



the seventy two unfortunates
FOOTBALL LEAGUE PREVIEW



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INTRODUCTION

A hearty welcome to this 2011-12 Football League Preview, which is a joint venture from The Seventy Two and The Two Unfortunates, part of that ingeniously named Seventy Two Unfortunates network, which celebrates the finest writing in the Football League blogosphere.

What can you expect?

Here we present the product of a summer's work. The core is a monumental club-by-club preview, and for that we have enlisted the assistance of the best that the footballing blogosphere has to offer, as well as general friends, acquaintances and people we met at bar mitzvahs – well, Twitter in the main.

This is accompanied by a taster of representative articles that have appeared on the pages of The Seventy Two and The Two Unfortunates over the past year, as well as a clutch of newly commissioned pieces from the likes of William Abbs and Kerry Andrew, plus expert statistical background from Ben Mayhew.

Reasons to be Inspired

Several issues are at the top of our minds as we anticipate Blackpool's visit to the KC Stadium on August 5. Ex-England bosses Sven-Göran Eriksson and Steve McClaren are among us, with the former in particular building a team equipped to challenge. Relegated West Ham and Birmingham will be hoping to collect parachute payments for one year only and south coasters Southampton and Brighton can look forward with optimism; the latter swelling with pride at their spanking new residence.

In League 1, Huddersfield Town will be hoping to stretch their run to just one defeat in countless matches while a brooding Steel City duo will evoke memories of Boxing Day 1979. In League 2, newcomers Crawley and AFC Wimbledon will provoke differing welcomes - although who would bet against the former to do well?

Fit and Proper

More pertinently, there is every concern that the seventy two could be shorn to seventy one or less before May – with Plymouth Argyle the most endangered but a host of others attracting scrutiny over the summer months and we hope that Coventry, Portsmouth, Swindon and Port Vale avoid the financial woes of their non-league brethren Wrexham and Rushden. It's been a torrid few months too for Supporters Direct and they and others including the Football Supporters' Federation, The Justin Campaign and Kick It Out continue to deserve our unstinting support.

For if one thing that was refreshing about reading and editing the contributions to our preview, it's the modesty and sense of realism that most fans possess. Few are now silly enough to want to mortgage their clubs' futures for an expensive shot at hollow glory and we detect a new breed of football fan which is far more comfortable in its skin. Roll on!

David Bevan, Joe Brewin, Rob Langham, Lloyd Langman and Chris Matthews

@the72football
@twounfortunates



CHAMPIONSHIP



Barnsley | Wilky | @onthepontyend

70% of their points total came from home matches, the 2nd highest proportion in the Football League | 32% of their conceded goals came in the final 15 minutes, more than any other Championship side

Headline of the Summer?

Personally that would have to be “Don’t Expect Hill To Be Your Best Mate” which came from guest writer Matt Bootham to the blog in June.

The piece was written from the perspective of a Rochdale AFC fan and gave a stark warning to Barnsley FC fans about Keith Hill’s personality and approach to management.

In spite of the way that the management duo “Hillcroft” departed from Spotland, Matt provided readers and fans of Barnsley FC with a lot to look forward to.

“Barnsley fans will come to enjoy the season ahead, for I am sure Hill’s appointment will be a triumph. They will appreciate the nimble, quick, style of play, and be impressed by the fitness and willingness to ‘play for the team’ of his squad.”

Any major worries?

Although very little is spoken about it publicly, there are concerns over Reds owner Patrick Cryne’s health, a pending court case regarding his former business iSoft and constant rumours that Barnsley FC are up for sale.

As the main benefactor to the football club, any fallout from any of the aforementioned scenarios remain major worries.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

5 - The current board have made massive efforts over the last few years to stabilise the finances at Oakwell. As a result, the club can boast that it is

operating without debt.

Despite a well publicised reduction in the playing budget, Don Rowing has assured fans that there is still money available for the right players.

With the departure of Jason Shackell to Derby for £1m recently, “Hillcroft” have been shrewd in their new purchases and high cost loanees appear to be a thing of the past.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

As a litmus test of “Hillcroft”, it’s Morecambe at home in the first round of the Carling Cup!

The Championship this year looks to be one of the most competitive in recent years. Taking last year’s League 1 teams into account, Brighton & Hove Albion have the resources and stadium to really have a go this year alongside Southampton.

Adding to that Birmingham City, West Ham United, Blackpool, Leeds United, Leicester City, Reading and Nottingham Forest and you may have a bunch of likely play-off contenders there. It feels like Premiership 2.

Where will you finish this season?

My heart tells me that Barnsley will make a better fist of it than the soothsayers say. In fact, I believe that we are nowhere near certainties for relegation.

Mid-table, challenging to scrape into the top half would probably be my guess.

There’s always a dark horse in the Championship. I have a feeling that we are that team this year.

Birmingham City | Kevin Ball | @joysandsorrows

Didn't score more than 2 goals in a single game; something which every Football League side managed at least twice | Scored less than a goal per game (0.97), the lowest tally in the Premier League

Headline of the Summer?

Has to be Alex McLeish running away to the other side of the city. There had been a few minor rumours rumbling around, but both Blues and Villa fans had laughed them off as neither sets of fans could believe it would happen.

Well it did, and it was terrific for *Joys and Sorrows*. We had a month's worth of hits in a week as the city's fans went into information overload. We had Villa fans saying they didn't want him, (after saying they didn't want other possibles too), Blues fans saying both you can have him and you can't! It was a funny week.

As all the dust has settled now, I can't help feeling that we have done OK. His style of football was somewhat boring - except in the cups - and although we kept the ball well a lot of the time, we never seemed to make much progress. Last season we produced the lowest number of chances out of all Premier League clubs.

We have just heard that the two clubs have agreed compensation so at least we can draw a line under it and concentrate with our new manager Chris Hughton, which I guess is the other headline. 99% of Blues fans are pleased with this appointment. We might get to see some goals to cheer now!

Any major worries?

Obviously losing players is always a worry, because you have to re-build. Unfortunately you don't always get the choice these days with agent pressure and the lure of the big bucks in the Premier League. However I've follow Blues for over 30 years and players come and go - so I'm happy

to trust Hughton on this. I guess the other concern is the fact that Carson Yeung has been in the news for the wrong reasons. Part of the issue for me isn't that he may be guilty because the charges relate to some while ago - it's more that he is the other side of the world and the news is sketchy.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Well, there has been a lot of talk on this in the press. Most of it is speculation in my opinion. Of course there are issues as we got relegated but my understanding is the club had plans for both relegation and if we stayed up. I know a lot of people are worried and think we are close to going under, but I don't. 6/10

Opposition that you're most worried about?

This is tough, because to be honest I didn't pay much attention to the Championship last season.

However there are some decent teams there. Forest, Reading, Leeds, Southampton and Leicester are all sides I think will be pushing for promotion.

Where will you finish this season?

I haven't the foggiest! I'd hope we would be at least in the play-offs. The reason for my reservation is that Hughton, as already been said, is having to build a new side. The question is can he do that quickly enough for us to be promotion candidates.

We do seem to have been the busiest side in regard to transfers, albeit a lot of them are Bosmans etc. This can be a good or a bad thing. If they gel, we could be one of the promotion candidates.

Blackpool | John | @tanger_dreaming

Conceded more goals than any other Premier League side, averaging 2.05 per game | Despite being relegated, scored the same number of goals as 5th-placed Spurs (1.45 per game) | Had the best disciplinary record in the Premier League, averaging just 1.23 yellow cards per game | 29% of their goals conceded came in the final 15 minutes

Headline of the Summer?

The summer has been about moving on and starting afresh. The protracted transfer of Charlie Adam to Liverpool passed off with a good deal for the club. David Vaughan has moved on with grace and gets to play in the Premier League once more and that is where he should be.

The end of the season was sad in so many ways and a brave attempt at staying up against the odds will have drained energy from the club. However, Ian Holloway is the right man to gee everyone up and already the signs are positive. The club have made their stance quite clear with certain players being retained and contracts being sorted out early.

The Blackpool that starts the new season will be a new one in terms of personnel, but their approach will be the same and attack will once again be the name of the game.

Towards the end of the season Holloway made brave statements about trying to take his Spanish influence further, so pre-season may well be a time to take on new ideas. The signing of Gerardo Bruna from Liverpool is a more obvious nod to that approach.

As a club, players and staff will have learnt a tremendous amount from the Premier League and it will be interesting to see how much of that is used and built upon.

Any major worries?

The main worry is that we might leave our recruitment to the last minute like we did last year. However, the early signs are that the club is mak-

ing moves in plenty of time. The fact we need a new foundation to our midfield is really crucial, but recent contract extensions for Matt Gilks and Stephen Crainey have been very reassuring, meaning there are two less spots that require consideration.

The other worries are that the Taylor-Fletcher contract situation rumbles on and that DJ Campbell's eventual transfer somewhere is conducted with decorum.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Think it's fair to say that we are a 10. On one hand we have cash to spend, on the other an ultra frugal steward in charge of the club in Karl Oyston.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Every single team poses a different set of problems and every game is a tough proposition. Right now, away to Hull in the first game of the season is a tough opener. Pearson is a cynical old dog and seems to be recruiting solidly and I'm sure he'll set out to stifle and frustrate us. A point from that first game would be a fantastic start.

Where will you finish this season?

Top ten would be a great achievement. By the time the season kicks off we will have a new spine to the team which might take half a year to bed in.

If that initial period can be weathered without major trauma then the second half of the season might see some strong performances being put together as the team becomes more cohesive.

Brighton & HA | Sam Swaffield | @tslr

Boasted the 2nd most efficient attack in the Football League - 1 goal per 5.6 shots | Never went consecutive games without scoring

Headline of the Summer?

“Albion Sign Bergkamp”, *The Argus*, 1 July 2011.

OK, so it's not Dennis, rather his nephew, but Albion fans would be forgiven for thinking the original Dutch maestro had come out of retirement if the other big news over the summer has been anything to go by.

Whilst content at being back in the Championship, we have been overwhelmed by the astonishing activity on and off the pitch. Marquee signings Craig Mackail-Smith, Will Buckley and Will Hoskins mean the loss of last year's top scorer to our arch rivals has been wholly forgotten.

Away from the pitch, there's the small matter of moving into our beautiful new stadium which we've all been fighting for since we were in short trousers, and the subsequent moth-to-a-flame season ticket sales ensuring the place will be full up every other week. So when we read Bergkamp, you know what, it might well have been Bergkamp!

Any major worries?

It's no exaggeration to say that there has never been a better time to be an Albion fan, and our happiness is built on solid foundations. If we play well this season then Poyet will be linked with every job going, but we know he'll leave one day and the new club culture suggests that any replacement would probably notch up the flair-o-meter a little higher anyway.

Truth be told, our match against Palace at The Amex will be pretty terrifying. The return of our judas du jour, Glenn Murray, will almost certainly end with him scoring a hat-trick in front of our new North Stand. The thought sends a shiver.

Other concerns surround the volume of toilet paper needed to satisfy the thousands of fans who'll enjoy the local real ale pre-match in the new fan

bars; getting dizzy by looking at our new reverse-gull club crests that are plastered everywhere; the reaction of some fans on seeing our cheerleaders, Gully's Girls, on a big screen in HD for the first time; and, finally, how we're going to get a stadium full to the new ground with a railway infrastructure that makes Thomas the Tank Engine look like King's Cross at rush hour.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

10. And we're not lying either; Pompey we ain't. Our Chairman and leader Tony Bloom has both money and a brain, and we all know how rare that combination is in Football League boardrooms. Every pound that has come from his pocket has made sense, even if there's been well over 100 million of them.

Albion fans are very savvy; we have been bitten before, badly, so these days we demand, and subsequently enjoy a great relationship with the club hierarchy.

To take an example from both ends of the spectrum, the club has smashed its record transfer fees twice with the signings of Buckley and Mackail-Smith, whilst at the other end ensured all fans could buy season tickets over 12 monthly direct debits. Nice eh?

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Crystal Palace FC, and specifically the denizens of Croydon enjoying the facilities at The Amex.

Where will you finish this season?

Upper mid-table would be nice; common sense would suggest we'd end up thereabouts. A lot of people are tipping us for a second successive promotion, but there are just as many who think the only promotion at The Amex next year will be a 2-4-1 deal on our ghastly new away shirt at the new megastore.

Bristol City | Paul Binning | @cider1977

No Football League side scored a higher proportion of their goals in the opening 15 minutes of matches (23%) | Never went more than 4 matches without a clean sheet, the joint best streak in the Championship (shared with Millwall)

Headline of the Summer?

“Hey Nicky, you’re so signed!”

If Nicky Maynard signs the new contract that is on the table, albeit with a Premier League bid release clause, it would make most fans’ summer.

He doesn’t appear to want to move to another Championship club and we’ve repeatedly rejected large bids from Leicester, which is a real statement of intent.

Any major worries?

Maynard leaving, the defence, the new stadium. No regular right-back, one left-back and only 2-3 centre-backs, all of whom looked like they needed Stephen Caulker’s assurance alongside them last season.

The squad needs some strengthening and it looks as if Millen is waiting for the Premier League selections to settle down so he can pinch a couple of youngsters on loan for the season.

If they’re as good as Caulker and Jordan Spence were last season, everyone will be delighted.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Can I say both 1 and 10? First the 10: in Steve Lansdown we have an investor (no longer chairman) who loves the club, is determined to bankroll the new stadium, and is worth around £500m on conservative estimates.

Now the 1: We’re £20m in debt and made a loss of £11m last season. If the new stadium were to be

blocked, who knows how much stuffing would be knocked out of Lansdown, and whether he’d be so willing to continue funding the transfer fees (5th highest in Championship last season) and wage bill.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Leicester appear to be trying to buy their way out of the league and will be strong but I fancy West Ham under Big Sam will be a pretty horrible proposition to play against.

Ipswich also look to have picked up some quality free signings.

Where will you finish this season?

Somewhere between 9th and 14th. We will probably flirt with the play-offs at some point but I think most would be happy with a top-half finish.

Last year’s promotion ambitions have been dampened somewhat.

Burnley | Kevin Robinson | @nonaynevernet

Won the highest percentage of away points after conceding the opening goal (31%) in the Championship

Headline of the Summer?

“Jack Cork’s non-return”.

The Chelsea midfielder spent the last 18 months at Burnley on loan, was expected to join permanently this summer but Southampton managed to out-price us.

The Cork saga has pretty much dominated our summer and many supporters got a little pre-occupied with him at times. Failing to bring him back has certainly been the big story of a summer that has yet to really get moving.

Any major worries?

We’ve yet to make any signings and with a number of players moving on fans are beginning to get impatient.

We’ve lost many of our experienced players, most notably Clarke Carlisle and Graham Alexander, and with indiscipline a major problem last season we need to make sure we have strong leaders on and off the field.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

We may not be the richest of clubs but we’d score highly on stability, say around 8 or 9.

We refused to break our rigid wage structure for Jack Cork and that has to be commended.

The board has been keen to capitalise on our Premier League campaign and hope to build the club slowly. We’re in good hands.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I don’t think you can worry about any side in the Championship.

Leicester look to be building a strong side, but the Championship is so wide open, and the opportunities for success many, that worrying about any one side is not something you can really do.

Where will you finish this season?

We have to improve on last season and I’m confident we will with some stability. Top 6 is a minimum.

Can we push for the top 2? I’m not sure, but top 4 is a very real possibility.

The margins of success and failure are tiny here though, you can be in the play-offs one year and relegated the next. Anything can happen.

Cardiff City | Joe Harrison | @joe_harrison1

21% of their goals scored in opening 15 minutes, the 2nd highest in the division | Only conceded 1 red, joint lowest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

As always seems to be the case at Cardiff there's plenty going on this summer. With the Championship's longest-serving manager, Dave Jones, sacked following a second successive play-off failure the main headline is Malky Mackay's appointment as his replacement.

However, the return of loan players to parent clubs (most notably Craig Bellamy) and contract expirations (such as last season's top-scorer Jay Bothroyd) led to a decimation of the Bluebirds' squad. Player recruitment and a summer overhaul is a major theme this summer. The headline so far on this front (and one unlikely to be surpassed) is the return of fans' hero Robert Earnshaw on a free transfer.

Any major worries?

As hinted at above, the main fear would be that we simply are unable to recruit enough players and/or those with enough quality, leaving us with a thin squad competing at the wrong end of the table. But that is very much a worst-case scenario.

The other main fear has to be that Mackay fails to live up to his billing. There will be reduced expectations this season but whatever his faults, Jones was Cardiff's most successful manager in decades - certainly big shoes to fill. With a very limited track-record, Mackay needs to show that he can continue and improve on his successes at Watford.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7. I could really have answered with any number, such have been Cardiff's well-publicised financial problems of previous seasons. Since taking control officially in summer 2010 though, the new Malaysian owners appear to have steadied the ship as well as making money available for signings (paying a sizeable chunk of Bellamy's wages

last season for example).

For the moment the financial situation looks better than it has done for years but there is still £24m worth of debt owed to the mysterious Langston company, whose only known representative is the [insert adjective, preferably unfavourable, of your choice here] ex-Bluebirds owner Sam Hammam, so there are definitely still financial issues to be resolved.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

The league in general. One of the most disappointing things about Cardiff's failure to earn promotion last season was the feeling that the division was, to a certain extent, there for the taking. Not so much this year. With Birmingham and West Ham expected to sell but still maintain very high-quality squads at this level, they represent the most obvious challengers.

Leicester appear ready to spend and improve, while I expect Burnley to do well under Eddie Howe. I am also wary of Brighton and Southampton, strong teams who have the momentum of promotion and the example of Norwich's fantastic success last season.

Where will you finish this season?

Between 6th and 10th. It's difficult to make predictions at this stage of the summer, and it all depends on the calibre of players signed during the rest of the transfer window. Cardiff are very unlikely to be the force they have been in the last two seasons due to our own losses and the increasing strength of the league, but Mackay's record with Watford gives cause for optimism.

With the basis of a (somewhat uncharacteristically) solid defence already in place and new signings adding shape to the rest of the squad, if the team gels a play-off place is a definite possibility. Unlike last season, however, this would be considered a good achievement.

