

Pressures of To-day's Football

by Brian James

The 1971-72 season might be remembered by history as that which began with overdue attempts to protect players from each other; and ended with a evidence of a clear need to protect players from themselves. It cannot be often that the incidents of football, the matches and the performances of individuals are so over-shadowed by the larger issues of the game.

The first month of the season was made dramatic by a secretly-taken decision of the Football League to clamp down on discipline and, in particular, the notorious tackle from the back that for years had set British football aside from all other. As the statistics of players booked and ordered off mounted the world could have been forgiven for believing that British players had gone suddenly mad, whereas the truth was that British football was belatedly finding its sanity. We shall see later the consequences of their campaign.

But it was the final month of the season that the years may show was the most significant, a month in which first one voice, then another, was heard in protest about the strains - physical and mental - that the domestic and international fixture schedules were placing on the country's better players.

Dr Brian Curtin, of Tottenham Hotspur, may have started it by forecasting that the top players would be 'burnt out' by the time they were 28. Arsenal manager Bertie Mee followed up by declaring that the issue was 'the most important subject that had arisen in the game for years. We are ruining our players with what we are demanding of them'.

Suddenly from every quarter similar doubts and fears were expressed. Nor was the evidence merely verbal. Francis Lee of Manchester City was taken, exhausted, to hospital. Alan Mullery of Spurs declared himself out of England's future after a tired, tense national team had been eliminated from the European Championship by West Germany. Partially at the request of the senior players, an England tour was then cancelled; Hudson of Chelsea, Todd of Derby, both declined chances to tour with Sir Alf Ramsey and Young England. The word 'fatigue' was on their lips, too. It is only slight exaggeration to suggest that the mood below the stands was close to mutiny.

No man was closer to the problem than Dr Neil Phillips, honorary medical officer to the F.A. He is in no doubt of the seriousness of the situation. 'My view is that, as medical people, we just don't know enough about the strains and stresses that we are putting on our elite of players, the stars who are important to the top ten club sides in the country and the same people on whom the burdens fall in international football. But we ought to be doing everything we can to find out.

'Playing Saturday, Wednesday, Saturday . . . week in and week out, year after year, in a highly competitive atmosphere at a high level of physical commitment can impose appalling strains. Take the physical side first: What bothers me is that players get no chance to recover from minor injuries, we (that is the clubs) are forced to send them out half-recovered, straight off the treatment table. And chronic conditions can develop from small injuries that, in another era, would have been cured once and for all with proper treatment and rest. Soft-tissues injuries, bruises, need 48 hours complete rest before the muscle should be asked to function again. Present-day stars simply don't get the chance and permanently-damaged muscles may be the end result.

'We have already seen some evidence of this in the long-standing pelvic disorders suffered by men like Alan Ball, Alan Mullery and Bob McNab. These conditions started with minor groin strains that were not properly rested; I am afraid that other chronic conditions of this sort may soon start to show. We must be alert for the signs.

'Yet even this is not the main problem. The emotional and mental effects on players of playing to the schedules of today, may well be a more serious danger. Players are competitive - they have to be - and so they will know the extremes of elation and disappointment. The list of pressures on them is endless. They exert pressures on themselves because of their own ambitions. Money, the bonuses they play for that can

make all the difference to their standard of living, add to that weight. Then, team mates put pressures on them, for football is a team game and one man's failure may be a team's disaster. The coaches and managers put pressure on them, for the success of the bosses is tied to the players' performance. The directors, the crowds, even their own families, all exert pressures for their own reasons on the player. Everyone wants success for his or her team – but the buck stops with the player.

'To know the total weight of such tensions the ordinary man in the street should ask himself how he would feel if he were promoted in his job, or how he would feel if he were suddenly sacked. Players, in effect, know exactly these extremes – every three days of their lives . . . getting promotion . . . getting sacked . . . Just think of it.

'Most men could withstand such strains for a short period, perhaps a whole year. But when it becomes part of the pattern of life, year after year, the burden becomes frightening. What worries me most, however, is the way in which players voluntarily add to these pressures by their commercial interests outside the game. In addition to everything else they get themselves tied up in businesses – concerned about contracts, schedules, royalties, meetings, fees, public appearances and so on. The problem of business alone can send small shopkeepers running to their doctors, yet players let themselves in for precisely similar worries on top of everything else on their minds.

