

Review of the Season

The pre-occupation with the 'treble', and their eventually superb triumph in the European Cup, tended to deflect the spotlight away from Liverpool's retention of the League Championship. Struck down by injuries in every department bar goalkeeper at critical stages of the season, they responded magnificently to withstand persistent pursuit from Ipswich and Manchester City. Indeed Smith for Thompson in defence, McDermott for Callaghan in midfield, and Johnson or Fairclough for Toshack in attack did not paper over cracks; they cemented the whole.

If at times away from home Bob Paisley's side did not set the very best example one expects from champions - their away goals total of 15 was less than the relegated Sunderland and Spurs - their overall standard rarely slackened. Anfield's simple, repetitive lifestyle might have been a strong factor in the loss of the restless, inventive Keegan to Germany, but it produced a remarkable level of consistency. While it is still fashionable to complicate the product, Liverpool remained as champions on the time-honoured philosophy that, properly played, football is a simple game.

Neither Ipswich nor Manchester City could find that extra gear which turns good competitors into winners. Yet both contributed much to the season. The arrival of Mariner from Plymouth, after protracted and expensive negotiations, sharpened Ipswich's attack, while Woods added regularity to his wriggling skills on the flanks and Talbot reached international class as a combative midfield player. A new striker, Kidd from Arsenal had added to Manchester City's goalpower, though by the end of the season a succession of opponents had provoked him into a series of unseemly incidents. City finished second, perhaps most of all on the strength of a vastly improved away record.

But interest extended deep into this lengthy season - stretched because of the introduction of postponed matches on the Saturday prior to international calls. It centred on relegation, for three-up three-down continues to generate excitement as well as fear. A dozen clubs spent March, April and early May battling for their First Division lives; notable sides, too, like Queens Park Rangers, runners-up the previous season, but frustrated by injuries and a Loftus Road pitch which was almost destroyed by the worst winter in terms of postponements for 14 years; like Derby County who lost Dave Mackay as manager when his board refused to give him a vote of confidence and who lost confidence themselves under Colin Murphy, the former reserve team coach, who finally became Mackay's successor.

Derby were rarely out of the headlines. After a few weeks of Murphy's 'caretaker' reign, during which he paid out £300,000 for Derek Hales of Charlton, the board attempted to seduce Brian Clough back from Nottingham Forest. Clough considered, then declined. Murphy swallowed his pride, and finally kept his side afloat. Perhaps more significantly, the club also announced a financial sponsorship deal with Saab, which might have set a precedent to the economic survival of many other clubs.

Derby and Queens Park Rangers survived the relegation crush, as did Everton after a change of managership. Only weeks after signing Rioch from Derby and Duncan McKenzie (well-paid but unappreciated by Anderlecht) Billy Bingham was sacked - setting off a chain reaction which brought Gordon Lee from Newcastle as his replacement and an outburst of 'player-power' at St. James' Park, where the team wanted and finally got Lee's former assistant, Richard Dinnis as manager.

West Ham also survived, with 16 points from their last 13 games and a spate of goals from 'Pop' Robson, bought back from Sunderland as a saviour. For much of the year Bristol City's first season in the First Division for 65 years seemed as though it would not be followed by another, but Norman Hunter's arrival from Leeds added steel to zest. A point for City at Coventry, two days before the Cup Final, finally kept both teams in Division One.

But that same night defeat for Sunderland sent them down after Jimmy Adamson had breathed new life into a bickering, ailing club. Between November 27 and February 5 Sunderland played 10 League games without scoring. Adamson picked uninhibited teenagers out of his ranks and the side then slammed 16 goals in three successive home games. They seem well equipped for an immediate return, unlike Tottenham Hotspur, relegated after a pallid, uninspired season, and Stoke, who paid the price of putting pounds before players of quality. The selling of Hudson and Greenhoff balanced the books; the team scored only 28 League goals.

In that respect, Stoke suffered a harsh local comparison, Wolves, their neighbours, ensured their return to the First Division on a diet of the very fare absent at the Victoria Ground. Fifty goals from 20 games suggested the first 'ton-up' in Division Two for 13 years. But 84 in the end was enough for the Championship, a point ahead of Chelsea, whose young side responded in uninhibited fashion to economic necessity of promotion. Forest won the third place and another triumph in the managerial career of Brian Clough, who continued in his new vein of confining his outbursts to the secrecy of the dressing-room.

Bolton, for the second successive year, and Luton came closest of the also-rans, while Fulham captured the most attention. George Best and Rodney Marsh were brought back from North America by a new board who also chose to replace Alec Stock with Bobby Campbell. Best duly got sent off, had a late-night car crash, and skipped a few days' training, but performed tremendously and returned to International football. It was the last season, too, for Bobby Moore, also marred by a sending-off, but once again of chilling consistency. It was typical of the man that his last game, in a quite uncontrived manner, just happened to be his 1000th in senior football.

The simple innovation of goal difference for goal average made calculations much less of an academic chore, particularly in the remarkable finish to the Third Division season. Wrexham met Crystal Palace to decide the third place, with Wrexham needing just a point to deny Palace. Palace, however, burst into a two-goal lead. Yet Wrexham pulled back to equalise and the score remained 2-2 until two minutes from time. Just that length of time away from a Second Division place, Wrexham conceded another two goals in a desolate finish - Palace's fourth goal being particularly crucial because it made their goal difference better than Wrexham's.

Wrexham still had one more chance, if they could beat Mansfield in their last match. But they lost to a goal which made Mansfield champions, under player-manager Peter Morris. Alan Mullery made it an all-round triumph for young managers by guiding Brighton into second place, on the back of 32 league goals from the exhilarating Peter Ward.

Ron Atkinson, for so long a player with Oxford United, revitalised the other Varsity city as Cambridge United ran away with the Fourth Division. In another cut-throat finish Swansea missed out as Exeter, Colchester and Bradford City found reward at the end of an unremitting season in which their consistency did not guarantee them promotion until May.

But at all levels, the Football League still had to grapple with two jangling skeletons in the game's cupboard. Economically the news that only a handful of the 92 clubs were in the black did little to encourage the belief that the present structure could survive.

The cross the games continues to have to bear is on the terraces. If once again a minority blackens the reputation of a responsible majority, there are more than enough hooligans to do damage to football more lasting than their Saturday afternoon havoc to property and person. Manchester United and Chelsea were penalised to the extent of having their fans banned at away matches.

A third threat comes from the lure of lucrative careers abroad to top players. Keegan has gone, and though McKenzie did not flourish in Belgium, Chivers in Switzerland, Roger Davies at Bruges, and Ray Clarke in Holland have benefited European clubs as well as their own bank balances - to say nothing of the draw of the dollar, which is an ever-present temptation for a career in the United States.

Brian James