Coventry City | Neil Allison | @neilallison

Took the 3rd highest number of shots in the Football League (13.3 per game) | Joint most profligate side in the Football League (1 goal every 11.4 shots) | Only scored 3 or more goals on 2 occasions, the joint worst in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

You'd have to say Marlon King swanning off to Birmingham got more attention than anything else. In the grand scheme of things, we've more pressing concerns, but at the time the hoopla around him reneging on his verbal agreement sent us all bandy.

How daft we were to expect anything else?

We also lost Keiren Westwood and Aron Gunnarsson, which means that new manager Andy Thorn has a bit of rebuilding to do.

Any major worries?

Once again, we find ourselves in huge financial trouble.

Many would say this is the headline of the summer, but in my mind this has spanned the whole of 2011, so isn't really new anymore.

Obviously our lack of money has had a knock-on effect throughout the club, resulting in a transfer embargo for the first half of the year, an inability to strengthen, to plan for the future or to persuade our three most valuable playing assets not to leave the club for absolutely bugger all.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I'm going to take the view that 1 means we're on the verge of collapse any day now, so won't quite go that far (yet).

But, unfortunately, we're a solid 2.

Losing an inexplicable amount of money a month, it's hard to see how things are going to get sorted without a radical change in approach.

Former board member Gary Hoffman seems keen to take over the club and claims to have investors waiting, but even with that initial investment to tidy things up, lots needs to be done to ensure we're not just throwing good money after bad.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

West Ham are going to be strong, there's no two ways about it. It'd be surprising if they weren't with the manager and players they have.

I'll also be keeping my eye on Brighton. They've got it all going for them. Following last season's performance and some decent additions in the summer, confidence will be high.

Where will you finish this season?

It's completely up for grabs. We've finally got a manager in Andy Thorn with an approach that I believe is needed to succeed in the Championship.

Losing the big three, King, Westwood and Gunnarsson is obviously a blow, but providing we're able to bring in a few players to replace them, the team dynamic shouldn't change too much and a top half finish is more than achievable.

Unfortunately, things being how they are, it's likely to be bottom half, although that should never be the aim.

Crystal Palace | Jamie Daly | @fypfanzine

81% of their points at home, the highest proportion in the Football League | Conceded the most penalties in the Football League (11)

Headline of the Summer?

Before last week it was just like any other summer: tennis disappointment, days at the park in the summer rain, and a whirlwind holiday romance with a girl called Sandy.

But that all changed when the footballing gods bestowed on this fanzine editor the greatest gift of all - Australian midfielder Mile Jedinak. The 26-year-old had signed a three-year deal at Selhurst Park, which is great and all, but more importantly the Pandora's Box of Star Wars puns has been well and truly wrenched open. I am positively bursting with excitement at the Darth Vader and Chewbacca references I'll get to use throughout the campaign and have already got my first chant of the season prepped: "Wan Miles Jedinak, there's Obi Wan Mile Jedinak." Maybe I'll just stay quiet.

Any major worries?

Only whether I'll be able to get as many Star Wars puns as I can out of new boy Jedinak. Oh that and the impending threat of relegation. But mostly the Star Wars thing.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I'm going to have to go with 9. I know that seems rather high but there are good reasons;

1) We are backed by four very successful, wealthy local businessmen who have plenty of experience of running multinational companies.

One of them - Steve Parish, the one with the Simon Jordan-esque haircut (thankfully that's where the comparisons end) - has just sold his company for millions. These guys know what they are doing and have gone on record to say they will be running Palace as sensibly as possible; no more hedge funds, no more £25,000-a-week contracts to certain small, bald forwards.

2) They are LOADED! Not that they would ever mention it, the modest bastards, but trust me they got some serious monies.

3) They are Palace fans. All four of them. Lifelong, season-ticket owning, Steve Coppell-loving Eagles supporters. Gawd bless 'em.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Aside from obviously being worried about everyone (except for Brighton of course), Leicester City scare me the most. Not on a physical level - a trip to the Walkers Stadium is about as entertaining as watching Billy Paynter watching paint dry - but they have been snapping up the best players at Championship level and will be a force to be reckoned with (young padwan). Plus they took star midfielder Neil Danns, and former Eagles always score against us on their return.

Then there are the obligatory worries about the relegated sides and their financial muscle. Kevin Nolan embarrassed us two years ago when he was with Newcastle, so I'm not looking forward to seeing him back with West Ham.

But there is quiet confidence at Selhurst this season. Dougie Freedman is impressing in his first manager's job, superstar goalkeeper Julian Speroni is staying (and has had a restaurant in the Player's Lounge named after him, no word of a lie), and we've signed arch rivals Brighton's star forward Glenn Murray on a free transfer. Not a bad summer after all.

Where will you finish this season?

Let's go with mid-table, shall we? After two seasons trying to keep the trap door to League 1 from opening up and swallowing us whole, a nice little comfy season would be great.

Maybe even a fun little cup run. As long as the force is with us, of course.

Derby County | Joel Clyne | @fakejoelclyne

Scored 10% of goals in final 15 minutes, lowest in the Football League
| No points from 10 away matches after conceded the opening goal

Headline of the Summer?

After two-and-a-half years of struggle, a significantly reduced wage bill and quality in the squad to go with it, the time has come for the board to invest. The epic loss of form and fall from 4th to a season ending 19th place outlined just how little quality there was in the side after the sale of Rob Hulse and Kris Commons. The resulting tail-off made it clear to all that without significant investment a further season of struggle, which realistically could end in relegation, would be on the cards.

Since the end of the season Jamie Ward, Theo Robinson, Frank Fielding, Craig Bryson, Jason Shackell and Chris Maguire have all arrived for around £3million. A decent investment but one that was desperately needed. I doubt that the spending is over though.

Derby are still in need of at least one central midfielder player, a proven goal-scorer and cover in both full-back positions.

The club also need players out of the door with Stephen Bywater and Dean Leacock the likeliest after falling out of favour under Clough. With two months remaining until the window shuts there is still room for manoeuvre.

Any major worries?

One of the main concerns is where the goals will come from. After the sales of Hulse and Commons, Derby lost any consistent supply of goals that they had.

Currently the club has five strikers with Championship experience in the first team squad with a combined total of 41 goals in 297 appearances.

Admittedly, several of these have played the majority of games out wide. Goals are therefore harder to come by but the club is clearly short of a proven goalscorer.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially secure is your club?

The club is on a sound financial footing despite what many fans believe. Whilst performances on the pitch over recent seasons have been poor, the state of the club's finances has improved. In the latest accounts filed, the club "returned a loss of £2.16million, compared to a loss of £14.93million for the previous 12 months."

The club has a parked debt of £15million on Pride Park Stadium and any other losses are covered by the club's investors. Whilst there isn't money to be thrown about, the club is in a much stronger position than it was several years ago and is certainly a lot more stable than other clubs around the country.

Opposition you're most worried about?

In a division that is renowned for being one of the most competitive leagues in the world, you can never quite pinpoint who is going to be the strongest side. But you have to be fearful of any club backed by Asian billions with a former England manager in charge.

Sam Allardyce is back in management so clubs can expect a tough game or two when they come up against his West Ham side. Say what you like about Gold, Sullivan and Brady but Allardyce is one of the best in the business.

Where will you finish this season?

With the squad at present, a mid-table finish would be the best Derby could achieve. Whilst the defence, on paper, is strong, the midfield is lacking experience and the club still doesn't contain a proven goal-scorer. A few seasons ago Leicester were relegated with the second best defence in the league. Their problem was that they couldn't score. Heaven forbid Derby have the same problem, but as I mentioned previously there is still time for further additions.

Doncaster Rovers | Glen Wilson | @vivarovers

54% of their conceded goals came in the last 30 minutes of a match, the highest proportion in the Football League - this figure was even higher away from home (62%) | Conceded 3 or more goals on 13 occasions - the joint 2nd worst in the Football League | Kept the 2nd lowest number of clean sheets in the Championship (7)

Headline of the Summer?

“Club Bosses Blow Whistle on Saucy Mascot”.

I don't think any headline better encapsulates the painful pursuit of football related copy to fill the void of the modern close-season than that, and the manner in which it went global.

It also highlighted what a lot of Rovers fans already knew; for all the professionalism shown by those in control of matters on the pitch, off it Rovers remain nigh on Corinthian.

Any major worries?

At the time of writing, the playing side doesn't look all that much stronger than that which struggled through last season.

Admittedly several of those players whose seasons were curtailed through injury have returned and in Tommy Spurr we have at least identified one problem area at left-back.

But the problem for over a season now has been in the centre of defence and filling the void left by Matt Mills: so far we have recruited Richard Naylor, but we've also released Wayne Thomas and, though I hope to be proved wrong, that doesn't strike me as the comprehensive overhaul many of us were hoping for.

We've a strong capable side when all are fit... but then the Titanic was pretty resolute in calm seas too.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

It's a mark of football at this level in that though Rovers are run pragmatically by chairman John Ryan and his well-off fellow directors, the club is to my knowledge operating at a loss.

Not a huge loss, but its certainly not turning a profit.

If you were an accountant with no knowledge of football you'd probably give it a 2 at best, in comparison to the rest of the Championship we're probably about a 9.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I'm struggling to pick out opposition we're not worried about in what appears a very strong Championship.

Leicester seem to have confused the transfer market with a strip club the way they're excitedly throwing money at individuals, and West Ham's capture of Kevin Nolan suggests they're determined to replicate the brevity of Newcastle's year seeing how the other half live.

Middlesbrough look set to continue their end of season form, Forest will be a better prospect without Billy Davies' paranoia, whilst past results suggest Reading could field eleven actual biscuit men and still get a result against us.

In short, if you offered me 21st now I'd not only take it, I'd whack it on eBay giggling at my own cheek.

Where will you finish this season?

Still in the Championship... just.

Hull City | Kate Ogram | @TigerKJ64

No side in the Championship won a higher proportion of their points away from home (55.4%), 2nd highest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

I am hoping it's yet to be written - 'Tigers sign goalkeeper' would be helpful.

Any major worries?

Speculation continues about Director of Football Operations Adam Pearson's future at the club, which is making many City fans uneasy.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

It seems to fluctuate between a 2 and an 8 depending on which interview you read. Things are certainly much healthier since the Allams' rescue mission.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Burnley. It would be a bonus to lose by less than 4 to them this season!

Where will you finish this season?

5th - if our youthful, new look defence gels quickly and we sign a decent goalkeeper!

Ipswich Town | Gavin Barber | @gavinbarber

8% of their goals scored in opening 15 minutes, 2nd lowest in the Championship | 29% of conceded goals came in the final 15 minutes

Headline of the Summer?

It has to be “Town linked with Jesus”.

This arose (ha!) because a “news” account tweeted that “Valladolid have accepted a bid from Ipswich for midfielder Jesus Rueda”.

We never heard any more than that, but it was fun to speculate on whether he’d be our saviour, and how good he’d be at getting on the end of crosses (fill in the rest of the gags yourself).

And that was a distraction from the more prosaic “Ipswich set to sign Lee Bowyer” headlines which, of course, were true.

Without getting into a potentially complex theological debate, I think we can safely assert that Lee Bowyer - for all the qualities he may bring to our midfield - is not Jesus.

Any major worries?

Probably not as many as last summer because this year we’ve got on with strengthening the team in time for pre-season. As well as Bowyer, Michael Chopra, Nathan Ellington, Ívar Ingimarsson and Aaron Cresswell have come in.

With the exception of Cresswell - a highly-rated young full-back from Tranmere - the rest of those have a good track record at Championship level or above, and can hopefully be relied upon to provide consistency.

And, in the cases of Chopra and Ellington, we may perhaps finally see the quality most noticeably absent from Roy Keane’s Ipswich teams - pace.

But having lost Gareth McAuley, Connor Wickham, David Norris and Jimmy Bullard (only a loanee but easily the shining star in last season’s not-particularly-sparkling firmament), Paul Jewell knows that we still need more players if we’re going to challenge for the top 6. Another centre-half and a

creative midfielder would be a good start.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

For as long as Marcus Evans (or Reclusive Owner Marcus Evans, to give him his full title) stays around, 10. If he should ever get bored and wander off, minus 10.

The club is effectively mortgaged against Evans’ extensive business interests, and a reassuring thought is that Evans - who inherited a substantial chunk of debt when he bought the club - will never repay that investment unless we get promoted.

On the other hand, should we endure another few frustrating seasons, it isn’t inconceivable that he could decide to cut his losses. He’s never claimed to be a football fan, after all.

Then again, he gave a seven-figure donation to the Liberal Democrats before the last election, so he’s obviously not that averse to chucking vast sums of cash at hopeless causes who will inevitably let him down. (Our Chief Exec’s called Clegg, too)

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I doubt this will prove to be an original observation, but with the signings they’ve made, Leicester look a good bet to be this season’s QPR and run away with the league.

West Ham will be strong if Kevin Nolan stays fit but my dark horses for a promotion challenge would be Hull, who are very well organised under Nigel Pearson and will no doubt be consistent. Despite having recruited a good manager in Malky Mackay, I suspect Cardiff City may have a difficult time of it.

Where will you finish this season?

I’m optimistic for an improvement but I think 7th or 8th is probably a realistic prediction.

Leeds United | David Wilkinson | @scratchingshed1

Collected the highest number of yellow cards in the Football League (1.9 per game) | Conceded the highest number of fouls in the Championship (12 per game) | Went 14 matches without failing to score, the longest such streak in the Championship

Headline of the Summer?

Well, that can only be our pre-season mini-tour of Scotland - I hear the entire footballing community was jealous of that one?

Seriously though, we've not really done anything of interest. Kasper Schmeichel leaving shocked and upset a few, but I wasn't hugely disappointed or surprised by that. Then there's the "shock" revelation that Ken Bates owns Leeds United (he had us all fooled... honest).

Any major worries?

For me, this is the relaxing part. The majority of Leeds United fans seem to be falling into the same trap they do every year and panicking at the lack of signings so far, but these things generally work themselves out and I have full faith in the manager's ability to field a strong side come opening day.

Other than the squad, I live in constant fear Ken Bates will totally screw us up with some sort of tax evasion scheme that sends us down another three divisions or has us permanently banned from football.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

The official LUFC line would be a 10 because Ken Bates and his merry men are financial geniuses (hence the administration, points deductions and inability to repurchase our stadium and training complex).

Unofficially, who the hell knows? With the extortionate ticket prices, relatively high attendances and lack of transfer spending over the past few

seasons things should be pretty good. However, Bates keeps mentioning a "war-chest" which I strongly suspect is some kind of coded message as it clearly doesn't relate to available transfer funds.

One theory I'm working on involves a coalition of the world's greatest super-villains (with Kenneth the leader, naturally).

I'm still ironing out the details at the moment, but it involves a complex worldwide money laundering network, a hollowed out volcano lair, lightweight lycra suits and a plan to use their combined resources to takeover the world...

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Tough one to predict at the moment but I suspect Leicester will be the team to watch. Barnsley, Donny and Hull will no doubt beat us home and away as is standard Leeds United protocol in local derby matches - we like to give the lesser sides an occasional boost.

Where will you finish this season?

Assuming we keep the key players - Jonny Howson, Max Gradel, Robert Snodgrass, Luciano Becchio and Davide Somma - then I honestly believe we'll top last season and finish somewhere in the play-offs.

We need a few additions yet, but the majority of those that have left were surplus to requirements and should be easily replaced.

This time last season many predicted we'd be in a relegation battle and we managed to surprise a few - hopefully we'll do the same this time round.

Leicester City | Jamie Treadwell

Won 5% of available points from 14 away games after conceding first
| Conceded the 3rd fewest fouls in the Championship (9.5 per game)

Headline of the Summer?

There've been a few! First of all we've had our stadium re-named. But most newsworthy are the high-profile permanent signings - Eriksson is building a squad and spending big money.

However, the biggest headline – certainly from my perspective – is that after last season's debacle we're getting a proper pre-season schedule in with our own players.

With friendlies against Bursaspor (Champions League last season), Valencia (Champions League knock-out rounds last season) and Real Madrid among others, we had a proper chance to settle and hit the ground running as opposed to having to play catch-up 10 games in.

Any major worries?

Before the signing of Matt Mills, it was the defence. Mills is a fantastic capture for us – albeit a little expensive.

Strong leadership skills, commanding aerially, Mills has experience of this division and played an important role in a confident, winning team last season.

His acquisition coupled with the signing of Sean St. Ledger is certainly a huge improvement on the unsettled, inexperienced partnerships we had last season, and should see us defensively solid next term.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Who knows?! In all seriousness, though, it appears as though we are on a reasonable footing in terms of finances at the moment – maybe a 7 on the scale? Evidently our stadium is a huge burden on us and to be able to fully accommodate the debt it has saddled us with - we need Premier League football.

The new owners have brought in a high-profile manager, funded a host of expensive loan signings last season, re-laid the pitch at the request of the manager, have installed big screens in our ground and are this season attempting to fund a major promotion charge.

None of this could be done unless we had decent backing behind us. The fear would be that the owners will pull the plug on us if we do not go up this season, but considering they have just bought the naming rights for our ground in their own company's name, I can't see how that will be the case.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Of last season's Championship clubs, Burnley, Reading and Forest will be three of the more dangerous I would expect.

Obviously you have to look to Birmingham and West Ham as two of the strongest on paper, yet clearly this will depend on how many of their players are still with them come the end of August after the Premiership clubs have circled.

Those two aside, two of the teams promoted from League 1 last season – Southampton and Brighton – will no doubt be a big threat.

Where will you finish this season?

Anything less than a top 6 finish must be seen as a complete failure and would no doubt signal the end for Sven.

The brief for this season is promotion – ideally in the top 2 – but it'll definitely be taken any way we can get it. Evidently the Championship is a seriously competitive league and I would argue that it's more difficult to get out of this league than it is to just survive in the Premier League.

We're on course for the top 6, although missing out on automatic might disappoint some fans.