I have noticed the change in top players over the past few years, a sort of disenchantment with the game. A lack of sparkle. One finds oneself looking around a dressing room like an officer looking at his men in the trenches in the First World War – which ones will crack when the shelling starts, and which will still have the nerve left to go over the top?

'Worry, for some of these players, has become a way of life. That can't be right and eventually some of them, those with the weakest personalities, will crack. I am not saying they'll go loony, but they will reach a point at which they can't go on. They will get into a state of acute anxiety, even a mild nervous collapse, in which they will become useless. We have not been confronted with this problem long enough to have all the answers, but we had better start looking for them now.

'We may well get to the state when football has to protect these top players from themselves; stop asking them to play the number of games we now demand. And then perhaps the clubs will have to prevent them making life harder by being involved in business interests while they are still playing.'

In the light of that gloomy appraisal most of what happened in the year seems insignificant, yet the League's campaign for fairer football still deserves attention. It began with the secret briefing of referees on the first Sunday of the season – when specific instructions about specific types of misconduct were laid down. The immediate effects were alarming, with players and clubs protesting they had not been consulted, or even warned, before the axe fell. Cautions ran into dozens, then hundreds, as players discovered that offences that had become part of the pattern of their game were now banned absolutely.

Yet, slowly but certainly, footballers came to terms with the new code, and it is impossible to doubt that a saner, more just, style of football began to evolve. Sadly, the referees' zeal was not matched by uniformity in the disciplinary committees and, after several famous miscreants had escaped the consequences of their conduct, players found it well worth their while to appeal constantly to the committees against the decision made in the field. (By January, 139 appeals against cautions had been registered, compared with perhaps 10 in a normal full year!) Unsurprisingly, the referees' enthusiasm abated as their authority was undermined, and even the League were not pretending that more than 75 per cent of officials were obeying the new code by the season's end.

This apparent contrast in attitude between the League and F.A. led to more formal conflict when the League brought out its own plans to take over disciplinary matters concerning their own employees, and to begin a 'points' system for a scale of set punishments for a list of set crimes. The F.A. were unenthusiastic about this idea, and the Government's insistence that football should rule according to the spirit of the Industrial Relations Act (providing opportunity for appeals for penalised workers) added a further

complication. Yet the signs are that as a result of meetings this summer, a new system for maintaining order in football would emerge – and the League's determination to redress the balance between the skilled and the merely strong will be perpetuated for the unarguable good of the British game.

Indeed, despite the fuss about its launching and the doubts about the way it finally drifted, the League's campaign had just a few certain and admirable consequences, perhaps best instanced by the case of George Eastham. Eastham, the former Arsenal and England forward whose skill was as abundant as his inability to express it consistently among bigger, tougher men was evident, had left Stoke to play in South Africa, apparently finished with an English game he had illuminated but could not dominate.

The signs that football was at last placing greater value on skill, and was at last prepared to protect those who possessed it, prompted Stoke manager Tony Waddington to recall Eastham. Waddington's judgement and hope were justified as Stoke – a club that had won nothing in over 100 years of existence – played through to win finally the League Cup. To reach Wembley they had to play a marathon set of four matches with the equally skilled West Ham. Each of the games was fine in itself – taken as a series they were superb, with a Gordon Banks save from Hurst's penalty and a spell in goal by Bobby Moore mere incidental highlights.

But it was the climax at Wembley with Eastham finally striking the goal which beat Chelsea that most of us saw as a significant omen of improving times. Stoke might even have made it a double, for it took an aberrational decision by a linesman to defeat them when confronted with Arsenal's power in an F.A. Cup semi-final replay at Everton. Arsenal, despite the influential presence of Alan Ball (one of the £200,000 signings who made this, too, a year of significant inflation in the transfer market), did not long survive this one piece of luck their cool football needed: at Wembley they were out-run and finally overcome by Leeds United who thus took their first F.A. Cup in the competition's Centenary Year.

But both these cup campaigns, like ALL cup campaigns, came as drama-on-the-day chapters in the longer-running story of the chase for the League championship. There have been few more erratically begun, more tautly-finished, campaigns than that of 1971–72, and fewer deserving of a fairer climax than it was eventually to receive.

