

## Review of the Season

Where Leeds United have been concerned, the race for the First Division Championship has sometimes seemed like the fabled contest between the tortoise and the hare. As often as Don Revie's side have fled the blocks in a seemingly invincible sprint, they have been caught and overtaken at the end of the race by more durable, if less distracted, opponents. Cynics could be forgiven, during the latter weeks of the 1973-74 season, for sensing the forming of a similar pattern. For between February 23 and March 30, Leeds United were beaten four times – a remarkable statistic in the light of their consistent form over ten First Division years, and particularly odd because until that February afternoon at Stoke's Victoria Ground they had not lost a League game all season.

It had been a start almost without precedent. After 20 games they were still unbeaten and had achieved the best post-War beginning to a Division One season. When they met Stoke they had extended that impressive statistic to 29 matches; nine points ahead of Liverpool, the competition for the Championship was surely at an end. Yet that trophy has been a mirage of the most teasing kind for the Elland Road club. Never less than fourth in nine previous seasons, only once had they been victorious. Throughout March the neurosis of that past began to show. A defeat at Anfield had double significance as Liverpool efficiently started to close the gap; Leeds' staggering 4-1 home beating by out-of-touch Burnley added to the slide, while another loss at struggling West Ham pushed them to the brink.

That they never toppled over reflects tremendous credit on the maturity of players who had begun the season with an extra burden upon them. Leeds were on trust from the Football Association because of two years of indiscipline on the field. An appalling record of bookings and sendings-off had been answered by the threat of a fine of £3000, which would be implemented if their conduct failed to improve. Thus their League Championship success, sealed in the week before the last Saturday of the season when Liverpool lost at home to Arsenal, had a double flavour of satisfaction. The real threat of another last moment failure had been thrust aside and, in the main, the undoubted quality of Leeds' play had lost its cynicism without losing its effectiveness.

Leeds undoubtedly enjoyed a rare singleness of purpose which followed an early exit from Europe and a sensational Cup defeat by Bristol City; in the final analysis it was Liverpool, eventual Cup-winners, who suffered the distractions. But the Yorkshire club had their own handicaps in a series of injuries which robbed them of the motivating skills of Giles, the drive of Jones, and the electric if enigmatic Eddie Gray for long periods. In the new climate McQueen and Jordan flourished, while David Harvey threw off for all time the challenge of Gary Sprake.

While Liverpool spent much of the year out of arm's reach, they nevertheless held second place with much of the certainty with which Leeds led. Though they never found goalscoring easy, such was the certainty of their defence that one shot often ensured two points. Even when serious injuries robbed the back four of Lawler and Lloyd, none of the cement was missing in the reconstruction; Hughes and young Thompson sealed the centre of the defence while Tommy Smith, relieved of the captaincy and apparently on his way to another club after an altercation with Bill Shankly, produced revelatory form in a revised role at right-back.

Among the few clubs not tainted by the threat of relegation in the new world of 'three-down' were Derby County, who overcame the internal explosion generated by the departure of Brian Clough, and Ipswich, for whom Bobby Robson continued to produce starlets from his own kindergarten. Promoted Queen's Park Rangers and Burnley both spent almost all of the season in the top half of the table, and Rangers in particular unveiled a side of character, cheek, and an astonishing ability to combine both qualities in creating a succession of goals from free-kicks.

But elsewhere the spectre of Second Division football hovered. Just four Saturdays from the end of the season, ten clubs were in serious danger of going down. Threatened West Ham produced an unbeaten run through January into March that in previous years would have guaranteed salvation but only became technically safe with their last game. Stoke too, down among the early strugglers, showed great form around Christmas with a burst of eleven games without defeat and yet still remained in the mire; only another fine end-of-season show of consistency hauled them to safety and eventually fifth place.

At the end of the dog-fight, Southampton became the first club to suffer under the new ruling, but their plight was eclipsed by the demise of Manchester United. Conceding barely more than a goal a game, United's failure lay in the area that had for so long been their strength. They knew they would be without the goals from Law and Charlton for the first time in a decade, but not the crippling and permanent loss of Ian Moore with an incurable ankle injury. George Best, back once more from 'retirement', was but a shadow of his former self, and on New Year's Day he made what surely was his last appearance in a United shirt.

Tommy Docherty could not muster enough goals from either promising youngsters or expensive Scots to avoid the drop. McIlroy topped their League scoring list with just six goals, and the dearth of attacking power was never more evident than in goalkeeper Alex Stepney's heading of that chart for several weeks with but two penalties to his name. If United's downfall had all the sadness that inevitably surrounds the dereliction of a stately home, the immediate end came in circumstances that were both shameful and ironic. The irony occurred when a sad-faced Denis Law backheeled the goal which finally put United down, and it heralded disgraceful behaviour from a contingent of their supporters. Invading the pitch, they succeeded in their intention of having the game abandoned; their futile act only inflicted wounds on a reputation already beginning to tarnish.

Southampton and Norwich City, successful in their brinksmanship a year earlier, were both relegated under new managers; Laurie McMenemy and John Bond. Much of Southampton's stay in the First Division had been guaranteed by forwards of the calibre of Davies, Chivers, and Channon scoring more goals than a succession of leaky defences conceded. McMenemy's faith in attack again only papered over the cracks at the back. His outlay of £175,000 on Peter Osgood epitomised his philosophy, but neither the uneasy ex-Chelsea forward or the more in-form Channon could fashion enough goals to avoid the drop.

This left Birmingham, who began the season with twelve games without a win, as the more dramatic of the escapists; six points from their last four games tugged them above Southampton, vindicating the gamble of manager Freddie Goodwin, who sold Bob Latchford to Everton in a complicated £350,000 deal which brought Kendall and Styles and spending money to St Andrews in his place.