Middlesbrough | Mike Baker | @smog_blog

Won the highest percentage of points after conceding the opening goal than any other Championship side apart from Norwich (37%)

Headline of the Summer?

After years of trying to resolve our problems by throwing money at them, we've learned that running a wage bill totaling more than the two automatically promoted clubs combined is unsustainable. In 2010-11, we're believed to have allocated £24m to players' salaries within a division where anything over £10m is extravagant. The parachute payments are running out this year, so it's a luxury that has to stop.

There's a marked difference between the old Boro and the club managed by Tony Mowbray. Everything that went wrong under a dreamer like Gareth Southgate and the utter disaster of Gordon Strachan's reign (Gordon snapped up Kris Boyd and offered him huge wages without bothering to work out if he would fit within the side, which is just negligent) is now being reversed.

There was a welding of homegrown ability to the existing squad and he even got Leroy Lita scoring on a semi-regular basis. We were too far down to think about going up, but the promising signs of corners being turned were evident by the campaign's close, and it's these that mark a cautious increase in the take-up of season tickets from a region that itself is feeling the pinch.

Any major worries?

Shaving millions off the wage bill is just half the job. Mowbray now has the task of replacing at least some of the departees with reliable, cut-price signings. The pressure of promotion is off his shoulders.

Everyone connected with the club realises that in resolving the overspend we might have to sacrifice our dreams of going up, but in certain areas we're looking thin on the ground and as usual there's our sizeable injury list to worry about (Kevin Thomson and Jason Steele are already crooked for several months). The manager came with a bargain hunter's reputation, and we'll need

him to demonstrate this quality before the transfer window closes.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Rumours of us going into administration did the rounds last season before Steve Gibson stepped forward to assure us that nothing could be further from the truth. The cost cutting was all to do with reducing the club's debts and making us sustainable, he declared. The unspoken reality was that we couldn't expect a side of expensive imports while the stadium remained less than half full, which on balance seems fair enough.

We still have one of the country's best chairmen running things. He won't see Boro go to the wall and last year details of the refinancing package that ensure the club's security were released; we should be as stable as ever. If, along the way, there's a new philosophy of prudence that ends the (sometimes shockingly wasteful) free-spending attitude of our past, then it's all we deserve.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I've never enjoyed it when we face Reading. They're too organised, sensible and able to thrive whilst living within their means for my liking. In March, they crushed us 5-2, a bit like receiving a clip around the ear for having ideas above our station.

Where will you finish this season?

I'm reasonably happy with anything around mid-table, though more satisfying will be the club's announcement that the financial woes are over, rock bottom has officially been reached and it's time to get back on the upward curve. We've made a mess of things since relegation in various, comedic ways, and it's high time we turned things around. Above 10th at the conclusion of a battling campaign that saw points prised from us rather than given away would be great.

Millwall | Chris Matthews | @twounfortunates

After promoted QPR (25) and Swansea (21), kept the joint-highest number of clean sheets in the Football League (20)

Headline of the Summer?

“A tale of two strikers” or, plainly, the departures of Steve Morison to Norwich and of Neil Harris to Southend. The way in which Morison appeared to conduct himself during negotiations riled more than a few on Twitter and the messageboards, but it was an irresistible opportunity for a player not long out of the Conference - soon to turn 28, Premier League football was unlikely to beckon again - and the club received a decent fee. Harris’ exit was met with more goodwill from the supporters. Partly because he is knocking on a bit and was well off the Championship pace last season, but mainly because he has achieved so much during his two spells at the Den.

Since then, Darius Henderson has arrived from Sheffield United and Jordan Stewart must have done something right on trial, as he has been given a year-long contract. Kenny Jackett’s hopes of reuniting Watford’s full Premier League starting XI were scuppered, though, as Ashley Young plumped for Manchester United.

Any major worries?

There have been murmurs of discontent over the options in the forward department. Even with Morison last season, we needed another goalscorer. The money being spent by Leicester and especially Brighton’s purchase of Craig Mackail-Smith (whom, it was felt, should have been a Millwall target) has led some to believe that we ought to be lashing out millions on what is known in Tabloidese as a ‘marquee signing’. Despite Premier League experience, Henderson doesn’t really fit that description. He does represent excellent value, though, which is what a relatively hard-up club should be looking for. Anyway, January signing Josh McQuoid and a home-grown youngster, John Marquis, both impressed towards the end of last season, and a loanee may join the ranks soon.

Where we are short of options is out wide. Hameur Bouazza and James Henry are plenty

good enough, but there is no-one of a similar standard to challenge for their places.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

At the moment, I’d say 8. The overall position of the club is better than at any other point in the last 20 years. Our Bostonian (as in Massachusetts, not Lincolnshire) majority shareholder, John G. Berylson, has converted loans into equity, consolidating the share base, while the annual losses appear to be on a downward trajectory.

As might be expected from a graduate of Harvard Business School and a former US Marine, he is not here to hang around in the lower reaches. Pleasingly, though, his interviews suggest that sustainable growth is the plan, rather than a KLF-style bonfire of his personal wealth. Having said all that, we are, as ever, at the mercy of a single investor, hence the 8.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I’ll join the chorus and say Leicester. Investment in proven Football League talent should prevent them from going the way of Middlesbrough and other sure tips from previous seasons. I’m hopeful that West Ham will remain true to recent form. The signing of Kevin Nolan is eye-catching, but Fat Sam’s Rollerball won’t go down well at the self-styled Academy. Elsewhere, Hull and Burnley may be up there.

Where will you finish this season?

The Championship is probably going to be the most keenly contested of the three divisions this coming season, and this is the first campaign under Jackett’s management in which we can’t realistically expect to improve our final league placing. Our success thus far has been founded on the defence, which is still in place. If we can increase the number in the goals scored column, the top 10 should be in reach.

Nottingham Forest | Pat Riddell | @seatpitch

2nd most efficient attack in the Championship - 1 goal every 6.7 shots
| 3rd fewest number of shots in the Championship (10.1 per game)

Headline of the Summer?

The sacking of Billy Davies and appointment of Steve McClaren. The latter was a surprise to most, the former was both predictable (to some) and unexpected (for many). I've written at length why Davies had to go so I won't go into great detail but his continued fall-outs with the board had made his position untenable.

McClaren's arrival was quickly met with derision before, almost as quickly, bringing a positive atmosphere to the City Ground. A coach with as much experience and success can only be a good thing for Forest — particularly with his reputation for bringing through youth players.

We can only hope McClaren quickly settles to life in the Championship and establishes us as a force to be reckoned with — alas, some Forest fans are not known for their patience.

Any major worries?

At the moment it's the lack of players — Kelvin Wilson, Robbie Earnshaw, Julian Bennett, Nathan Tyson, Paul McKenna and Dele Adebola have all gone. To be honest, none of them are a great loss but we must be replacing them with better players.

I'm quite confident that McClaren wouldn't have taken the job without reassurances that funds were available for transfers but we have less than a month now until the start of the season.

A left-back, winger and striker are essential — at minimum — so we can field a full squad.

We have to remain confident that a manager with the contacts and experience that McClaren has will bring in the right players when he has fully assessed the squad.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Well, finances are a tricky subject when it comes to Forest. Nigel Doughty has funded the club since he became chairman in 2002 to the tune of around £60 million — but many fans are not happy about the fact we are indebted to him.

Looking around the Premier League and Football League (and disregarding our absence from the top flight in the past decade) I'd say we're lucky to have him.

As long as he stays a benevolent benefactor there's no issues with financial stability — and, if we ever do regain a Premier League place, that kind of money can be dealt with in a matter of seasons.

So, the long answer is 10.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

There's no team that I'd say we're particularly worried about.

That's not being arrogant — it just means we can beat anyone on our day; and anyone can beat us.

Presumably the likes of West Ham, Leicester and Birmingham are going to be the ones to beat this season but I'm sure many will be saying that of us — I only hope we can live up to it.

Where will you finish this season?

Well, I have to say anything but the top 6 would be a disappointment given the past two seasons — and would give many people ammunition to claim the sacking of Billy Davies was premature.

If we start well and maintain some consistency then we could be challenging for one of the automatic positions come May.

On the other hand, if McClaren needs a season to settle, establish his style and bring in new faces it could be a season of consolidation.

Peterborough Utd | John Verrall | @johnverrall

Only failed to score in 4 matches | Scored 3 or more goals in 16 matches | 3rd most efficient attack in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

The issue that has dominated the headlines this summer has been the Craig Mackail-Smith transfer saga. After protracted negotiations he ended up going to Brighton - a rather surprising choice - for a fee of around £3 million.

Any major worries?

There are definitely a few. We know how tough this league can be after finishing bottom of it two seasons ago, and that has helped keep expectations down. Whereas before we were hoping for a top 6 finish, this season everyone is just aiming at consolidation – but it is also a stronger, and more competitive league this time around.

After losing Mackail-Smith and Aaron McLean we are left with a rather unproven strike force. Lee Tomlin and Nicky Ajose will be the likely starting front two, with the former having only been plucked out of non-league last season and Ajose with fewer than 30 professional games under his belt. Neither have played a game at Championship level.

Also, relying on our defence has never been a strong point. Last season the defensive frailties at Posh were there for all to see and we have made very few additions to it so far during the transfer window. Paul Jones, who was on loan here last season, has signed permanently to provide competition for Joe Lewis in goal. Craig Alcock has also signed up and Scott Wootton has been brought in on loan.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

This is impossible to gauge without seeing the club's balance sheet, but the indications are that we are relatively well-off. Darragh MacAnthony has told of how he wishes to create a legacy at Peterborough, passing it down to his sons and keeping it in the family, so the chances of a

takeover seem relatively limited.

There is a worry that MacAnthony has effectively loaned £8 million to the club so far, but he assures the fans that this is what had to be done for our club to be run successfully. He also insists that the policy we are employing – buying young talent; nurturing it, selling them on for a profit – will eventually pay for itself and Peterborough United will be a sustainable, profit-making club.

In terms of stability we are not in any danger of heading into administration it would seem. Out of 10, I would say we are about a 7.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

As we expect to be in a relegation battle this season there is no need to be worried about the clubs challenging at the top of the table. We only need to be concerned with the teams around us.

If you look at the other teams that you would expect to be in a relegation fight – Doncaster, Watford, Coventry etc – and asked me if I'm worried about them, I'd tell you I'm not. I believe if we play to our best against them we have enough in our squad to beat them.

Where will you finish this season?

21st. If you offered any Posh fan this position now I think they would snap your hand off. We all know how crucial this season is and the necessity for the club to consolidate itself as a Championship outfit.

Our short-term aim is to be a club like Doncaster or Barnsley who have established themselves as a Championship club, seen their average attendance increase and been able to attract bigger players.

If we can stay at this level for a few years there is nothing stopping us doing that, but we must stay up this season to prove to everyone that we can compete at this level and are not just a “yo-yo” club.

Portsmouth | Rob Calver | @pompeyrob

Highest average winless run in the Championship (5.2 games), 2nd highest in the Football League | Only scored 6% of their goals in the opening 15 minutes - the lowest in the Championship | Took the 2nd fewest shots in the Championship (9.7 per game) | Their 6 clean sheets in a row was only matched by promoted Swansea

Headline of the Summer?

Yet another takeover; this time by Convers Sports Initiatives, a company controlled by a London-based Russian businessman that is building a portfolio of stakes in various sports and media businesses.

Not a lot is known about them, but they do already own various sports franchises and media rights, including the World Rally Championship, Spartak Moscow ice hockey team and the Isle of Man TT motorcycle race.

The early signs are very positive with some investment in the squad and infrastructure.

It is clear that CSI spent many months tracking a number of English clubs, and going through extensive due diligence before proceeding, which can only be a good sign.

Only time will tell if they have the money and the inclination to invest what is necessary to return the club to the top half of the Championship, and ultimately, the Premier League.

Any major worries?

We have the same major worry as this time last year: will we have enough players come the start of the season to put a team out?

The squad remains extremely thin at the moment, but the management are clearly working hard to bring players in, and we are being linked with several different players every day.

Also, as above, we cannot be certain what the new owners have in mind and how much money

they have to invest in the club and squad. Finally, we have the worry of the return of Southampton to the Championship. Most Pompey fans' only target for the season is to take six points off them and finish above them. That is all!

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Impossible to say until we see and hear more from the owners.

We can only assume that we are far more stable than we have been in years.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

As above, Southampton. They will be desperate to knock us off our perch this season and will fancy their chances of having a strong season.

I'm not sure I could face losing to them at Fratton, and we would never ever hear the end of it.

I'm not concerned about West Ham (who I fancy may fail miserably) and my tip for the title is Leicester City.

Where will you finish this season?

A lot depends on the players we can bring in over the next few weeks, but the core of the team remains reasonably strong.

We have high hopes for an improvement on last season, although the play-offs are surely a pipe dream again.

Somewhere between 10th and 15th would be very respectable for us.

Reading | Rob Langham | @twounfortunates

Average unbeaten run of 5.3 games was the 2nd highest in the Championship (after QPR's immense 8) | Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 3rd best in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

So far, Matt Mills leaving for Leicester City in a deal rumoured to be in the region of £4.5 million, although Shane Long is also likely to follow him to the exit door.

With Ívar Ingimarsson and Zurab Khizanishvili leaving the club, it will now be up to Alex Pearce and A. N. Other – possibly young Sean Morrison – to shore up the defence.

Any Major Worries?

The club has rightly chosen not to compete with the bigger spenders in the division and I agree with this policy 100% - but too little ambition could lead to a downward spiral and reduced gates.

Mills and Long will need replacing to some extent although canny, inexpensive purchases will be the way to go.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7, John Madejski's 20 years at the club have led to few worries on this count and, stadium and infrastructure apart, the Royals have tended towards the frugal.

But the sugar daddy model is risky whether your benefactor is benign or not and the tendency to cash in on major assets makes the need to balance the books clear.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I was impressed with Leicester's passing in their 3-1 defeat at the Mad Stad in the Spring and they

only look stronger, having partly abandoned the loanee policy and opted encouragingly for lower league talent.

West Ham and Birmingham are looking to follow the model that saw Newcastle quickly re-promoted in 2009-10 and Burnley might do better under the clever stewardship of Eddie Howe.

Everyone is looking over their shoulders at Southampton and Brighton too – I think one of these will shine and the other disappoint – not sure which though!

Where will you finish this season?

Reading have finished in the top 10 every year since being promoted almost a decade ago and I would expect a finish of 9th or 10th.

Alex McCarthy and Hal Robson-Kanu emerged as real prospects toward the end of last season and there is still a vitality and verve that will cause problems for most opposition – but the fans need to be realistic about the club's ambitions.

Southampton | Steve Grant | @stevegrant1983

Took the highest number of shots in the Football League (14 per game) | After promoted QPR (25) and Swansea (21), kept the joint-highest number of clean sheets in the Football League (20) | Scored 3+ goals in 16 matches - joint best in the Football League | Only conceded 3+ goals in 2 matches - joint best in the Football League | Conceded the 2nd highest number of fouls in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

“Steady as we go”, I guess. The squad doesn’t need a major overhaul, so we’ve not given it one (yet).

Any major worries?

The only position where I’m slightly concerned we’ve not got enough strength in depth is in the centre of defence.

José Fonte is an automatic pick, and probably would be for any of the other 23 Championship clubs, but who plays alongside him is open to debate. Radhi Jaïdi had an excellent second half of last season, but it’s hard to imagine he’ll be able to keep up those levels of form and fitness at his age.

That leaves a lot of inexperience to take his place. Danny Seaborne has come on leaps and bounds in the last six to nine months, but still lacks a bit of composure at times. Aaron Martin is extremely promising, but at 21 and with a dozen senior appearances to his name, it’s unrealistic to expect him to play a leading role at this stage.

Perhaps a striker with a bit of pace would be an added bonus, but Rickie Lambert, Lee Barnard and David Connolly should get their fair share of goals regardless.

On a rating of 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Probably an 8. There’s still something of the unknown about the status of the loans Markus Liebherr put into the club before his sad passing a year ago. But, assuming his estate is still willing to continue his 5-year plan of Premier League foot-

ball, things would appear to be fine for the time being.

Opposition you’re most worried about?

Leicester City. They’ve spent an absolute fortune this summer, which does appear to be something of a “shit or bust” attitude, perhaps also linked into the pending introduction of the Financial Fair Play rules in the Championship, and as a result they’ve built up what looks to be an incredibly strong squad.

Other than Leicester, I expect West Ham to be strong, and it’ll be interesting to see how Blackpool react to their swift return to this level.

Our local rivals Portsmouth appear to have discovered someone else’s money down the back of a sofa (again, it’ll end in tears), so they’ll undoubtedly have a strong first eleven but struggle when they start getting a few injuries and suspensions. Of course, Steve Cotterill will complain that they’re really hard done by...

Where will you finish this season?

Having spoken briefly to Nigel Adkins while on a pre-season tour of Switzerland, the “plan” is to do a Norwich.

Clearly it makes sense to have those ambitions when the Canaries have demonstrated that successive promotions can still be achieved at this level, but I would think a comfortable top-half finish will be a good starting base on which to build next season.

Any finish above Pompey to restore normality to South Coast football would be particularly sweet.

Watford | Matt Rowson | @mattrowson

Most efficient attack in the Championship (1 goal every 6.2 shots) | Conceded fewest fouls in the Championship (8.8 per game) | Only failed to score in 7 matches - 2nd best in the Championship | Only conceded 2 red cards, joint 2nd lowest in the Championship

Headline of the Summer?

“New Car-diff for Mackay as he loses his WatFord Focus.”

Any major worries?

New owner. New manager. Very few players. Rubbish pitch. No money. Everything's fine.

Mind you, I said pretty much the same last summer and we had our most enjoyable season for years.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

There's a question. We've got no money, but no less than that. 7.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

That's within our own hands, as ever. History has shown that we can put up with an awful lot if we put on a united front.

But on the pitch, given the size of our squad, it would be good to quickly identify three teams in a more parlous state than us. Oh, and Cardiff, obviously.

Rumours that they're set to sign our new centre back David Mirfin, Elton, Graham Taylor, the bloody ring road and the Harlequin shopping centre are, as yet, unconfirmed.

