

Review of the Season

If the 1974-75 season will not linger in the memory for the quality of the end product, it will certainly be remembered for the thrill and intrigue of League competition in which a levelling-off of standards ensured that many of the critical issues remained undecided until the last few days of April.

The First Division Championship provided a case in point. Unlike many recent seasons there was no Leeds, Liverpool, or Arsenal to set the sort of pace that burned off most challengers well before the final run-in. Everton, Stoke, Ipswich, Burnley, Liverpool Derby, and Middlesbrough all retained a realistic interest into the last month of competition.

Like the very best of horse races it was a situation tailor-made for the late run, and Derby County fashioned that form to emerge from the bunch and take their second title in four years by a short head. Without detracting from their success, it highlighted the dearth of a really outstanding side because they had been able to overcome a disastrous start to the season, normally a disease malignant to championship hopes, when they won just one of their first seven League games. Indeed, their final total of just 53 points was the lowest since Chelsea's win twenty years earlier.

Nevertheless, it provided a quite remarkable triumph for Dave Mackay. Not only had he been able to motivate players who had threatened strike action a year earlier when he arrived to succeed Brian Clough, but his purchases, Rioch from Aston Villa and the revitalised Lee from Manchester City, scored the goals that mattered. Indeed, the midfield concentration of the sharp skills of Rioch, Newton, and Gemmill formed the cornerstone of the victory; no battering Rams here. And all this without, until the very last gasp, the commanding presence of the injured Roy McFarland.

For so long it had seemed that Everton, less flamboyant but more consistent, would be Leeds' successors. Criticised from within football and without for negative and over-aggressive attitudes, they reached the half-way mark of the season with but one defeat to their name. But manager Billy Bingham will reflect that the points lost in a staggering eighteen draws proved fatal as a young side finally lost their belief over their last few fixtures. Further pain came when they finally finished below Liverpool after heading them for almost the entire season. That Liverpool, now without the drive of the messianic Shankly, could earn second place with only the occasional stammer of their very best form again emphasised the paucity of the highest standards.

Ipswich and Stoke matched the attraction of Derby, but inexperience and the demands of other tournaments for the former and a cruel run of injuries, including five broken legs, for the latter hampered their causes. Middlesbrough and Burnley faded at the final inquisition while Leeds United lost their title in 44 days of trauma in August and September, the span of Brian Clough's reign as managerial successor to Don Revie. The irony was inescapable; whereas players had threatened strike action when Clough left Derby, it was the Leeds players whose discontented broodings provided this new downfall. If Clough's behaviour lacked a sensitivity towards the feelings of his team towards his predecessor, it in no way matched the callousness of the Leeds board, whose total belief in Clough turned to total disbelief in an extraordinarily short space of time.

The second season of 'three-up, three-down', boosted again by the similarity of teams' abilities, provided a breathtaking relegation battle. Carlisle tasted the euphoria of heading the table on the first lap of the race but a succession of defeats by the odd goal, again emphasising the equality in the division, sent them down. Luton, too, failed to consolidate after promotion, though six wins in their last ten games almost produced some masterful escapology. That quality was reserved for Spurs, under the helm of Terry Neill following the retirement of Bill Nicholson. In nine games in the new year they scored three goals and took one point, before Easter brought a resurgence and safety at the expense of Chelsea, who, with their ground improvements, suffered a financial as well as an emotional tragedy.

The West London Club must draw hope from the experience of Manchester United, who bounced straight back from the Second Division with frenetic support though a violent minority left scars to the club's reputation around the country. Norwich, too, regained their status at the expense of Sunderland, whose early challenge surprisingly died, while Aston Villa's wheel turned full circle after their decline eight years earlier. Encouraged by their League Cup run, Villa's end of season form became impeccable

with a devastating finish of twenty-six goals and eight straight wins.

Sadly, another club of proud history, Sheffield Wednesday, took the opposite route - with the season's most remarkable statistic, just two League goals in their last 17 Second Division games - along with Millwall and Cardiff City. In Divisions Three and Four, the attractive styles of Plymouth, Blackburn, Charlton, and Mansfield were duly rewarded, while Chester, like Villa sustained by their League Cup form, put one sad record behind them. At the start of the season they had been the only club who had never savoured the taste of promotion, but when Lincoln lost at Southport on the last Tuesday of the season, Chester took the fourth promotion place by four-hundredths of a goal!

Perhaps the sharpness of the competition was partly to blame for a drastic backslide in discipline which saw a record 110 players being sent off, a style sadly etched at the outset when Keegan and Bremner were dismissed from the FA Charity Shield match, an inauspicious beginning to the first of such occasions to be held at Wembley. But the competitiveness was certainly a factor in a pleasing if slight rise in overall average attendances.

Politically, the players continued in their attempts to alter the conditions of their employment to their clubs by lobbying for freedom of contract, an attempt to alter the present system which permits a club to retain the registration of a player even when his contract runs out. They must continue their negotiations without one of their most persuasive advocates, Derek Dougan, whose retirement as a player after 18 seasons ends his term as chairman of the Professional Footballers' Association. A farewell, too, to Denis Law, who chose his World Cup appearance with Scotland as his finale to fifteen years of charisma and goalscoring swagger.

Whatever new system of employment the players and their management eventually resolve it seems that transfers will no longer be conducted at inflated prices. A peak was reached in November when Stoke paid Leicester £350,000 for the services of Peter Shilton. But the conditions which created a sellers' market no longer prevailed, and for many clubs survival itself in an awkward economic climate became a main priority. And for all the fervent competition that the season had provided, the year ended on a note of depression as large numbers of players were freed by clubs who had been forced to operate on the most stringent economies. The future of next season depends very largely on how well these clubs can master that challenge.