The Second Division became a tale of two Charltons, both in their first season of managership. Jack cast his Middlesbrough very much in the image of his former club; like Leeds, they built on an utterly reliable defence and though goals flowed at the end of the season they played several goal-less draws in the early period which established their status in the Division. Like Leeds, they stretched out in front of the field, but for Middlesbrough there was no suggestion of a faltering step and they finished champions by a staggering record margin of 15 points. Behind them, Luton, at the end of their journey to the Fourth Division and back, reclaimed the First Division status they lost in 1960, while Carlisle joined the élite for the first time by taking the newly created third spot in the last gasp of the season when Orient failed to beat Aston Villa at home and go up themselves.

For Bobby Charlton, initial managerial experience proved far less salutary. Though he buttressed his side with former United colleagues Stiles, Burns, and Sadler, his team collected only 12 goals and two wins in their last 18 Second Division games, and inevitably relegation followed. Swindon tasted an equally distressing season, while the third relegation place eventually fell to Crystal Palace and Malcolm Allison. In an extraordinary season, Palace did not win until November 10, their 16th League game. Then followed a consistent acceleration that seemed certain to keep them in Division Two until the loss of their last two home games proved fatal.

The Third Division, too, had its own front runner. Bristol Rovers emulated the form of both Leeds and Middlesbrough over the first two-thirds of the season, remaining undefeated for 27 games. But an injury to Alan Warboys disrupted a partnership with Bruce Bannister that produced 40 goals, and in the final run-in Oldham emerged from the pack of clubs behind them to take the Championship by a point. Rovers, in second place, earned promotion along with York City.

The most goals of the season, 90, came from Gillingham – 31 of them from striker Brian Yeo – and it guaranteed them promotion from the Fourth Division. For much of the year they were engaged in a three-cornered battle for the Championship with Colchester and Noel Cantwell's Peterborough, who eventually won it and reclaimed a Third Division place that they had lost through an F.A. punishment. Bury's consistency in the latter part of the year gained them the fourth spot.

Inevitably the pattern of events on the field had its influence from issues and factions off it. One noticeable trend involved a new term 'player-power' which manifested itself in two ways; either the players took public, rather than more personal, issue, with decisions taken in club board rooms, or the views of the players held considerable sway in determining the outcome of those decisions,

Of the former type, the parting of Brian Clough and Derby County almost brought strike action from unhappy players. Clough left after a long-standing dispute with Derby chairman Mr Sam Longson, following a six-year period in which he had refashioned the club from an average Second Division side to First Division champions and European Cup semi-finalists. The players, most of whom had accompanied him all the way along that route, reacted so uneasily to his departure that for several bitter weeks they refused to accept a former team-mate, Dave Mackay, recruited immediately from Nottingham Forest as a replacement.

Ron Saunders, who began the season as manager of Norwich City and ended it out of work, felt the effect of the two faces of the unity of players. When he resigned at Carrow Road after a row with the club chairman only his personal intervention prevented a repetition of events at Derby as the players protested. Four months later it was the voice of his new charges at Manchester City which was influential in his dismissal. Saunders had been openly brought in by directors to alter the 'trendy' image of the club and its performers; though he had brief satisfaction in leading Manchester City out for a League Cup final, just as he had at Norwich 12 months earlier, there was no mix to the philosophies of the old and the new, and it was the old, epitomised by the players, which forced the directors to retract and won the day.

Ironically Saunders' last match in charge was at Queen's Park Rangers, where City limply conceded a three-goal defeat. The next day, while Saunders' fate was being determined, there was much of the voice of the Rangers players behind an announcement that Jackie Mansell, their coach for just two weeks, was being relieved of his duties 'because of a clash of personalities'.

Players, too, had their say on Sunday football, which by necessity was introduced to solve the problem of the lack of floodlights through an industrial dispute in another industry. There were dissenting cries from some who felt that it destroyed a footballer's weekend, but those who spoke out were rarely from the lower divisions, where teams played before much larger crowds on a Sunday morning or afternoon than they had been previously doing on a Saturday. The experiment, which was switched off when floodlighting was switched on again, could not be conclusively tested over such short a period, but it provided a welcome stimulus as overall attendances again dropped. Crowd figures of 5630 for Hartlepool v Stockport and 6000 for Barnsley v Reading made warm reading.

Transfer fees increased in what was inevitably a seller's market. A generally agreed paucity of good players meant that star names were invariably assets that clubs hung on to, so that when a talent became available, the bidding furiously pushed up the fee. Hudson to Stoke for £240,000, Osgood to Southampton for £275,000, Latchford to Everton and Tueart and Horswill to Manchester City in complex deals in which valuations were agreed at well over the £300,000 mark – all transfers in which the buyer was looking for goals scored or created. This overriding logic of the market surely made the bargain-of-the-year Fulham's purchase of Bobby Moore for a mere £25,000.

The problem of discipline on the field showed encouraging improvement in one department; considerably less mis-use was made of the appeal system to free players for important fixtures, and the more dramatic problem of control involved spectators rather than players. The extent to which television should be allowed to cover League matches was also a lively subject for debate as a three-year contract came to its end.

In all, it was a season which fell much under the shadow of England's performance at international level. Consolation could be found in the competitive quality of the play in all four divisions but in the final analysis every Football League club suffered because of England's failure to qualify for the World Cup. And for all the achievement of Leeds, Middlesbrough, and the rest the relationship between the grass roots of the League and the withered blossom of international success is perhaps the crucial issue to carry forward into 1975.