Where will you finish this season?

At home to Middlesbrough in April. But not relegated.

West Ham United | Cris | @jimdtrilby

Most profligate attack in the Premier League (1 goal per 9.7 shots) |
Kept 2nd lowest number of clean sheets in the Premier League (5)

Headline of the Summer?

“He’s fat, he’s round, he’s Boleyn bound...” The naming of ‘Big Sam’ Allardyce as the 14th full-time manager of West Ham United has been the biggest single event of the summer. It represented a victory for pragmatism over sentiment, with the need for a strong-minded manager to significantly overhaul the club over-riding any concerns over the manager’s style of football. Also, without Allardyce there would be no Kevin Nolan; the decision of the Premier League’s top scoring midfielder from last season to rejoin his former boss represents a remarkable transfer coup in the circumstances. In the space of a week, the club secured strong new leadership on and off the pitch.

Any major worries?

Primarily the squad. 14 first team players have departed the club since the end of last season and only two (Nolan and Faye) have so far arrived. Of those still here, the three highest profile players (Green, Parker and Cole) are linked with moves away and at least two of them will probably go.

What remains is a sprinkling of established younger players who will need to step up (Tomkins, Noble, Collison, Sears, Stanislas, Spence, Barrera and Reid), journeyman pros who will need to rediscover variously their form, fitness and/or motivation (Faubert, Ilunga, Piquionne and Boa Morte) and a plethora of untried youngsters who may or may not make the grade (watch out for Robert Hall as he is a star in the making).

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

David Sullivan said recently the club’s financial position is the worst in English football. The reckless buying, the false promises over investment and the crippling liabilities have all contributed to an estimated £80 million debt. There are still two instalments outstanding on the £21 million the club were ordered to pay Sheffield United, while

compensation and legal fees in the past four years have totalled £51.1 million. Sullivan admits that all the debts are secured on the stadium and training ground so there is no escape route via administration. In that sense, West Ham really is a football club where the football and bank debts exceed the value of the club.

On the plus side, cost-cutting measures have saved an estimated £25 million and Karren Brady reported a small operating profit for the first time in years. The wage bill has also been significantly reduced due to the huge player exodus. Despite the parachute payments, Sullivan has spoken of a £30 million loan he and Gold will need to make next year to keep the club going.

As supporters of the club with an estimated combined personal wealth of £750 million they are willing and able to fund such largesse; although the prospect of a brand new Olympic Stadium on the horizon and the potential windfall that could yield is clearly further motivation. In short, I’ll give the financial stability of the club a tentative 6, but that number will rise or fall exponentially depending on what division we are in when the move to the Olympic Stadium rumbles round in 2014-15.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Leicester City seem to be the team everybody is talking about. The form they displayed towards the end of last season, coupled with the experience of their manager and the acquisitions they have made, suggest they will be the team to beat.

Where will you finish this season?

I genuinely believe automatic promotion should be achievable but everything will depend on which players are still here at the end of August and the new recruits we are able to bring in. A surprising 73% of relegated clubs fail to return to the Premier League at the first attempt, so I will offer a note of caution and predict we will finish second rather than champions!



BRAND NEW



ALL OVER THE PITCH

Kerry Andrew

@kj_funk

Classical music and football. Suggest these occasional bedfellows to the goodfolk on the street and you'll probably get a pidginopera version of *Nessun Dorma* bellowed back in your face. Tear-jerking arias and rousing orchestral works are the menu du jour when it comes to soundtracking the biggest footy moments, but what about modern classical music made by living composers?

I'm both a composer in the alternative/contemporary classical world and a Wycombe Wanderers fan since my wayward yoot, navy and sky-blue-blooded to the very gills, etc.

I've often felt that these two areas of my life are very distanced – the only performer dashing out of a cutting-edge 'exploded opera' rehearsal at the Whitstable Biennale to see England bellyflop skin-smackingly out of the World Cup last year to Germany, or wondering if I was the only WWFC fan in the ground to wish I'd spent £20 on going to Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* that day instead of playing away to Brighton.

I only know one composer amongst many who is a Proper Fan (Simon Speare, Plymouth Argyle) whom I can chinwag with about our clubs' financial woes in the same breath as discussing Mica Levi's work for the London Sinfonietta. But, though they don't often cross over, there are a few modern classical composers who've let a love of the game infuse their music.

Mark-Anthony Turnage, most recently gaining notoriety for his musical joke of orchestrating Beyoncé's *Single Ladies* in last year's Prom commission (and fooling the critics to boot, none of whom recognised it), is an Arsenal fan.

He has used terrace chants more than once, in his

opera *The Silver Tassie* (where an Irish soldier wins a trophy before returning to the Western Front), and beautifully integrated into his orchestral work *Momentum* (1990-91). Here, he deftly uses as his main theme the common denominator 'o-lay, o-lay' song, and weaves snippets of other club chants (in a nod to the teams some of his CBSO players supported) into his boisterous, dirtily-jazzed score.

Michael Nyman, a QPR fan, went further, releasing a whole album of football-related works, *After Extra Time*. The eponymous work, *AET* (*After Extra Time*), is a typical chunk of chugging minimalism which plays with the idea of football more in structure than in motifs.

Nyman has described the ensemble as being divided into 'two five-a-side-teams', with piano and bass somewhere in the middle (let's say referee and a linesman!), and the extra time as being represented by later material (written in the '96 part of the 1995-96 season) inserted into the existing piece (written in the '95 part) to extend it.

The Final Score (*A Concerto For Football*) was the score for a Channel 4 film about QPR's recent history for the last 20 years. This is a bit too formulaic-sounding for me but I bet is a dream come true for West London footy fans into their neoclassical-lite!

There's lots of lovely footage of packed terraces and '90s haircuts. British art/cannibalism film fans might recognise *Memorial* (1985) from Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; its in fact dedicated to the memory of the Juventus fans killed at Heysel.

Much more interesting is Nyman's work *Beckham*

Crosses, Nyman Scores, for string quartet, piano and... John Motson! Fragments of Motty's commentary from the 2002 World Cup game between England and Argentina were set to music in a piece later reworked into a new piece for dance, Exit No Exit. I wasn't aware of its earlier incarnation at a performance of this, so had no idea that the bubbling bass clarinet had replaced Motty's excitable tones.

Hmm, who else could you transform into music? Jonathan Pearce can only be several shrieking piccolos; David Beckham's awkwardly ambassadorial sentences would be a viola, bowed on the bridge for extra gratingness; Alan Hansen's drawl onto muted trombone; Rooney's spitting curses on tenor sax and thunder sheet. A fun high-art game for all the family!

Last year, Jocelyn Pook brought a short opera about football fandom, In-ger-land, to the Royal Opera House. It was a punchily-directed celebration of football chants and songs, vignettes about father-son relationships in football, football as religion, the pervading influence of WAGS on the UK's celebrity culture, and much more. Mixed with footage of real fans, the singers nailed the teeth-gnashing fervour that we all froth ourselves up into during a match.

There were chalk pitches and formations drawn on the stage; chordal versions of the reaction to an almost-goal, with descending 'ohhh!'s as the singers sank back into their sofas; chorus-sung narration of England's matches against Argentina in both 1998 and 2002, culminating in the men's repeated outbursts of 'THE RE-FER-EE'S A WANK-ER!!'; and a madrigal based on the Liverpool chant 'Oh, Gerrard, Gerrard, he's big and he's foo-kin' 'ard'.

The opera was pitched perfectly, to me at least; if you listen really hard sometimes at grounds, you experience this wondrous polytonal, polyrhythmic, polyEVERYTHING mix of vocal sounds, mostly male, with a touch of brass and drums. It takes just a little spit, polish and hot dog juice to fashion it into something credibly artistic that transports that crazedly animal devotion into the theatre.

As might be expected, the focus is usually on the upper echelons of football, so clearly I've got to

get my act together. I can see the headlines now: 'Renowned Composer Kerry Andrew Writes Experimental And Slightly Impenetrable Musical-Theatre Work Around Her Devotion To Lowly League 1 Whipping Boys, Wycombe Wanderers'. It's got 'SURE-FIRE HIT' written all over it, hasn't it?

Chants – including a bit of one of my blogs about hearing the chants go all out of time...

1. Elgar's chant for the Wolverhampton Wanderers

Edward Elgar was a diehard supporter of England's Wolverhampton Wanderers club and legend has it that he regularly cycled all the way from Worcester (a 40-mile trip) to watch games during the 1890s.

In 1898, he was so taken with a phrase in a newspaper report that said his hero Bill Malpass had "banged the leather for goal" that he set it to music. Some claim this is the first-ever football chant. Today, Wolves fans reportedly sing Nimrod from Elgar's Enigma Variations at home matches.

2. Shostakovich: The Golden Age

In his lighter moods, Shostakovich was fanatical about soccer and was even a qualified referee. His favorite team was Zenit Leningrad (now league champion Zenit St. Petersburg) and he kept a notebook detailing scorers.

His 1929 ballet The Golden Age told the story of a vigorous young communist soccer team that traveled to the West and whose wholesome sportsmanship had the capitalists joining their cause. The music is sardonic and fast-paced with touches of jazz and it includes a climactic soccer match in Act II.

3. Bohuslav Martinu: Half-Time, a Rondo for Large Orchestra

In his Half-Time, the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) was inspired by the half-time atmosphere at a Czech-French soccer match in 1924. Full of vivacious, energetic rhythms and audacious harmonic techniques, the rondo suggests the influence of Stravinsky.

THE TWO AMIGOS

William Abbs

@williamabbs

In a quiz about Spanish footballers in England that was posted on the Guardian's website twelve months ago – timed to coincide with the arrival of David Silva at Manchester City – the first question asked who the first player from the country to appear as a professional in the Football League was.

As many a Who Wants to be a Millionaire? contestant relying on a 50-50 lifeline has found out to their cost, while two of the possible options could be ruled out immediately the remaining pair seemed equally plausible answers.

In this example, Albert Ferrer (a Chelsea debutant in 1998) and Xabi Alonso (who followed suit for Liverpool six years later) were joined by the names Emilio Aldecoa and José Gallego.

It would be fair to say that Aldecoa and Gallego are not as well-known as Ferrer or Alonso, even though one was a full international who – like Ferrer – played for Barcelona. As opposed to their Premier League peers, though, Aldecoa and Gallego's time in English football overlapped.

They were born just five months apart and arrived in Britain in the same year as each other. The mere mention of the Spanish Civil War will be enough to explain that apparent coincidence. Aldecoa and Gallego hailed from the Basque country, the region whose army formed part of the Republican faction that ultimately lost the conflict.

So it was, then, that in 1937 both men fled their homeland as refugees. Unlike many of their uprooted compatriots, they settled not in southern France but the heart of England.

Arriving in the country aged 14 and 15 respectively, Gallego and his family moved to Cambridgeshire

while Aldecoa's wound up in Staffordshire. It is Aldecoa whom the FA credit as the first Spaniard to play in the Football League.

After his performances for a local works outfit had brought him to the attention of Wolves in 1943, Aldecoa had already been with Coventry for a season by the time League football officially resumed a year after the end of the War.

What turned out to be Aldecoa's only season in Division Two was not a particular success on an individual level – 29 appearances failed to yield a single goal for the left-winger – but Coventry did finish in a respectable eighth place, as Manchester City took the title.

It was an underwhelming beginning and end to Aldecoa's League career, when considered alongside his being a leading scorer in Major Frank Buckley's wartime Wolves side, but the young man from Bilbao made history nonetheless during the course of 1946-47 – simply by taking to the pitch.

Joining Aldecoa in the Second Division that season, from the second half of the campaign onwards, was his compatriot José Gallego.

An outside forward who had already spent four years with Cambridge City in the amateur divisions, Gallego earned a transfer to Brentford in January 1947. He made a handful of appearances before moving to the Bees' Second Division rivals Southampton at the end of the season.

A single substitute appearance was the only first team action that Gallego saw in two years on the south coast, although reports from that match suggest he might have made a better impression

in time had it not been for an ankle injury.

Gallego then made four appearances for Colchester United between 1950 and 1952, joining in the year the club was elected to the Football League. After a respectable five-year stint as a professional, Gallego wound down his playing career with Cambridge United, who were then playing in the Eastern Counties League. He remained in the area even after retiring as a player, reputedly working for the local gas board.

Picking up Aldecoa's story in 1947, however, sees him leaving England to return to Spain in order to join Athletic Bilbao. Although his Football League career was shorter than Gallego's, it was Aldecoa who went on to enjoy greater and more prolonged success in the game.

During his two years with his hometown club he picked up a cap for Spain, appearing as a substitute against the Republic of Ireland in 1948. Three years later, after a brief but prolific period with Real Valladolid, Aldecoa signed for Barcelona, helping the club to two Spanish championships and one Copa Latina (a forerunner to the European Cup).

The two league titles that Barcelona won while Aldecoa was there were actually the fourth and fifth that the club had secured under the Franco regime, which is perhaps surprising given its association with Real Madrid. Of course, the team in white soon won their first championship since before the Civil War and then went on to dominate European football for the next decade.

After finishing as a player with Sporting Gijón in 1954, Aldecoa moved into management with Girona and then coached CD Condal (a precursor to Barcelona's B team) before having a season with Real Valladolid in 1966-67.

Alongside his assignments as a number one, Aldecoa's coaching career also took in a two-year spell as a member of Birmingham City's backroom staff.

He took up a post with the Blues in 1960 at the invitation of Gil Merrick, their new manager. Merrick had featured for the Blues against Barcelona in the semi-final of the Fairs Cup in 1957 and was still a player when they lost the final of the same

competition to the same opposition in 1960, albeit no longer first-choice goalkeeper.

While both games came after Aldecoa's time there as a player, the Spaniard's name would still have been known at the Nou Camp – which might explain how the job offer came up.

With Birmingham City about to enjoy a jaunt in the Europa League this season, it's pleasing to be reminded that Aldecoa joined the club as a coach at a time when they were enjoying something of a golden period in European football.

After the near-misses of 1957 and 1960, Birmingham reached the final of the Fairs Cup again in 1961. Beating Helenio Herrera's Internazionale home and away in the semi-finals was at least some consolation for the disappointing aggregate defeat to Roma that followed.

Aldecoa left Birmingham in 1962, a year before Merrick won the Blues' first – and only, until the club repeated the feat in February – major silverware, the 1963 League Cup.

Next season, then, as you watch David Silva attempting to prise open defences for Manchester City, remember the names José Gallego and Emilio Aldecoa. They made the same journey from Spain to England some 75 years ago, but for very different reasons.

While researching this article, I discovered that a minister of the Spanish Republican Government in Exile wrote to FA Secretary Stanley Rous in 1946 to try to arrange a fixture between an XI featuring players displaced by the Civil War (including Emilio Aldecoa) and a British side.

If anyone can shed any light on whether such a game ever took place, I'd love to know more.

Please send me an email if you can help:

williamabbs@hotmail.com.

NEWCASTLE UNITED'S FIVE-POINT PLAN FOR BOUNCEBACKABILITY

Black and White and Read All Over @blackwhiterao

The start of a new season: a time of excited expectation, eager anticipation, renewed hope. But, for a few clubs, a painful reminder that last season's nightmare had lasting consequences – namely condemning them to life at a lower level.

Such clubs might usually have better resources and more financial clout than their new opponents, but they're also demoralised and in disarray. How then to dust themselves down, pull themselves together and bag promotion at the first attempt?

Here two Newcastle fans, Ben and Paul of Toon blog Black & White & Read All Over, draw on some of their own club's experiences to offer a Five-Point Guide to Bouncebackability, and lay themselves open to accusations of insufferable smugness in the process...

1. Get rid of the mercenaries

Tempting though it might be to wallow in misery, there's no time for licking wounds. Firm foundations for promotion need to be laid well before a ball is even kicked.

In all the teams who've ever been relegated, there are normally one or two (or eleven) players whom fans can point to and say 'He didn't care'.

It's true to say that footballers have only a relatively brief career in which to make as much money as they can, to support them through the years of knee and ankle problems which lie ahead.

While the money drops off dramatically out of the Premier League, the fact is that, for many players, the driving factor is how much cash they can amass.

Which means that when things aren't going your way and the going gets tough on the pitch, some players would rather pull out their mobile and ask their agent to start looking for a new employer than get stuck in trying to avoid relegation.

Once relegation has been confirmed, it's imperative that such players are shipped out quickly if a club is to stand any chance of making an instant return from whence they came. Owen? Viduka? Martins? Auf Wiedersehen pets.

Not only will this lighten the wage bill, and hopefully bring in some funds for restructuring, it will also keep the wolf from the door in terms of the lost revenue and allow those remaining to focus on what they need to do to get back up.

Which brings us to...

2. Rebuild team spirit

Players who did genuinely bust a gut in the ultimately fruitless fight to stay up and who were upset at relegation are (quite rightly) likely to be aggrieved at remaining on the same payroll (and, in all probability, in a lower pay bracket) as the mercenaries. So beginning by jettisoning the cash-craving malcontents is key – only then can the remaining players start focusing on the task in hand.

If your team is sufficiently committed and mature to be able to address the reasons why they find themselves in a lower division, then relegation can (perhaps perversely) be a unifying, galvanising experience. Where once a team may have been riven by dressing-room dissent and cliques, relegation at least strikes a heavy blow to the collective pride.

After all, the players have been dealt a brutal reminder that football is a team game, and that if they all pull together they stand a far better chance of restoring their bruised egos, collectively.

How best to draw a team together into a close-knit unit has been the subject of many different theories across sports – from an anthem for the British Lions, courtesy of Sir Clive Woodward on the disastrous tour of New Zealand in 2005 (the players' own preference was for just going to the pub together), to the cultivation of comical facial hair, courtesy of our very own Joey Barton last summer.

As long as your team bonding exercises keep the players out of the tabloids (best to avoid Ayia Napa) and don't wind up with your right winger picking a fight with your star striker, the person with whom he's supposed to be developing a telepathic understanding (Keith Gillespie and Alan Shearer, take a bow), they can work wonders for team spirit for the season ahead.