For the first weeks, football could talk of nothing but the start made by Sheffield United, promoted from Division Two, and by their own manager's admission a side of players 'picked up in Woolworth rather than Harrods'. United caught London's attention by taking on and beating the double-holders, Arsenal, on their own ground, and then proceeded to barnstorm around the country adding scalps. They played bright and aggressive football in those starting weeks, but the championship is for marathon men, not sprinters, and by early winter the drive had gone and football looked elsewhere for the champions.

They seemed to have been found at first at Manchester United, where Frank O'Farrell, a new manager, had given a famous team a new impetus. A revived Denis Law, a vibrantly effective George Best, scored goal after improbable goal, and the rest of the United pack fought to protect those leads. O'Farrell seemed strangely cool about the prospects and when, in December, Best's form evaporated that pessimism was seen to be justified. Gradually an eight-point lead was eroded and by January it was seen that a better-balanced team must emerge to take the title.

By late spring four contenders had survived – Leeds U., Liverpool, Manchester C. and Derby Co., and with Wolverhampton W. and Arsenal fading slowly from contention, this quartet went stride for stride into the last month and into the tightest finish the League championship has ever known. Every Saturday, every mid-week round of fixtures, seemed to give first one, then another, the edge; each of many improbable results then followed to confound predictions.

Manchester C. were the first to drop out, beaten by Ipswich T. Yet on Cup Final day, once by tradition the last day of the season, three teams could still take the title: Derby Co., who led the League table with their programme completed. Liverpool, who had one match left at Highbury and Leeds U. Leeds who had played magnificently to

overcome the handicap of playing the first eight matches away from home (the result of an F.A. ban on their ground because of crowd disorder), were clear favourites in Final week. And even the decision of the League – harsh, unexplained and perhaps inexplicable – that Leeds U. must play their final match, at Wolves, 48 hours after the Cup Final, seemed merely to add one more unfair obstacle to a team that had overcome so much.

In the event it was one obstacle too many. Leeds U., despite abandoning all celebration of their F.A. Cup victory and driving north within the hour to prepare for Molineux on Monday, were beaten by Wolves, the refusal of at least one certain penalty adding injustice to injury. The title, and the 'double', had gone. Liverpool's chance vanished on that same night – at Highbury they found Arsenal inflamed rather than dejected by Wembley defeat and so could not muster the win that would have taken them to the top.

So it was that the Derby Co. players, actually out of the country on holiday in Spain, heard themselves declared champions in their absence. Derby's bright football did not make them undeserving of the honour, yet the manner of victory remains somehow unsatisfying.

Great football honours, one feels, should be taken on the field on the day, with the winners coming off bathed in sweat and jubilation to have their feat acknowledged by the people who were there when it came; not like hammer-throwers who make their throw and retire to a bench to wait and discover whether rivals can improve on the score. None of this is Derby's fault (indeed they could argue that they DID win their title in face-to-face combat by beating Leeds a little earlier). Rather is it the fault of a too-crowded fixture list, the endless proliferation of meaningless extra competitions, which removes all elasticity from the season and almost guarantees an untidy, anti-climatic, end. But it does explain why Derby Co.'s first championship should have been greeted with only vague appreciation.

The First Division contest, of course, was not all about winning. A group of clubs found it only too easy to keep losing, among them C. Palace who, despite an extraordinary week of transfers (when they sold Kember and Birchenall for £270,000 and bought five reinforcements with the proceeds), found eventual safety only very late in the season. Survival in the First Division was eventually denied to Huddersfield, a worthy, hard-working team who lacked only the time to acquire polish, and Nottingham F. whose sale of their star Ian Storey-Moore to Manchester U. was seen by some as a gesture of surrender to the impending fate.

Similar criticism was made of Q.P.R. who allowed Rodney Marsh to join Manchester C. for another £200,000-plus when they apparently had a fine chance of promotion. Sting went out of that accusation when Q.P.R., minus Marsh, continued to pick up points at an even faster rate than before, and when Manchester C., with Marsh, dropped the few fatal points that cost them a title. The vacant First Division places went, finally, to Norwich C., promoted for the first time as a reward for a season-long steadiness, and to Birmingham C., who recovered bravely from an F.A. Cup semi-final trouncing by Leeds U., to inch ahead of Millwall and Q.P.R.

Birmingham C. can be said to have had no other choice than to succeed, for the effect of failure would have been disastrous in a city already wavering towards total commitment to their rivals Aston Villa. Villa, gaining staggering support from the fans, came bursting out of the Third Division with an authority that left observers wondering only how they had got themselves down there in the first place. Brighton out-lasted Bournemouth in a south-coast chase to keep Villa company.

