

Review of the Season

The events of the final evening of the 1975-1976 season brought a dramatic end to a League competition sometimes obscured by a lack of really top-class technique. On that night the denouement of an intriguing plot of promotion and relegation was finally completed, including the ultimate 'who wunnit?' the Championship itself.

By then the issue, for so long as unfathomable as a tangled ball of string, had resolved itself into a straightforward premise: Liverpool needed to win, or to achieve a low-scoring draw in their final match against Wolverhampton at Molineux, to claim their ninth League title, at the expense of Queen's Park Rangers. Even then there were greater connotations, for Wolves themselves were in desperate need of a victory to preserve their First Division status - but only if, on that same evening, Birmingham failed to take a point at Bramall Lane against the already-doomed Sheffield United.

With a perfect sense of theatre, Wolves struck the first blow as the games unfolded simultaneously, with Kindon shooting a 14th minute lead. Minutes later, in Sheffield, Woodward sent Birmingham behind; if the half-time scores had remained unaltered, Rangers would have been champions, while Birmingham were relegated. But Liverpool, with a characteristic show of strength, responded with a devastating three-goal burst in the game's last 14 minutes to lift the crown and send Wolves through the trapdoor.

The champions and the runners-up had shaken off their closest pursuers with a burst of spring-time invincibility. Liverpool, criticised for their functional approach to away matches, dropped just one point from their final nine games. Rangers, the popular favourites, forfeited their first title by letting only three points out of their last 30 evade their grasp. Manchester United, who had returned to the top flight, seemed to be precariously successful on a prayer and the wing power of Coppel and Hill, but their exuberant industry contributed greatly to a season in which there was a small but definite switch of emphasis towards attack.

But Tommy Docherty's youngsters could not match this final flourish. Nor could Derby County who lost, at a vital time, the goal scoring panache of Charlie George, who at last revealed a mature consistency in his new surrounds. Nor could Leeds United, at times unable to conceal the odd crack of vulnerability in an ageing squad.

Yorkshire's discomfort was increased by the demise of Sheffield United, who neither under Ken Furphy nor his successor Jimmy Sirrel could produce football of sufficient quality to gain points or fill the impressive new stand that ended Bramall Lane's dual existence as a football and cricket ground. Burnley failed for once to conjure enough pedigree youngsters from their astute resources, and they, along with Wolves, failed to survive.

The dramas of the final evening were not confined to Division One. Indeed the Third Division produced arguably the most fascinating of all the dog-fights. On that evening defeat for Crystal Palace at Chester cost them a return to higher things while Cardiff won at Bury to earn the last promotion place. Palace's failure remained one of the season's imponderables. Retaining all the trappings of a big-time organisation, much of their football was styled, by Malcolm Allison and Terry Venables, along similarly ambitious lines. Towards the season's half-way mark they towered above their rivals by seven clear points; and even as that lead was eroded they sustained some remarkable performances to become only the fifth Third Division-side to reach the F.A. Cup semi-final. But an inability to win at home finally had a malignant effect on the players' confidence.

Pressures on Palace grew greater in the face of a remarkable rise across South London by Millwall - unbeaten in their last fifteen games - where Gordon Jago manufactured a revival on a double brace of signings; the coloured forwards Lee and Walker early in the campaign, and then the on-loan Seasman and McGrath at the time for a final impetus. Cardiff similarly timed their run to perfection to pip stayers like Palace and Peter Taylor's Brighton, but the divisional championship went to Hereford who completed a remarkable rise from the Southern League to the Second Division in four years. In the course of their triumph Terry Paine, at 37 still a force in midfield, overtook Jimmy Dickinson's record of 764 League appearances.

The Second Division race itself was barely less exciting. Sunderland after many a stutter finally returned to Division One after disappointing failure each season since their momentous FA Cup win. Bristol City, spurred by prolific goalscoring in the

early weeks from Cheesley and later from Ritchie, accompanied them after 65 years in the lower echelons. And the First Division will have a rare player-manager next season following the success of Johnny Giles in his first season in that role at West Bromwich Albion. His experienced side showed more resilience in the final analysis than Bolton, who for so long seemed certain to go up, Southampton, who took 38 out of 42 home points but found travelling unprofitable, and Luton, who projected a cheerful front even in the real face of bankruptcy.

Luton, who in November were given just one month to live, faced the most severe financial difficulties. But their problems were by no means untypical. Portsmouth, relegated along with York and Oxford, faced debts of over £300,000, and the general lack of profitability among the League clubs again provoked discussions of a restructuring of competition and a turn towards part-time football.

But the Fourth Division clubs, the most financially oppressed, did more than most to portray the commercial quality of the product: Lincoln City became the first side for nine years to score 100 League goals, and in doing so they shattered the points record for the Division, an achievement which reflects considerable credit on their young manager Graham Taylor. Northampton almost matched Lincoln and they too were promoted along with Reading and Tranmere Rovers. And the Division was even graced by a George Best comeback. This time it was with Stockport, in carefully selected home matches. But sadly, like the others, it remained abortive.

In fact the clubs did cope with the increase in admission charges - the minimum up to 65p - which hovered gloomily on the horizon at the start of the year. Goalscoring was up, if only marginally in all four divisions, though the philanthropy of the Daily Express, with their offer of £10,000 to any scorer of 30 League goals in the First or Second Divisions, remained untested; this despite a lone, brave challenge by Derek Hales of Charlton who reached 28 with two games to go, then dried up.

Discipline took on a smoother style in the wake of legislation which made provision for automatic suspensions when an offender reached 20 penalty points and for most sending-off transgressions. And even though it was a season in which the talents of Rodney Marsh were sacked by Manchester City and allowed to be exported to the United States, and even though Liverpool, still the most machine-like of the very best sides, became the ultimate winners, there was, at least, lip-service paid to the needs of the paying customer.

The present-day chestnut of football - 'do you want us to entertain or win?' - began to lose some of its polarisation, even if performances at national level continued to question the value of such intense domestic competition.