Team spirit needn't always be instilled from above – sometimes the rallying cry can come from within.

Facing up to our first campaign in the second tier for seventeen years, and in the wake of a truly calamitous 6-1 pre-season thrashing by Leyton Orient, our senior pros – Kevin Nolan, Alan Smith, Steve Harper, Joey Barton – grasped the nettle and challenged those present to show their commitment to the club and the cause or to get out. Chris Hughton rightly took most of the credit for unifying a fractured dressing room, but it was crucial that the players acknowledged their responsibilities themselves.

3. Adopt a 'horses for courses' approach

If you want to get a job done, make sure you start off with the right tools. Again, flogging off the highest wage earners can help – those who think they're above the division in which they find themselves aren't likely to prove much use.

Technically gifted players can be an asset, often proving the difference between otherwise relatively evenly matched sides (QPR's Adel Taarabt

being last season's most obvious example), but if lightweight or allergic to hard graft they can also be a liability.

While many players who really belong at the level above will continue to shine, some more brightly than before, others will struggle and look woefully out of their element. There's much to be said for looking at and picking up those who already have considerable experience in the division in question.

And the same goes for managers – if your gaffer has been forcibly ousted by the chairman as punishment for dragging the club down, then arguably better to appoint a successor who knows the league and who's achieved promotion before than a big name not used to dirtying his hands at that level in a bid to generate excitement among the supporters (take note Stockport and Didi Hamann).

Tactics too should be tailored to the task. We won the Championship title by playing by far the most effective football in the division – not the prettiest. That accolade was arguably claimed by play-off winners Blackpool, whose manager Ian Holloway then stubbornly refused to alter or compromise his approach in the Premier League, only to see his ambitiously attack-minded side ripped apart defensively and sent plummeting back down.

Holloway's failure to adjust was at a higher level, but equally for relegated sides there's no shame in shifting to an ostensibly more defensive formation – say 4-5-1 from 4-4-2 – away from home to supposedly inferior opposition if it actually improves your chances of winning the game.

4. Don't underestimate your opponents

Despite what they might think, players who were until recently regulars in a higher division do not have a divine right to win games.

On the contrary, to win games you first need to earn the right to do so – generally by working extremely hard and establishing a solid platform in defence and midfield. Your players need to realise that they're in the league they're in on merit, just like everyone else, and to learn to treat opponents

with respect.

Relegated sides should always be wary of being a prized scalp, representing a chance for players to prove themselves against their supposed superiors.

While some can be intimidated by visits to larger stadia and confrontations with better-known opponents, others set out determined to show they have the potential to step up a division (or two). You can guarantee that any complacency will be seized upon – autumn defeats to Blackpool and Scunthorpe taught us a harsh lesson that we didn't forget.

Likewise, your manager shouldn't arrogantly assume that his players and tactics will always or even generally dictate the pattern of a game. Changing formation in response to an opposing line-up shouldn't necessarily be seen as bowing to fear by concentrating on nullifying threats – it can often be a respectful and proactive attempt to outfox and outwit.

This is where detailed and regular scouting reports are invaluable – without them, life in an unfamiliar division would be a succession of steps into the unknown.

5. Be canny in the transfer market

This is particularly important in the January transfer window – it pays to keep at least some of your powder dry until then.

Signing players in January can be fraught with danger – clubs are less likely to relinquish stars mid-season if they've still got much to play for or if sourcing a replacement at short notice would be difficult, and if they do decide to sell the price may well be inflated.

But, after minimal investment before the campaign kicked off, we spent wisely in January on players who could bolster the squad, freshen up the look of the team, add options and help to carry us over the finishing line.

Given that our transfer dealings have all too often been absurd flights of fancy or gambles which never paid off, there was a refreshing pragmatism

and short-termism about our purchases.

A serial flop in the top flight (as he's proved once again with us), Wayne Routledge was nevertheless an inspired buy at Championship level, giving us fiendish pace and trickery on the right wing. Mike Williamson was also an astute acquisition, a quality player in the second tier who was desperate to escape being condemned to inaction by Portsmouth's crippling financial crisis.

These were not flashy signings suggestive of a club already getting carried away with plans for a Premier League return, but of one which acknowledged there was still work to be done and which had identified precisely the sort of 'horses for courses' players to do it.

TWO DECADES LATER...

Daniel Griffin
@footballgib

Not since the early 1990s, when Crystal Palace came over for a friendly against the national team, has a professional English club played on Gibraltarian shores.

Therefore, when it was announced that the national team would play Rochdale locally, and Cardiff in Jerez (a game later to be cancelled), it was good news for local football enthusiasts.

For a territory starved of regular, decent international football, due to the struggles to obtain UEFA and FIFA licenses against Spanish objections, which proved far too strong, the chance to see fully fledged professionals sounded like a good opportunity to attract a decent crowd.

Unfortunately, a relatively steep ticket price of £12 (compared to £10 for the friendly against the Faroe Islands, who Gibraltar ended up beating 3-0 on a torrential night), meant that only one stand ended up being used, and even that was not near half full.

Therefore, only a crowd of 500 or so greeted the national team for their first match back home after an Island Games tournament which saw them finish in 5th place.

The match itself was a highly entertaining affair, with Rochdale eventually coming out 2-1 winners thanks to goals from Simon Hackney and Jason Kennedy, with one of Gibraltar's few 'semi-professional' players, Joseph Chipolina of Spanish Segunda B4 side Linense getting the consolation for Gibraltar.

However, the score could have been greater on either side.

New Rochdale manager Steve Eyre was complimentary of the team after the game, as well as seemingly the experience itself, not only playing on an artificial 3G pitch, but playing at 32 degree temperatures in the evening.

Hopefully, for Gibraltar's sake, it won't be another two decades until another professional side plays at the Victoria Stadium.

It shouldn't be the case, as the GFA is being run a lot better now than it was in the 90s, shown in the fact that 5 days later, Gibraltar hosted Isthmian Premier side Wingate and Finchley in a match (which was less attended, albeit at no cost to attend), with Gib winning that affair 3-2.

The struggle for UEFA and FIFA recognition is very hard, and will likely be unsuccessful for a long while, so for the time being, Gibraltar will have to make do with just friendly games.

However, the more matches of the standard of the Rochdale contest, ultimately the better.

BRIGHTON IN BLOOM

Lloyd Langman

@twounfortunates

With their new stadium set to be unveiled on the opening weekend and their club transfer record in smithereens, the most upwardly mobile team in the 72 as we move into 2011-12 has to be Brighton & Hove Albion. Delivered on a plate by chairman Tony Bloom via a £90m interest-free loan, Falmer could well have represented a figure of envy for supporters of less progressive clubs if it weren't for the torrid years that the Albion have been forced to endure.

Yet, for all the hype and positivity surrounding the Seagulls as they prepare to go full-circle by welcoming Doncaster, their final opponents at the Goldstone Ground some 14 years ago, how much do we really know about their benefactor and the reasoning behind his drop jaw investment?

A graduate of the University of Manchester, Bloom studied Mathematics and initially developed a successful career as a professional gambler. Football was a particularly good earner and insiders talk of how Bloom made some real money by constantly backing France in the 1998 World Cup.

Following a call from bookmaker Victor Chandler, Bloom's poacher-turned-gamekeeper moment didn't come long after. He was sent Eastwards to work on Chandler's spread betting Asian handicap markets and it worked a treat for both parties, with Bloom able to gain the necessary experience and contact base to allow him to set up his own premierbet.com venture on the eve of 2002 World Cup and Chandler profiting to the point where he was able to seriously expand his company and set up in Gibraltar.

Bloom went on to make a small fortune when premierbet.com was sold to Interactive Gam-

ing Holdings at the height of the market (which subsequently went to the wall) and has, over time, amassed a considerable fortune in property and private equity.

One casualty in this Gekko-esque tale however has been Bloom's friendship with former business partner Matthew Benham, who some readers may know from his own involvement in Brentford's more modest renaissance over recent seasons. Details are sparse, but it apparently involved the sale of premierbet.com and intellectual property rights relating to the industry standard software for bookmaking, one of countless products and services with which Bloom has a vested interest.

Reflecting, perhaps, the characteristics that have helped make Bloom an internationally renowned poker player, whose winnings alone would fund a middling non-league side, insiders talk of how this episode kindled paranoia and an insistence on secretiveness, yet this seems to sit uneasily alongside Bloom's almost blithe bankrolling of the Albion Dream. But then again, have reason and football ever sat comfortably in the same sentence?

The Bloom family has had Albion in its blood for many years, you see, with Tony the third in the dynasty to sit on the board following Harry, his grandfather, who was vice-chairman when the Seagulls reached the top flight in 1979 behind rivals Crystal Palace, and his uncle, Ray, a current director. Indeed, Bloom has spoken publically about the sentiment behind his investment, which was offered "primarily for the love of the football club".

Yet, true to Bloom's character, there was also an element of pragmatism about the decision as well

given that Albion were struggling to attract support from banks to fund the project until Bloom upped his stake. Moreover, as ludicrous as it perhaps seemed to others at the time with Brighton stumbling around League 1's final third, Bloom would no doubt have had an eye on securing a penny-for-penny return for his outlay.

As he recently said, cigar clenched between molars, "We are the only league club in Sussex, we have a big catchment area and we want to make the most of that. We want people coming to Brighton, not Palace, Portsmouth or Charlton, and I think we can make that happen when we have Falmer." Only now, as thousands of supporters emerge from the woodwork and after American Express have signed a multi-year naming rights agreement for the new stadium, does the club's potential seem so, well, obvious.

There are obstacles, of course. Bloom's interest-free loans are due to be repaid in 2023, although he has the option to partially convert these into shares. You get the feeling, however, that so long as the club can keep their wage bill in check and continue to engage with and entice the local community, the Seagulls will be able to handle the repayments. Particularly if they reach the Premier League.

Putting Bloom's investment to one side, there's a slightly larger elephant that will be playing on minds down on the south coast. Supporters know that Gus Poyet's rate of progress will have bigger Premier League and Championship clubs on standby and it remains to be seen whether Bloom and his fellow directors possess the wherewithal to attract a similarly dynamic and successful coach should the Uruguayan depart.

Albion fan Sam Swaffield gives us his verdict on the likely post-Poyet scenario elsewhere in this preview but, for now, supporters will take confidence from a series of impressive advances in the club's infrastructure.

Firstly, there's the zeitgeisty development squad that is emerging under 29-year old coach Luke Williams and Charlie Oatway, which acts as a go-between for the first and youth team squads, and fulfils all of the club's reserve team fixtures. Reflecting an approach adopted in Scotland, this

could well prove to be the solution for clubs unsure of what to do with their first and second year professionals and you get the feeling that the idea of a development team could catch on across the country. Furthermore, a new £15m training ground is in the pipeline, which will no doubt help to further professionalise the club and attract the best players down to Sussex by the Sea.

So, there you have it. An attempt to dig some dirt has ultimately proved fruitless and it appears as though Brighton have simply struck lucky. "A lot of passionate Albion fans would do the same if they had the money", Tony Bloom tells us. Breathing life into that staple conversation of supporters on messageboards, in pubs and under the stands, Brighton's Bloom-fuelled rise gives all of us would-be sugar daddys a vicarious thrill, imparting the feeling of what it might be like to make your fellow supporters' lives that bit better. How long it'll last, I don't know, but for now Brighton are this dreamer's second team.



LEAGUE 1



AFC Bournemouth | Chris Lines | @narrowtheangle

Took 3rd highest number of shots in League 1 (12.1 per game) |

Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 3rd best in the Football League |

Only conceded 3+ goals in 3 matches - the joint 3rd best in the Football League |

62% of their points were won from home matches, the 3rd highest proportion in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

“Captain Marvel returns to Pompey” - Jason Pearce heads back to Portsmouth after their 50% sell-on clause means it makes more sense to sell him back to Portsmouth than accept a larger bid from Peterborough.

Any major worries?

The fact that we've allowed our influential youth team coach Joe Roach to leave the club. Fans sense there's been a personality clash between Roach and chairman Eddie Mitchell, with Mitchell perhaps wanting his own men in place.

But Roach has overseen a conveyor belt of talent - Sam Vokes, Danny Ings, Josh McQuoid, Brett Pitman, etc. His loss is a substantial one, and it would be a disaster if our youth system stopped producing.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Probably somewhere between 4 and 6. No enormous alarm bells ringing thanks to the substantial transfer fees we've received in recent times for Marvin Bartley, Jason Pearce, Rhys Wiggins, Brett Pitman and Josh McQuoid.

And for the first time in many years we've spent money on more than one player in a pre-season! Steven Gregory has joined from AFC Wimbledon and Adam Barrett from Crystal Palace looks likely to follow for a fee as well.

We're still not 100% convinced about Eddie Mitchell. It's a difficult one. On the face of things, he seems to have made great strides in clearing club

debts. But what are his long-term intentions? We hope - but don't quite yet trust - that his intentions are only good. Let's hope by this time next year we are admitting we were wrong to doubt him...

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Not too many, for once. I don't think we'll get promoted, but I also don't see League 1 being hugely strong this year.

Huddersfield should get automatic, and I think Charlton, Sheffield United and Preston all have a very good chance of play-offs. Scunthorpe and Sheffield Wednesday are hard to call. My gut feeling is that the former will have the better season, but won't get automatic promotion.

My tip for an outside bet would be Exeter. I think their chances of a play-off place are a fair bit better than the bookies seem to think. And then there's the loose cannon of Notts County, who could finish 2nd or 22nd under Martin Allen.

Where will you finish this season?

I've a hunch we'll flirt with the play-off places but finish up about 8th or 9th. This is not to be sniffed at, even among a fairly average League 1 crop. But if we hit a good run of form, another play-off finish is not out of the question.

It'll be good for Lee Bradbury to have a full season to show whether he has the ability to stay in the post long-term or not.

One concern is that we were extremely vulnerable from set pieces last season - and a commanding, tall centre-back is yet to arrive to address this problem.

Brentford | Brian Smith

Scored 45% of their goals in the last 30 minutes of matches, the 2nd highest in League 1 | Their scoring rate at home (1.04 goals per game) was the 2nd lowest in League 1 | Took 86% of possible points from matches in which they scored first, the 3rd highest in the Football League | Only conceded 2 red cards, joint 2nd lowest in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

The league form curtailed off at the end of last season which reduced the chances of Nicky Forster being made permanent manager after his good start.

It was a relief to all at Griffin Park that the season finished, even if it was a creditable 11th position.

From the outside, many may think this is a good year for the Bees – but with an improved playing budget this was a disappointing season.

After a long wait for the appointment of a manager - the Bees finally made Uwe Rösler the man to lead their quest for promotion.

So far he is making all the right moves.

Any major worries?

None at the moment – scarily it's all looking good.

We look strong in all departments – if anything we are short of one striker, but it's not a worry.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7. Mathew Benham's finances have changed the club.

The finances are setting up the potential for Brentford to push on with lots of money going in the Centre of Excellence and playing budget.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Huddersfield Town.

After missing out in the play-offs the last 2 years they must be favourites to challenge again and being unbeaten for the whole of 2011 (apart from the most important – the play-off final!) they look to be one of the front runners.

Where will you finish this season?

Top 6.

Rösler has signed a number of key players with promise of more to come.

In have come League 2 top goalscorer Clayton Donaldson on a Bosman, Swindon Town captain Jonathan Douglas, St Pauli centre back Marcel Eger and on loan from Celtic, Northern Ireland international Niall McGinn.

Optimism is high with season tickets selling well despite the financial hard times and the Bees' first pre-season friendly finished with double figures as the Bees beat Tonbridge Angels 10-0.

They followed this up by thumping Hampton and Richmond 6-1 with youth team players Jake Reeves and Luke Hacker impressing.

Will the season end in disappointment once again? Probably – but I am excited about the new season ahead rather than the dread that normally comes with the first game of the season!

Bury | Mark Crossley | @markcrossley

Scored 3+ 16 times | 1 of 6 sides to win more points away from home (51.9%) | 3rd highest number of shots in League 2 (11.5 per game)

Headline of the Summer?

The full-time appointment of Richie Barker as manager. On paper it looked like a no brainer – after Alan Knill departed for Scunthorpe back in late March, head of youth development Barker won all six of his first six games in caretaker charge to lead us to promotion at champions Chesterfield (the best day I've ever had supporting the Shakers anywhere). His place in Bury folklore comfortably secured.

However, with open top bus parades over and done with, many fans cautiously expressed the desire to see a more experienced manager put in place for life back in League 1. Ex-Carlisle boss Neil McDonald was seemingly favourite, until pulling out at the eleventh hour to join up with Big Sam again at West Ham. Appointing Barker on a twelve-month rolling contract at the start of June might have been seen in some quarters as the cheap option, but it was a decision universally popular amongst the players, who clearly want to play for him. Most importantly for me, he likes to play football the right way too.

Any major worries?

Our squad looks already looks very thin. Tom Lees was a towering presence at centre-half last year but has returned to his parent club Leeds, whilst the pace and attacking threat of Nicky Ajose and Kyle Bennett will also be missed.

Bury-born Ajose scored 13 goals on loan from Manchester United last season, but has now predictably joined up with Darren Ferguson at Peterborough. Bennett (the younger brother of Elliott) has also moved to the Championship to join Doncaster for an undisclosed fee.

We've brought in ex Walsall centre half Mark Hughes from North Queensland Fury, who already looks the kind of no nonsense player we need at the back, but a winger and another striker to support Ryan Lowe up front are essential.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

6. That's a bit of a guess, but the money brought in this summer from the sale of Bennett, the sell-on of Dale Stephens (who moved from Oldham to Charlton) and compensation for Knill, will have helped massively. As will the receipts from higher gates against the likes of Rochdale, Preston, Sheffield United and Huddersfield.

To put our finances into context, on 1 March 2012 it will be ten years since the club went into administration. The last decade has been difficult for Bury fans to say the least - some awful football, dwindling attendances and a high turnover of players and managers - but last season's success was a long overdue reward for everyone who shook a bucket and volunteered tirelessly to help keep the club afloat back in 2002.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I imagine most League 1 sides will expect to beat us this year, so there's no point worrying. We are great away from home and play the ball on the deck, so I think we'll do well on nice surfaces in big grounds (we played a full strength Sheffield Wednesday off their own pitch in the Carling Cup last year). But our home form is usually pretty patchy.

