank Lampard tries to change everything, there might not be much to show for a year in the top-flight were relegation to happen.

The minimum expectation this coming season should be less about survival at any cost and more about what can be done to put this club in a position to sustain Premier League football over the long term – even if that involves relegation. Given that this is a squad that wasn't expected to win automatic promotion 12 months ago, there's no guarantee that it would return to the Championship and expect to win it again – especially if one or two star players leave and with Matt Grimes another year older.

This coming season needs to be about building on the existing foundations in place that can cement Coventry City's status as a top-flight prospect over years to come. A year of losing most weeks while being forced to spend a load on transfer fees and wages has the potential to be hugely damaging to the club's trajectory – just ask Luton Town.

Ultimately, by August and then the following May, Coventry City is going to be completely transformed as a football club via the fact of being a Premier League team. The scary thing is that there is no guarantee that it will be for the better.

As fans, the task is to take charge of what we're in control of. The global focus on the club could easily see the image of Coventry City taken out of our hands. Crystal Palace feels a great example of an equivalent-sized club that have retained a strong matchday identity despite having had a long spell in the top-flight.

25 years after relegation from the top-flight, Coventry City are set to walk back into a very different division. There will be no getting ready for what it will truly feel like, but efforts must be made to ensure that this golden opportunity to permanently transform this football club doesn't spin out of control.

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