Perhaps the most notable performances of the lower divisions were those of Brentford, who used a tiny squad to gain promotion from Division Four, and Wrexham, the poorish Division Three side who ended Cardiff's monopoly of the Welsh Cup – and so gained a back-door place into the European football usually reserved for the giants.

Much else happened in football: the first shock and sadness of Asa Hartford's 'hole in the heart' non-transfer to Leeds U., and his then unconcerned march into the Scottish national team. . . . Mullery's apparent rejection by Tottenham H., and his immediate return to captain them to triumph in the U.E.F.A. Cup (they beat Wolves in the all-English final) . . . the emergence of Kevin Keegan, at Liverpool, as the outstanding 'find' of the

season . . . the conflict between clubs over the controversial 'loaning' of players . . . the problems presented to poor clubs by the recommendation of the Wheatley Commission into crowd-safety standards, and the vastly more worrying implication of the Government's decision to make Soccer liable to Value Added Tax . . . and, of course, many, many fine matches, memorable individual displays.

Yet, on balance, it was those first sounds of alarm about the pressure on players that are likely to resound longest from season 1971–72. When George Best flew to Spain in May declaring that he was finished with football, a victim of the game's attendant stresses, the feelings of those he left behind were mixed. Some argued that the game was better off without his tantrums, others that football could scarce afford the loss of one of its few unique talents. But none dare dispute that in Best football had had its clearest warning yet of the need to find a way to protect players from themselves.

Internationally British football ended the season in turmoil. England, having completed the dismissal of teams such as Malta, Greece and Switzerland during the first part of the year, found themselves confronted with West Germany in the quarter-final of the Nations Cup. Remembering Wembley and 1966, remembering Leon and 1970, the pairing was piquant to say the least and many were the column-miles of newsprint expended on the prospects.

In advance the issue seemed clear enough: England would win at Wembley, as of right, but would they win by a sufficiently large margin to guarantee survival in the return in Berlin? There seemed little else to debate. In the event all forecasts missed the point because Germany came to Wembley not merely to defend, but instead attacked England with verve and skill enough to win 3-1. England's lack of a ball-winning midfield player was held to be the reason for defeat, yet this simple solution ignored the greater reality that the Germans were a faster, fitter and infinitely more *skilful* side.

A great deal of advice was poured out for Sir Alf Ramsey's benefit before the return – advice now not on how to protect an England lead, but rather on how to save a desperate situation. Ramsey, ignoring almost all of it, chose a hardened team of experienced players, and while England never looked capable of recouping what was already lost, played tightly enough to avert further disaster. Even achieving this limited object did not save Sir Alf, and his team, from further abuse, and it was a tight-lipped and resentful squad (minus regulars like Hurst, Lee and Mullery) which came home to prepare for the Home championship.

From the first moment the Home title seemed tailor-made to fit Scotland. The Scots, taken over by Tommy Docherty in mid-season, were already feeling the effects of their new manager's presence and the selection in the squad of some of the younger 'Anglos' seemed to provide a nice contrast with Sir Alf's much-criticised adherence to his tried and trusted regulars.

England started well enough, beating Wales in Cardiff to earn restrained praise, but Scotland disposed of Ireland to keep, at least, abreast. Midweek the picture changed; Ireland went to Wembley and a goal by captain Neill undermined and defeated an England team including newcomers Todd, Currie and Lloyd. The ridicule poured now upon England took predictably little account of the fact that these were precisely the sort of changes many critics had advocated since Berlin. Next night Scotland overcame the Welsh and, with England due at Hampden for their final match, the issue seemed to revolve around Ireland's chances of sharing the title with the Scots.

But England are never more dangerous than when they are down and, after an early spell in which Scotland dominated what little football a foul-littered game permitted, the English discipline sealed up and eventually commanded the match. A goal by the reinstated Alan Ball gave England victory, to share the title with Scotland, and Ireland's draw that evening with Wales saw the tournament slide to anti-climax.

Once again the argument for playing the competition mid-season was raised . . . and once again the depressing evidence of players being too drained to impress was cited. Observing wearisome matches that even century-old rivalries could not fan into life, it became hard to argue that men who have to give so much to their employers should be able to keep something in reserve for their country.