In terms of a tip for the title, I think it's hard to look beyond Huddersfield, who we play first up.

I think Lee Clark's a terrific manager and I hope they finally do it this year.

Where will you finish this season?

With a couple of needed loan additions, I think we can surprise a fair few. If pushed, I say we'll finish somewhere between 10th and 15th, which would represent huge success after our first promotion in fourteen years. However, I have no doubt whatsoever that will come back to haunt me...

Carlisle United | John McGee | @epouvantail

Scored 7% of their goals in opening 15 minutes, 2nd lowest in League 1 | Took 7% of points from home matches after conceding first

Headline of the Summer?

The twin contenders are chief executive (and co-owner) John Nixon's election to the Football League board and our flirtation with Shefki Kuqi being torpedoed in the Daily Mail following an invective strewn intervention from the giant Finn.

The local Carlisle News & Star caught the latter well with the headline "Kuqi Crumbles for United Boss".

Any major worries?

The chief is the same as that at most clubs at our level - lack of a dead eye finisher. The pair that ended last season up front, Craig Curran and Francois Zoko, are both excellent players but inarguably best suited to the support striker role.

Most fans are hopeful but all would be more comfortable seeing another more experienced or differently proportioned (big, fat and strong in other words) forward through the door come August. I can't help feeling that our wish may well come true yet.

A few still harbour concerns about Abbott himself, though the dissent seems to be on the wane. Gripes now normally concern his continued stubborn streak and undoubted frailties confronting the media.

Others continue to be of the opinion that his verve for and knowledge of the game are the club's chief asset.

I fall into the latter category. If we're bottom 6 in November the worm will turn quickly though.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially secure is your club?

I'd say 9. There's always room for a sugar daddy to invest a few million in the playing squad, but in the meantime the current board do a fine job. The trio

of astute local businessmen have worked hard to bring the club back onto an even keel since inheriting it from local mogul Fred Story.

Story maintains a large stake in the club through an interest free loan of £1.2m but this is set against fixed assets of £6.4m - chiefly Brunton Park which is in a prime redevelopment site for much needed housing should the worst happen.

Accounts ensure that any transfer fees received, such as that for Danny Graham's move to Swansea this year, are over and above a strong turnover position. Chief executive Nixon's nous in this field is well recognised by his election to the Football League board.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

The scene is set for Graham Westley's nasty pasties of Stevenage to turn us over. The clubs have some past after we beat them in 2006's Conference play-offs to secure a swift return to the Promised Land.

There was no love lost at the time; all three ties were tasty affairs and Westley hardly endeared himself to Carlisle fans with some unsavoury comments in the press. There's also a suggestion that they tried to shop us for failing to comply with the Conference's FFP limits (then 40% of turnover) in a bid to see us removed from the play-offs.

The Conference were already aware of the circumstances and had given us a year's grace which was time to secure promotion.

In terms of league favourites I can't look past Huddersfield. Of the relegated sides I expect Knill's Scunthorpe to be well-drilled and spend big on loans, and Phil Brown's Preston to be a handful.

Where will you finish this season?

Being a realist, and knowing this is Carlisle, I'll say somewhere between 7th and 11th. 9th will do me.

Charlton Athletic | Doctor Kish

41% of all goals scored at the Valley came in the final 15 minutes, the highest proportion of any Football League ground | No League 1 side scored a higher proportion of their goals in the final 15 minutes (32%) | 2nd longest average winless run in League 1 (4.4 games), driven by an 11 match barren streak

Headline of the Summer?

“Charlton sign.....”.

After the difficulties of last season when the squad was cobbled together late on, it has been refreshing to sign decent players early in the summer.

Any major worries?

The inexperience of Chris Powell at managerial level.

After winning his first four games, Powell won only two of the remaining 19 fixtures. He needs to hit the ground running this season.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Far more stable than a year ago. It is something of a mystery where the ‘real’ money comes from, but former chairman Richard Murray described the owner(s) as “seriously wealthy”. Got to be an 8.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

The big name clubs. The two Sheffield sides, Preston and Huddersfield all seem to have problems of one kind or another.

Scunthorpe have been promoted from this division twice in recent seasons, and with Alan Knill at the helm they could be dark horses.

Where will you finish this season?

With the signings that have been made, we should be top 6 and hopefully top 2.

Chesterfield | Dean Mansell | @awayend

2nd most efficient attack in League 2 (1 goal every 6 shots) | Lowest average winless run in the Football League (1.4 games) - the only side not to lose consecutive matches | Never went consecutive games without scoring, 1 of 6 Football League sides to do so

Headline of the Summer?

Last season's League 2 championship winning management team of manager John Sheridan, assistant manager Tommy Wright and first-team coach Mark Crossley all signing new four-year contracts.

Speculation had linked Sheridan with a host of other clubs including Sheffield Wednesday, Doncaster Rovers and Barnsley.

However, the speculation did not result in a move away for the new hero at the b2net and thankfully the challenge of the coming season in the next tier of English football was one he couldn't resist.

Any major worries?

I wouldn't call it a major worry but at the time of writing, the club have yet to sign a replacement for last season's top scorer at the club, Craig Davies.

His departure was widely expected in the summer as his one year deal came to an end. He attracted a lot of headlines last season and played a pivotal role in our promotion so good luck to him.

We do need to replace him however as (Sir) Jack Lester only made the occasional away appearance, with all of his 17 goals coming at home.

A potential replacement in the ranks is 20-year-old striker Jordan Bowery.

It would be a big ask for him to step up and partner Jack, although I have no doubts he has the attributes to become a top player.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

9 - The club is now in the hands of former Sheffield Wednesday chairman Dave Allen who became the majority shareholder at the club after investing £4m, plus a £2m loan to make up the shortfall in the funding for the new stadium.

With average attendances doubling last season from the previous and season ticket sales for the coming season approaching double of last, the coffers must be looking rather nice.

Dave Allen expressed at the time of his takeover that he wanted Championship football at the b2net in 3 - 5 years but would not be spending a fortune to do it.

Sounds sensible but is it realistic? We are only 2 years into the plan and with the playing budget probably one of the smallest in L1 this year. The jury is out on how achievable it really is, but so far so good.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

After coming so close last season, it will have to be Huddersfield. I'm a big fan of Lee Clark and the attacking style of football he plays. Goals galore promised when we meet them this season!

Where will you finish this season?

My head says just outside the play-offs so I'll go 7th. My heart obviously says we will continue the fine form of last season and the momentum will see us gain an automatic slot - we are football fans, we can dream!

Colchester United | Ryan Croke | @crokey94

69% of their points came from home matches, the highest proportion in League 1 and 3rd highest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

To be honest there wasn't any breaking news around the club but I would have to say the rumour of Lomana LuaLua coming back was the most outrageous thing this summer - that or chairman Robbie Cowling revealing his plans for the club's budget over the next five years.

Any major worries?

Well at the moment we only have one natural goalscorer at the club (Steven Gillespie) and he is known for injury problems.

He showed how clinical he can be towards the end of last season, scoring 9 goals in 18 games - so my major worry would be that he gets a series of injuries and we struggle up front.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Before Ward was hired, we were spending money that a club of our size should not have been spending and this has left a lot of our players on high earning contracts - something Ward has had to sort out.

He has brought in players from non-league and others who have been released by their clubs but have a point to prove.

Now with Cowling's 5 year plan where he decreases the amount of his own money that he puts into the club each year, we will end up only spending less than we receive and this will more than likely result in youth players being quickly promoted to the first team.

We are in the process of building a new training ground and have recently set up a link with a local school where our younger players will go.

All of this looks promising for the future and I believe like many of our fans that our club should survive for a long, unlike many clubs.

So - I would have to give us a solid 8.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Huddersfield.

Although they have sold star players Pilkington and Peltier, I think the young full back Jack Hunt can easily fill Peltier's boots.

They have also signed Danny Ward from Bolton and in my opinion, he can also take Pilkington's place.

Add in new signings McDermott, Woods, Gobern, Miller and Cooper on loan from Hull to the squad they already have and you have a team that I can think can run away with the league.

Where will you finish this season?

In my opinion the league this season is weaker, and depending on what strikers we can bring in, our squad will be stronger.

We finished 10th last season and only 9 points off the much sought-after play-offs.

With a fully fit O'Toole, Gillespie and Okuonghae I believe that we can make the play-offs and that we will finish 5th.

Exeter City | Gary Andrews | @gafootbl

Conceded the fewest number of fouls in League 1 (8.5 per game)
| Never went consecutive games without scoring, 1 of 6 Football League sides to do so

Headline of the Summer?

“Grecians aim high with ground redevelopment and under the radar with player recruitment” (yes, it’s not catchy, but it’s been a very quiet summer, and it’s better than “Tisdale signs a couple of players who’ll probably do quite well”).

Any major worries?

Replacing Jamie Cureton and Ryan Harley, who scored the bulk of Exeter’s goals last season. Guillem Bauzà’s signing would appear to be a replacement for both, and probably means a slight change in style.

I’m also not hugely convinced by our goalkeepers, but other than that the Grecians look pretty solid.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

6.

We’re not likely to do anything stupid, but having a lot of northern teams in the league this season will increase travel costs and decrease gates.

We’re probably a lot more solid than several other teams in the division.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

All of them and none of them.

We’re capable of beating the best and losing to the worst. I’ve given up predicting the results.

I have a depressing feeling Milton Keynes may do well this season and I think Stevenage will surprise

a few people, but it’s a pretty wide open division, so I don’t think any side should go into the new season fearing any of their competitors.

Where will you finish this season?

12th.

Exeter should be good enough to avoid relegation, but I don’t see us being any less inconsistent than last season and we don’t have the budget to challenge for promotion.

Anything above mid-table will mark a very good finish.

Hartlepool United | John Cooper

Took 2nd fewest shots in League 1 (8.9 per game) | Failed to score in 20 of their matches - worst in League 1 & 2nd worst in the Football League | Only conceded 2 red cards, joint 2nd lowest in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

On the player side, signing Nobby Solano.

Off the pitch, the amazing season ticket offer (£100 for adults, £50 for kids).

Any major worries?

Only that the expectation of the added support will weigh heavy on the players.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

10, provided the current owners stick around.

We've been bankrolled by them to the tune of millions for over 10 years now.

In that time we've enjoyed the most successful and stable period in the club's history.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

We fear no-one and can match anyone in this league - results against the 'big boys' last season proved that.

What I worry about most is getting knocked out of the FA Cup by a non-league side like Darlington.

Where will you finish this season?

Top half, possibly even top 6 if the new signings do their stuff.

Huddersfield | Charlie Johnson | @footballcharlie

Longest average unbeaten run in League 1 (6.2 games), thanks to going their last 25 league matches unbeaten | Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 3rd best in the Football League | Kept 5 clean sheets in a row, the longest streak in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

Anthony Pilkington wanting to leave the club. Not the snappiest headline but it shows the impact that not winning the play-off final actually had on the club. Pilkington was our marquee player, the difference in a good but increasingly functional side.

The fact that after recovering from a potentially career ending injury that he wanted to move on without playing for Huddersfield again sticks in the throat of many fans - with good reason - but we got good money for him and will now have to move on.

Any major worries:

That we won't score enough goals. Pilkington leaving is a blow because he is a great player, but also because he would also get you 10 plus goals a season. Add to this a number of non-scoring strikers and we might have a problem.

We weren't scoring enough goals last season and I believe that it cost us promotion - unless we now bring in a good striker I fear that we will have the same problems again.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

The club is financially stable as long as Dean Hoyle is in charge.

Without him it'd be a different story, although the £3 million plus we've made from outgoing transfers this season can't hurt.

On the rating I'd say 8.

Without the current chairman...? 3.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Preston will be a force this season.

Where will you finish this season?

I hate to say it but I think it'll be play-offs again.

Leyton Orient | Matt Arnot | @leytonorientear

Won every home game in which they scored the opening goal (11 games) - the only Football League side to do this

Headline of the Summer?

“Olympic Clock Ticking For Orient”. Whilst the unveiling of the Olympic clock in Trafalgar Square marked the official countdown to the biggest sporting cavalcade on Earth, in our small corner of East London it could herald the beginning of the end for London’s oldest Football League club.

West Ham’s move to the Olympic Stadium has the potential to damage our future crowds, with thousands of discounted and free tickets being offered to local children in Waltham Forest to fill what will inevitably be large gaps in the Championship club’s crowds.

Orient had sought to take the Olympic Park Legacy Company, the Government, Newham Council and the Mayor of London’s office to judicial review over the decision to award the stadium to West Ham, but the application has been rejected. Orient now face the difficult decision of whether or not to risk more of their limited funds on an appeal when the odds (and political will) are stacked against them.

Any major worries?

Unusually for Orient, everything looks fairly rosy on the pitch. Star performers Charlie Daniels and Dean Cox have been subject to transfer speculation but appear to be going nowhere. Captain Ben Chorley has signed a new 2-year deal, as have first-teamers Jamie Jones and Jimmy Smith, both of whom were linked with moves elsewhere.

The surprise decision to release Scott McGleish looks to have been vindicated by the arrival of Jamie Cureton, and other summer signings have significantly increased squad depth.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

3. Last season the club returned its first profit since 2006 following a lucrative FA Cup run, and

still has a limited amount of money in the bank from the 2009 sale of Brisbane Road. Subsequently, the balance sheet isn’t looking too bad in itself and anyone looking to take the club’s financial position at face value would say that Orient are in a comparatively stable position.

However, the financial future of the club rests entirely on the whim of one man (the ubiquitous Barry Hearn).

During his tenure as owner, Hearn has repeatedly covered Orient’s losses via his Matchroom Sports enterprise, but has offset those losses by steadily acquiring the ground piece by piece. LOFC now finds itself with a dwindling amount in the bank, no tangible assets, one year remaining before Hearn is scheduled to implement a £180,000 annual ground rent and the aforementioned spectre of West Ham’s arrival a few hundred yards away.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Charlton look to have strengthened following their immensely disappointing showing last time out. Brentford are another club who have made some interesting looking signings - Niall McGinn particularly - and they might be another to spring from mid-table into the top 6. Perennial challengers Huddersfield will be up there all season again and, alas, Franchise will go close too.

Where will you finish this season?

Expectations have risen exponentially following last season’s flirtation with the play-offs, and some of the more optimistic faithful are eyeing up a tilt at promotion.

Realistically, Orient remain one of the smaller and less well financed clubs in the division, and a top half finish would constitute a satisfactory return. Somewhere between 8th and 12th seems likely at the moment, though if last season’s abysmal start (which saw us bottom in October) could be avoided then the top 6 might not be out of reach.

Milton Keynes | @fromthecowshed

3rd most efficient attack in League 1 (1 goal per 5.8 shots) | Only failed to score in 6 matches - joint 2nd best in League 1 | Never went consecutive games without scoring, 1 of 6 Football League sides to do so | Took fewest shots of any League 1 side (8.4 per game)

Headline of the Summer?

Probably Sam Baldock rejecting a £1.2m+ move to Peterborough.

Or at least according to our side - Posh have countered that they pulled out and there was no deal to reject. It culminated in Darren Ferguson calling us unprofessional and then firing a few shots about Baldock's attitude in the same statement.

Any major worries?

I feel like we're moving in a positive direction, and I think we'll be playing in a weaker league compared to last season.

However, while I think there's plenty of business still to be done before we kick off, our squad is looking very small and very young.

Peter Leven, who held things together in the centre, has chosen not to re-sign and it doesn't look like Angelo Balanta, who is a little wizard on the wing, will be back on loan. They were two big players last season.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I'll go with a 5; we have significant debt to repay, but seem to be stable enough for the time being. Long term we need to be a Championship club for things to be sustainable at their current level, I would imagine. There will be no major spending on transfers.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Huddersfield should walk the division.

After that I find it a really difficult league to predict this year.

Charlton have made some very good signings but Chris Powell seemed to get off to a slow start last season. He's an intelligent guy, though, so maybe with his own squad they can make some noise.

Where will you finish this season?

I'd like to think our eyes will be on 2nd, but I'll say 3rd or 4th.

Notts County | Stuart Brothers | @wellypie

Conceded the most fouls in the Football League (12.9 per game) |
Most profligate side in League 1 (1 goal every 10.4 shots)

Headline of the Summer?

Probably the chase (loosest sense of the term) of Marlon Harewood. He came in and chatted with Martin Allen and chairman Ray Trew for nearly three hours - the offer was made so it was a waiting game after that.

I don't think any Notts fan truly thought we had a shot of signing him, but the longer it dragged on you began to think no news might be good news!

It's not to be though by the sounds of things, with it looking like that he's off to China at the time of writing this.

Any major worries?

Goals are likely to be hard to come by. Only five clubs in the entire Football League scored less than us less year - the least in League One altogether.

Lee Hughes still managed to finish top scorer despite missing for huge parts of the season.

Craig Westcarr pops up now and again with the odd vital goal. But then we've got Karl Hawley (much improved performances under Martin Allen) and Ben Burgess who only got one goal credited between the pair of them.

That said, we've taken on Hamza Bencherif and Jeff Hughes who scored more from midfield from their clubs than our entire midfield did all last season.

Hopefully that'll take some of the strain off the front men on their off days.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

11? Since coming in Ray Trew has ploughed (at least) £10m into the club, repaying the existing debts dating back before the Sven era, then rede-

veloping the stadium to generate extra income via the Meadow Lane Sports Bar. He's drastically improved the executive boxes and dining facilities.

We've had a lot of outgoings (managerial compensations, and almost extortionate rates of pay for what a lot of us consider deadwood) but apparently we still had a competitive budget this summer we were told. Helped somewhat by our FA Cup run last season with two televised fixtures in there and by the sale of Ben Davies to Derby County in January.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I was quite fearful when Huddersfield lost out in the play-offs since they gave us two sound hidings last year. Despite our abysmal form all season long in the league, I think they're the only team that worry me!

Preston North End and Sheffield United will be strong this year I'd imagine. And Sheffield Wednesday will be looking to improve drastically.

Aside from that, I think Rochdale were the only side I saw us play (that are still in League One) who really impressed me last year. I'd expect Chesterfield to pose a pretty decent threat though when you throw in the local derby factor.

Where will you finish this season?

I'll go for mid-table - I think most of us would bite your hand off if we could take it now.

Even finishing in ninth place last year I think we had the fifth best defence in the division. If we can keep Krystian Pearce fit (he was a massive loss as the season was closing) then I think we'll be steady again at the back.

Like I say though, who's going to win us games is the primary concern. If we somehow get the elusive 20-goal striker then we'll be pushing for the top half of the table.

Oldham Athletic | Mike Hawksby

52% of their goals conceded came in the last half an hour, the highest proportion in League 1 & 2nd highest in the Football League | Went 6 matches without scoring a goal - longest run in the Football League | Only 17% of their goals conceded came in the opening half an hour, lowest proportion in League 1 & 2nd lowest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

Paul Scholes – Will he/Won't he?

One of the longest running rumours on the fans forums, fuelled by the occasional rare tabloid interview with the player himself name checking his idol Andy Ritchie.

When Paul Scholes eventually announced his retirement this summer there were still some optimistic Latics' fans out there who thought he may grace Boundary Park for one year.

It was not to be and we've had to settle for an exclusive Paul Scholes interview on the official website instead.

Any major worries?

Getting through the summer without any more negative press about failing to pay the players was a major concern.

Despite the players being paid late on more than one occasion towards the end of the season, our chairman Simon Corney has done his best to allay fears about issues with the clubs cash flow.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

If our chairman is to be believed then we are probably about a safe five with many other teams in the league on a precarious two or three.

Longer term we need to bring more fans through the turnstile and playing in a run-down three-sided stadium doesn't help matters.

With a more Northern look to League 1 next season there are reasons for optimism when it comes to gate receipts.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I don't think there's anyone to fear in this league as Paul Dickov proved in the early to mid parts of last season that we can punch above our weight and take points off the big spending clubs.

It would be worrying though if we failed to finish about our Greater Manchester rivals in Bury and Rochdale.

Where will you finish this season?

Reaching the play-offs would probably represent an over-achievement.

A top-half finish is likely to be a realistic objective for the season and would further cement our position as League 1 veterans.

Preston NE | Kim Ramshead | @kimramshead

Kept lowest number of clean sheets in the Football League (4) | 3rd highest number of fouls in the Championship (11.7 per game)

Headline of the Summer?

Undoubtedly, the sale of Sean St Ledger to Leicester for around £1.2 million, although 20% has to go to Peterborough due to a sell on clause in his contract.

We have released 5 players from our squad, with the loanees all going back to their original clubs or having agreed deals elsewhere. Youl Mawéné, who had been training with us last season, opted to join up with former boss Craig Brown at Aberdeen.

A couple of others have also been sold to help free up our wage bill. Iain Hume, Barry Nicholson and some of the other players' loyalty has stood out this summer, as this is what a club that has just been relegated from the Championship for the first time in 11 years needs.

Hume was the first player to go to Phil Brown after we were relegated and his attitude really stood out for me.

Any major worries?

At the minute the only major concern for us is the lack of transfers in. So far we've only managed to get Clarke Carlisle, which is a brilliant signing as he is a solid defender. However, we really need to get a left-back in as that is a position where the options are limited.

Another central defender would be ideal as our back line wasn't the strongest last season. St Ledger's departure leaves Craig Morgan as our only remaining experienced centre back.

Even though we have a good strike force with Neil Mellor, Hume and the up and coming Jamie Proctor, another wouldn't go amiss.

One of the main worries is some fans may expect promotion but I'm not convinced this is realistic.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I would say only about a 3 or 4. This is because we are short on cash and our chairman doesn't really seem to care about our situation. However, Trevor Hemmings has given the club money in the past to help pay the players and without this we could have folded last season.

Plus we have had to offload players who have been on high wages to make way for new recruits. This wasn't helped by the crowds dropping considerably during last season as a result of high prices and a dislike of Darren Ferguson. The loss of money from Sky, etc. since our relegation will also have an impact.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

In League 1 there's a mixture of some big teams and smaller teams that will be equally as hard to beat.

However the club I think will be most difficult is Huddersfield, as they will want to go up automatically this season having just missed out in the play-off final. Also Sheffield Wednesday, but they'll miss Neil Mellor who scored 20 goals for them last season. Charlton could be decent as they seem to have spent some money.

Where will you finish this season?

As much as we'd like to go straight back into the Championship, realistically I think we'd do well to get in the top 6. However, if we can keep hold of Mellor, paired with Hume and Proctor the goals should come flooding and, providing a solid back four is in place, we should do well. Also keeping Keith Treacy is a must as he provides a cracking cross and offers a threat down the wing. But this is our first season in this division for a while, so it's hard to predict as there are teams we haven't played in a long time.

Rochdale | Sarah Lomas | @girlonaterrace

Conceded the 3rd fewest number of fouls in League 1 (8.9 per game)

Conceded 40 yellow cards, the 2nd lowest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

Probably an obvious one for Rochdale, but Keith Hill and David Flitcroft leaving us to take over the reigns at Barnsley. Given their achievements at somewhere like Rochdale meant they were always going to be looked at by bigger clubs.

Their move really hit us hard and for a good few days the fans were divided; one half wished them well and the other half were bitter. The way in which it happened probably wasn't the best - one day Hill said he wasn't leaving and we all sighed with relief and then a few days later there he was being appointed at Barnsley.

I won't lie, it hurt how they left us. They pretty much ripped the club apart, even taking most of the backroom staff with them too before coming back for two of our best players. But that was a few weeks back now and the second headline of the summer was our new manager.

We're into a new era with Steve Eyre and Frankie Bunn and I actually think we're feeling even more positive than when Hillcroft were in charge. Eyre has already grown on the fans - he knows what to say, is honest and genuinely seems like a great guy.

Any major worries?

I think it's too soon to be worrying given that we've not even started the season yet, but one worry (or maybe my impatience) is the lack of recent signings. We had a flurry of comings and goings one week and now it's all gone quiet.

We've got a few on trial who, as I write this now, are in Spain with the team, so hopefully something will come of them.

We still have a few positions that need filling before we get going and I guess as a fan not hearing any transfer rumours make you a little worried.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Well, obviously I can't say for sure because they're private matters for the club but I'll go for a 7. I trust our chairman and board of directors to take care of our finances as they always have. They're a very open and honest board and will tell you if there's anything going on that we should be concerned about.

We're not a flashy club and we would never spend over our means, we work with the budget we have and we're happy running the club like that.

I'd rather be a fan of a club that brings through young players and brings out the best in those that have fallen by the wayside rather than one where they overspend just to get some big names in. We survive by finding rough diamonds and developing them, and then making money through their sales and other clauses.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

We genuinely fear no one, why should we? We have nothing to prove at this level and we're just enjoying every minute of it.

Next year League 1 is going to be interesting, there's a real mix of big boys and smaller clubs coming into the league and I think it's going to be a tough one. I think the ones to watch will be Sheffield United, Preston and Huddersfield.

Where will you finish this season?

We'll be the first to admit that we over-achieved last season compared to where both ourselves and everyone else expected us to finish, but looking back we certainly deserved the results and the position we finished and I genuinely expect us to perform quite similar this season. I believe most have us down to be relegated, which doesn't really make sense, but I think we'll be in and around the play-off places again.

Scunthorpe United | Max Bell | @mpbell92

Won the highest proportion of their points away from home in the Championship (52.4%) | Joint most profligate side in the Football League (1 goal every 11.4 shots) | Failed to score in 21 matches - the worst record in the Football League | Conceded 3+ goals in 13 matches - the joint 2nd worst in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

“Can the Iron succeed following another rebuild?”

Any major worries?

Every two years or so our best players seem to disappear, and the worry is whether we can craft another side, with our thin cloth, that can be competitive again in League 1.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

9.

We were the only Championship side to remain in the black last year; we had the smallest wage bill and it has been cut even further post-relegation.

The club is excellently and successfully run, even if the attendances are still very skinny.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

There's lots of big clubs in League 1, all with eyes on promotion.

Particularly Huddersfield, who have spent big for several years now, and always seem to bloody beat us as well.

Where will you finish this season?

If we sign a couple more, whilst keeping hold of current assets, and the team gels – the play-offs aren't out of the question.

But my gut says top 10.

Sheffield United | Ian Rands | @unitedite

Failed to score in 19 matches - 3rd worst in Football League | Conceded the joint highest number of red cards in the Football League (12)

Headline of the Summer?

“Is Dan the Man?” or “Blades Desperate, Dan’s the Man”

Any major worries?

Yes - who will be here at the start of the season!

The existing wage bill is unsustainable. As I write, Darius Henderson and Mark Yeates have gone and we can expect one/some/all of Ched Evans, Nick Montgomery, Stephen Quinn, Lee Williamson to be gone by August.

That will leave us with a young and very inexperienced squad and, as good as some of them are, you have to worry what might happen if we make a shaky start to the season.

The loss of captain Chris Morgan for much of the first half of the season, is as massive an issue this season as it was in the second half of last season where no leaders were found as we sunk further into the mire.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

5. We owe a lot of money (mostly to Kevin McCabe and his business) and the stated strategy is that all loans will be owed to McCabe, with no bank debt, by 2014. However, the man wants out; his property business has suffered in the recession and he is looking for investment in the Blades.

Each season we are making significant losses and even cutting the wage bill this season will not get us anywhere near break even. In the absence of investment, McCabe will have to continue propping up a loss-making business for the foreseeable future.

Some worry he will pull the plug at some point, but I think he is in too deep for that to happen.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I hate playing Wednesday.

Horrible, stressful days. Yes the atmosphere is great and we have had the better of them over the years, but to me it is all about not losing, rather than winning.

I would much rather be seen as having the better of Wednesday by being in a division above, rather than playing them.

I am also not looking forward to playing teams like Exeter and Yeovil - teams that beat (in their own fans’ mindset, the “massive”) Wednesday last season and whose victories I gloated over without mercy. I just know that this will probably come back and bite me on the backside this season.

This is not meant in a disrespectful way to Exeter and Yeovil, more a reflection of how a large number of Wednesday fans still view their club compared to their divisional peers.

Where will you finish this season?

Mid-table.

In fact, with so much uncertainty surrounding the club and the hysteria in some quarters regarding Danny Wilson’s appointment, I would happily take that.

I fear that if a good start isn’t made, things may rapidly deteriorate, such is fan detachment from club and manager at this moment in time.

Groups within the support will turn on Wilson, the first bad run of results that we suffer.

Too much pressure could be placed on the heads of young players and that means Wilson has a massive man-management job on his hands, whilst financially his hands are tied behind his back.

Sheffield Weds | Chris Ledger | @obscurfootball

No Football League side scored higher proportion of goals in opening 30 minutes (42%) | Hit woodwork 10 times, lowest in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

The departure of the gutless Darren Potter to potential play-off rivals Milton Keynes. Potter, alongside James O'Connor and Tommy Spurr, was largely responsible for the Owls' relegation to League One with his tendency to shirk tackles and pass sideways or backwards at any given opportunity. Getting rid of Potter could prove to be Gary Megson's masterstroke and is destined to improve the dynamism of the Owls' midfield tenfold.

Any major worries?

A possible lack of goals is a major worry. Wednesday's current roster of strikers include Clinton Morrison, the unproven Nathan Modest and Gary Madine - whose off-the-field problems remain a pressing concern - and none of them have shown much sign of being a prolific goalscorer in League 1. Recruiting new strikers has also been a difficult task, as the Owls' continued interest in Preston North End's Neil Mellor has ensured that slow progress has been made in this matter.

Mellor should not be seen as the club's saviour because his performances, during his loan spell at Hillsborough last season, were wildly inconsistent and the fact he scored in only nine League One games last season distorts a goalscoring record that looks excellent on paper.

Goals in midfield is also a problem because, although the signings of José Semedo and David Prutton should improve a lightweight midfield, there is a distinct lack of flair and pacy winger Jermaine Johnson has had numerous injuries in recent seasons.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

The financial stability of Sheffield Wednesday is very good and can be rated as 8 out of 10. Milan Mandarić's takeover last season wiped out the £27 million debt that had haunted Hillsborough for

over a decade and the club now has the impetus to compete the transfer market, especially seeing that the signings of Semedo and Julian Bennett may not have been possible last summer.

Mandarić has also declared that he wants Sheffield Wednesday to be financially sustainable and will not be chasing promotion by recklessly spending money. This has unfairly been seen as unambitious by some fans, particularly when the club failed to sign Dagenham & Redbridge's Danny Green, but the club's sensible spending policy should be seen as one of Sheffield Wednesday's best decisions in recent years.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Sheffield Wednesday's toughest opponents should be Charlton Athletic. There were similarities between the two clubs last season: both teams had takeovers in December 2010 and finished the season underwhelmingly. Although they lack competition up-front, the Addicks undoubtedly have the strongest midfield in the division and should be seen as favourites for the League One title.

Where will you finish this season?

This season should see Sheffield Wednesday improve on last season's disappointing 15th placed finish: the arrivals of Bennett and Rob Jones should ensure that the Owls' leaky defence is a thing of the past, and the team is now expected to be a well-drilled outfit.

But there is still plenty of deadwood in the squad and injuries to key attacking players could be a big blow, particularly as Wednesday look like a side with few goals in them.

A play-off challenge, rather than automatic promotion, seems the most realistic target.

Mid-table consolidation could be the most probable scenario though.

Stevenage | Matthew Kett | @fcboro

Failed to score 17 times - joint worst in League 2 | Conceded 3+ goals in 2 games - joint best in Football League | Most reds in League 2 (9)

Headline of the Summer?

It's been a really quiet summer by our standards. Usually, there are players coming and going and it's a struggle to keep up, but that hasn't been the case this summer. Graham Westley said he would stick by the squad that won him a second successive promotion, and by and large he seems to be doing just that.

The "biggest" signing so far this season is probably Alan Julian's return to the club, 3 years after he left us to sign for Gillingham. Julian was a fans favourite during his first spell, but left under a cloud, so he has a bit of a reputation to re-build.

The signings of Guy Madjo and Phil Edwards didn't particularly give the supporters much enthusiasm going into our first season in League 1, but the addition of Jennison Myrie-Williams seems to have created some excitement ahead of pre-season.

Any major worries?

Yes and no.

For the first time since I can remember, we are a genuine favourite for relegation.

Even though we were only promoted to League 2 last season, I never doubted that we would survive. However, there are plenty of doubts this time around.

The jump from Conference to League 1 in just two seasons could be a step too far for this side.

I'm confident that we won't be hammered every week because we are well organised and have a great team spirit, but we are not good enough going forward at the moment.

Last season we got away with not scoring enough goals by having the best defence in the division, however we won't be able to fall back on that this season with the extra quality of League 1 teams.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

10. Financial stability has never been a problem since Phil Wallace took over the club in 1999. He saved the club from going bankrupt back then and has kept us afloat ever since.

Basically, the club is running at a loss due to increased costs with wages etc and low crowds, but whatever the deficit is, Wallace just pumps the money back in to make sure the club is solvent.

As long as this continues, then the club will be fine.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

We will be seen as the whipping boys by the majority of the division this season.

We've been given a kind start, so hopefully we can get some points on the board early doors, but I'd say that I am worried by about 75% of the division.

Trips to Hillsborough and Bramall Lane look daunting.

Where will you finish this season?

Realistically we will have to just take every game as it comes and just try to get as many points as possible, the sooner the better.

It will be an interesting season because, like I said above, we have never really been in this position before.

I would be happy with 20th.

My head says otherwise though, and at the moment the bottom four beckons unless we can further strengthen the squad.

Tranmere Rovers | Paul Harper | @paulharper82

Conceded 51% of goals in last 15 minutes of halves, highest proportion in Football League | 3rd fewest shots in League 1 (8.9 per game) | 30% of goals scored in final 15 minutes, 3rd highest in the Football League & joint 2nd highest in League 1 | 22% of goals conceded in opening 15 minutes of matches, 3rd highest in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

Has to be “Tranmere star joins Bayern Munich”, regarding Dale Jennings’ move to join the German giants.

It came completely out of left field and is a fantastic move for the youngster, a move not made very often by young English players - especially those who play in the lower reaches of the Football League.

I really hope he does well there.

Any major worries?

I believe we have the core of a decent side, with the likes of Andy Robinson, Enoch Showunmi and Ian Goodison all very capable at this level.

My major concern is that we don’t have the strength in depth. If any of those key players miss out through injury or suspension, we don’t have the quality on the sidelines to bring in and replace them to a similar level.

Also, goals, or a lack of them, has been an issue for the past few seasons and with the loss of Jennings to Bayern, we could really do with signing an established forward to help boost that goal-scoring record if we are to do better than the last campaign.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7 - I think Tranmere is a tightly-run ship.

We operate with a tiny budget so we don’t spend above our means.

The sale of Jennings has generated funds which will definitely help with the club’s running costs for the season.

As with so many clubs at this level we rely on player sales to keep afloat, but fortunately Tranmere has a very prolific youth system.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

There are so many big clubs in League 1 this season. There’s the two Sheffield clubs, Charlton, Preston, but the one I think will be right up there this season is Huddersfield.

They will want to put the disappointment of last season (missing out in the play-offs) behind them and kick on, and I can see them challenging for the top two spots again.

They have lost Anthony Pilkington to Norwich which is a big loss, but they have a good young manager in Lee Clark and they still have some very good players at the club.

I’m sure they will make a few more good signings before the transfer window closes.

Where will you finish this season?

I’m looking for Tranmere to make an improvement on last season’s 18th place finish.

If we can make a couple of good signings before the campaign gets underway, along with keeping our big players fully fit and on the field, I believe we can be around the mid-table zone.

A 12th position finish would be a job well done I think.

Walsall | Richard Millington | @bescotbanter

62.5% of their points were won from home matches, 2nd highest proportion in League 1 | Joint 2nd lowest number of clean sheets in League 1 (7) | Only conceded 2 red cards, joint 2nd lowest in League 1

Headline of the Summer?

“Bescot Stadium Up For Sale...”

Any major worries?

There are many major worries surrounding Walsall FC at the moment, the main one being the ownership of the club's home, The Banks's/Bescot Stadium.

Current landlords Suffolk Life Annuities Ltd have placed the stadium and surrounding land on the open market in an attempt to recoup their investment, while club chairman Jeff Bonser is believed to have an SIPP invested in the stadium which leads to many major issues regarding club stability.

Having separate club and stadium owners is never a good situation and can lead to disputes between both parties. There are a few investors interested but nothing is set in stone.

Many fans and supporters groups had hoped for an investment from Walsall Council but that has now been ruled out and leaves the club in some jeopardy.

I for one am very concerned for the future of The Saddlers at the moment.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Despite the current stadium and/or ownership issues, Walsall have a well run financial system, and tend to operate on a small profit, this however isn't a sustainable situation and the club must seek to clear up all issues or the future of the club may be in some doubt - 4.

Opposition you're most worried about?

Obviously the three sides relegated from last season's Championship are a threat, but you can add Sheffield Wednesday and Huddersfield Town to that list.

It's shaping up to be a very interesting season.

Where will you finish this season?

I believe manager Dean Smith is building a relatively strong first team.

However, there isn't much competition for positions at the moment, so the best we can hope for is a mid-table position - 15th?

Wycombe | Kerry Andrew | @kj_funk

Conceded 2nd most fouls in League 2 (12.1 per game) | Only conceded 1 red card, joint lowest in the Football League | Kept the joint most clean sheets in League 2 (17) | Only failed to score in 8 matches - joint 2nd best in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Wycombe Sports Village: WWFC Cite Town’s Obesity Problem As Main Reason For New Stadium”
(This is almost true!)

Any major worries?

Lots of fans are highly sceptical about owner Steve Hayes’ plan to move from Adams Park to Wycombe Air Park to re-house both WWFC and London Wasps (see above).

There’s a bit of club and council-related bureaucratic shenanigans going on - sort of like Seasons 4 and 5 of The Wire - except in Buckinghamshire.

I am quite worried that Gareth Ainsworth will retire halfway through the season and leave us bereft. He is Our King.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Wycombe finally announced their £1.17m loss for the 2009-10 season in April, twice as much as the previous season. But Steve says 10, and he’s currently holding a gun to my head, so I’ll say 10.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

The Yorkshire triumvirate of Huddersfield and the Sheffields.

Where will you finish this season?

Play-offs, and through some dedicated prayer to the Sky/Dark Blue God of Bucks, Wembley and promotion!

Yeovil Town | Ben Barrett | @benbarrett10

Conceded a lower proportion of goals in the opening 15 minutes of matches than any other Football League side (3%)

Headline of the Summer?

Apart from the third coming of the cult-hero Super Gavin Williams, this has to belong to Terry Skiverton and his "Twansfer".

Skivo asked his loyal Twitter followers to play a role as one of his scouts and get some suggestions to him on new players, either released, available for transfer or an up and coming youngster for a potential loan deal.

In the end, following a suggestion and a trial Kieran Agard was signed following his release by Everton. Skiverton's unique player recruitment was featured on the BBC, Sky Sports News and multiple other online sites, it ensured that Yeovil hit the national media and kept Yeovil fans happy whilst the squad was taking shape. Since then, more have been trialists and Aaron Lescott could well become Skivo's 2nd Twansfer!

Any major worries?

It didn't feel great losing six of the seven out of contract players when maybe we could have done a tiny bit more to keep our top scorer, Dean Bowditch, and other vital members of last season's squad.

We may have got a fee for club captain Craig Alcock, but maybe it would have been nice to have some continuity to the squad rather than another summer overhaul.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

8. From the figures we are told, I'd have to rank this pretty well.

We aren't crippled by masses of debt, we always live within our means, we are reluctant to pay over the odds for players (even if that means losing them to others) and we received two fees for players this summer (Alcock and a sell on fee as

part of the deal taking Lee Peltier from Huddersfield to Leicester), both of which are rumoured to be six figure sums.

As for the club as a whole, futuristic plans for some investment and a new stand suggest that the club is prepared to make the moves needed to ensure progression whilst at the same time not putting the club in danger.

The reason I haven't given the score of 9 or 10, is that we still have one of the smallest budgets in the entire league.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Lots of teams seem to be buying players well. Huddersfield will always be a danger, but no side really looks like running away with the league. Brentford seem to want the title of 'dark horse', with players loaned from Celtic and some shrewd signings from Swindon and the like.

For me, though, Charlton are the side most likely to break into the top sides. Down near 'our' end of the table, the promoted sides might not be the first choices to get relegated and if Tranmere spend the money from the Dale Jennings transfer well they could prove a force.

Where will you finish this season?

My heart says that with a couple of good signings, a good goalkeeper and a loan deal or two, we could make an impact on the top half of the table.

But my head wants me to be more realistic. Whilst I genuinely don't think we are in for another season of hoping and praying to be one point above the drop zone, emulating last season's 14th place might not be easy, as the middle third of the table could be tighter than ever.

I'd put my guess at somewhere between 10th and 15th place. In no danger of going down, but not quite ready to make the play-off push.



FROM THE ARCHIVES



HOW I FELL IN LOVE WITH SOUTHEND UNITED

Iain Macintosh

23rd March 2011 | The Seventy Two

I was a Liverpool fan when I was young. I think most people my age were. It seems staggering to say it now, but there was a time when football in England wasn't actually very popular. Violence was rife and conditions inside dilapidated stadiums were, as was so tragically proven at the Valley Parade and Hillsborough, seriously hazardous. My dad, like many dads, wasn't too keen on taking his young son to a urine-soaked, racist, violent and dangerous terrace and so it was television that introduced me to the game of football.

ITV had the rights to live broadcasts in the mid-to-late 80s, but sometimes they didn't even bother to use them. If they did, you could count on the fact that Liverpool vs Anyone would be the featured game. Manchester United? A cup team. Arsenal? Barely even a top six outfit. In the heart of Essex, a county with two rubbish and perennially Fourth Division teams to choose from, the Liver bird flourished.

It never felt strange to be a Liverpool fan in Chelmsford because I shared my playground with so many other innocent eight year olds burdened with Ian Rush fixations. In fact, I didn't actually meet another Southend fan until my dad took me to Roots Hall as a 13th birthday present, a kind of Anglican-Saxon Bar-Mitzvah, if you will. Little did he know that this was the moment, the fork in the road, the crack in the timeline that changed everything.

Most parents fret about the first game their children watch live, hoping that it will be a classic, one of those crazy, emotional afternoons where pride, optimism, hope and anxiety all beat each other over the head with big sticks and claw at each other's eyes for supremacy.

This, however, was Southend against Huddersfield on a bleak mid-January afternoon. There was, to my memory, one clear cut chance in the entire game and Huddersfield scored with it. No-one will ever remember that match. No-one except me. For me, it was the greatest afternoon ever.

For starters, there was the smell. Fried onions mixed with stale urine, burped beer and cabbagey fart. A kind of heady Eau My God rising up through the air. Then there was the noise, a thundering explosion of rage bouncing up into the corrugated iron roof of the North Bank and crashing back down with echoed reinforcement.

And the swearing! I was no stranger to it, but this blew my mind. Some of it was poisonous and vengeful, but some was genuinely funny. Some was cruel and merciless and bordered on bullying, but that was genuinely funny too.

The football was, for numerous reasons, secondary to the terraces. It was a sideshow. This was a throbbing, sweating, burping, farting and cussing collective of mind and heart. Heaven only knows what it would have felt like if we'd scored. I'd probably have fainted.

That was it. I was hooked faster than the stupidest fish in Jack Charlton's pond. The only problem was the loyalty angle. I didn't know much, but I did know that you don't change teams. Not ever.

My tender mind wrestled with the philosophical intricacies of the notions of support. Are you still a supporter if when prompted to locate Liverpool on the map, you accidentally point at Carlisle? I didn't know and it seemed terribly important to me to find out.

But while I prevaricated, Kenny Dalglish left Anfield. The challenge for a 19th title imploded and overall, it seemed like a really bad time to leave. For a while, I ran the two loyalties alongside each other. This didn't help at all. Southend, now watched by me on an infrequent basis, got better and better. Liverpool just got worse.

For a brief period in the 1991/92 season, it wasn't entirely implausible that the two would swap places. What I would do then? I'd be the very worst kind of glory hunter. Eventually it ceased to matter. I only ever wanted to be a part of that burping collective again.

To recapture that feeling that something was happening exclusively for me and for everyone else who had gathered to see it. I wanted to watch my team, not the team that everyone else had an opinion on. I wanted Southend. My Southend. The crap one. Not that we were always crap. I was there for Stan Collymore and Barry Fry, for Ronnie Whelan and... yeah, then we got crap again.

University and a move to Cornwall truncated the grubby love affair, but when I moved to London three years later, we picked up where we left off. Reliable as ever, Southend were still crap.

Then, bafflingly, we got good. Just as I landed a job that would pay for a more substantial number of home games a season, we slipped the surly bonds of the basement and rose up to the Third Division.

Not content with one promotion, manager Steve Tilson then secured another. Suddenly, we were in the Second Division playing big teams and beating them. Premier League regulars Sunderland and Birmingham both fell to us that year, but the real glory was in the League Cup where a stunning Freddy Eastwood free-kick brought Manchester United to their knees.

Yep, I tell you, if the season was all about those three games, we'd have done alright. Sadly, it was the other ones that saw us relegated.

That was, in many ways, the end of the affair. Even as Southend responded to the pressure of the relegation dogfight by going on a final run of six defeats in seven, I was in talks for a new role.

As The New Paper's UK football correspondent, I would have a press pass that would grant me access to approximately 75 live matches every season.

With notepad and pen, I became a regular at The Emirates and Stamford Bridge, at White Hart Lane and Upton Park. Now relocated in South Shields, it's St James Park and the Stadium of Light, with the occasional sortie down to Old Trafford.

I keep in touch with my old flame through the excellent Shrimperzone fansite and I'll always carry them in my heart, but I've worked so hard to force myself to be objective every day that it's hard to summon up any kind of partisan feeling for anything anymore.

I want only good things for Southend, though I have to be honest, I'll settle for any kind of guarantee that they'll still be in existence next season.

Maybe one day, I'll get back down there. In my time as a Shrimper, I've stood in the North Bank and sat in the East, West and South Stands, both upper and lower. I've been a guest in the directors box twice and I've even been in with the away fans after not asking the right questions about what kind of ticket I was buying in the pub.

My final trip to Roots Hall was tax deductible. From the confines of a tiny press box, flanked by Henry Winter and David Hytner, I saw Southend take a 1-0 lead over Chelsea before collapsing and losing 1-4.

I did my best not to grumble too much. The best job in the world has taken me away from the best club in Essex and, while there are intriguing positives and negatives about that scenario, one thing is clear.

My Dad could have taken me to Upton Park or White Hart Lane or Highbury for my 13th birthday, but I will remain forever glad that he didn't.

TEN MATCHES IN THE RISE AND FALL OF PLYMOUTH ARGYLE

Lloyd Langman

10th December 2010 | Two Unfortunates

Plymouth Argyle were granted a 63 day adjournment in the High Court on Wednesday after having been served a(nother) winding-up petition by the HMRC for stalling on tax payments of £780,000. The decision should be greeted as good news in the short-term, but the spectre of administration, and worse, continues to bear down on Home Park with fans wondering how times have got so bad, so quickly. Reportedly between £7-9m in debt, the Pilgrims have gone from being one of the best-run clubs in the country to the bottom of HMRC's Christmas list in the space of a mere few years.

Yet Argyle have been anything but cavalier in their spending over recent seasons, leaving many to wonder when and how exactly things went from bad to worse. Numerous articles have appeared on some of the best football blogs in weeks gone by explaining the extent of the debt and the immediate issues that have led to the Pilgrims' demise, but in providing a background to the club's rise and subsequent fall in relation to 10 specific matches across the past ten years, this (inevitably sizeable) article seeks to provide something of a broader context.

1) Saturday December 2nd 2000 Vs Exeter City (Away)

Ian Atkins or Paul Sturrock? That was the decision facing the much-maligned Argyle chairman Dan McCauley in October 2000 after he had handed Kevin Hodges his P45 following a disastrous start to the 2000-01 Division Three campaign. Few would have anticipated the magnitude of the decision; the Pilgrims had dropped into the bottom few positions in the Football League after a decade or so of decline punctuated by a couple of false dawns, and the new man's brief would, above all else, involve keeping the club in the 72.

The decision wasn't exactly unanimous, but the board opted for Luggy, who'd left Dundee United earlier in the season. The club was ailing, and confidence was muted; just 3,264 supporters turned up to Sturrock's first game in charge at Home Park, a 2-1 FA Cup First Round replay defeat against Chester, and it was clear that more than just a few training sessions would be required to turn this shower around. Money had been spent trivially over the past 10 years and the well was dry, so the Scot set about overhauling a tired squad from the off with a host of unattached players.

The remainder of the season was essentially spent establishing a side for the next term, but this Devon derby at Exeter sticks in the mind. Making their debuts were David Worrell and a certain man of Lorraine, with fellow ex-Valence teammate Romain Larrieu watching on from the stands. The unpopular Sean McCarthy may have bagged the goals in this encouraging 2-0 victory, but it was the arrival of Friio et al that was of real note that day. McCauley still cut a familiarly malevolent figure behind the scenes, but the building blocks for the Pilgrims' day in the sun were being put in place on the pitch.

2) Monday August 27th 2001 Vs Rushden and Diamonds (Away)

The enigmatic rich list dweller McCauley had, for many, held the club back for years through his despotic reign, and glimmers of a brighter future were twice extinguished when the Rotolok owner fell out first with manager Peter Shilton in 1995, and then his successor Neil Warnock a couple of years later. The local media were locked out when his actions were challenged, and fans feared that the club would continue to be beholden to Mc-

Cauley until new investment was sourced.

Thankfully, and to McCauley's credit, this happened on the eve of the 2001-02 season when he agreed to hand control to a group of Argyle-supporting businessmen led by Accountant Paul Stapleton. It would take another six months for ties between McCauley and the club to be severed completely, but the impetus was there as Argyle looked to build on a promising end to the previous season. With three sides of Home Park grounded ahead of the redevelopment of the stadium, this was a new era with the four footballing elements - board, players, fans and lady luck - all working in harmony.

Not that it didn't take the Pilgrims a few weeks to get going in this, their Division Three title winning season. Collecting just one point from their first three games, Argyle went to Max Griggs's Diamonds on a low and at 2-0 down following a Duane Darby brace further disappointment looked likely. Yet something clicked in this team, even though it was shorn of talisman Friio and his inbound central midfield partner Jason Bent, and Brian McGlinchey clinched an incredible turnaround midway through the second half with a goal that still tingles to this day. Around 850 Argyle fans made the trek to Irthlingborough that day, and to a man they knew they'd witnessed something special.

3) Wednesday October 22nd 2003 Vs Sheffield Wednesday (Away)

That Argyle team would go on to rack up an almighty 102 points, finishing five clear of their nearest rivals, Joe Kinnear's Luton. Key defender Graham Coughlan had been gracelessly labelled as a 'Joe Soap centre-half' by Kinnear after a bad-tempered Argyle victory early on in the season, but his leadership at the back alongside the born and raised Janner Paul Wotton formed the bedrock for the Pilgrims' ascension. Despite numbering just 15 or so regular first-team players, the modest squad that Sturrock had put together screamed solidarity, and it was no surprise to see its nucleus remain in place for a pop at Division Two.

An impressive 9th position was achieved in 2002-03 as Argyle held their own in a division dominated by a nouveau riche Wigan, but the signings

of southpaws Tony Capaldi and Peter Gilbert from Birmingham, together with right-sided midfielder David Norris from Bolton would prove to be key. All three were watched closely by Sturrock before they were signed, with Gilbert and Norris both spending time on loan in the South West prior to their moves. Reflecting a cautious approach to acquisition, Argyle were anything but flush with cash, but with such an effective backbone already in place Sturrock could afford to go about his business with a degree of diligence as contented fans afforded their manager time to build towards his next wave of success.

They didn't have to wait for long, however, as Argyle recorded their second Championship trophy in three seasons, topping the Division Two table above QPR, a club who'd seemed like footballing royalty a season earlier upon Argyle's elevation and the R's demotion to the third tier. Wins were chalked up across the season, but October 2003 was the month in which it all came together. Shortly after dispatching with Tranmere 6-0 and Port Vale 5-1, the Pilgrims travelled to Sheffield Wednesday for their first game in 12 years against the Owls. Playing in front of over 20,000 paying spectators, this was dreamland for supporters accustomed to trips to Macclesfield and Rochdale, and a thoroughly straightforward 3-1 validated hopes and expectations. This was, quite simply, a club on the up.

4) Tuesday March 2nd 2004 Vs Sheffield Wednesday (Home)

"Sturrock Set for Southampton" is a headline that will forever remain etched on the memory of a generation of Argyle fans. It was perhaps inevitable that Luggy, who had been linked with Watford some time before, would leave the Pilgrims but the timing of his eventual departure was unfortunate, coming as it did 12 games before the end of the season. Ironically the announcement came on the back of a 2-0 victory against Wednesday, the very team that Sturrock would take up the next season following his dismissal at St Mary's.

Even so, Sturrock left Argyle in a healthy position, four points clear of Bristol City at the table's head, and if Caretaker Kevin Summerfield could keep the team chugging along then they would go up. The ex-Argyle player made a good start, winning

two of his first three, but a decidedly patchy run of results pushed the board, riding until then on the crest of Sturrock's wave, into action and Bobby Williamson was poached from Hibernian for the last three fixtures.

Argyle sealed promotion in his first game, that match against QPR, and won their remaining two to move into the newly branded Coca-Cola Championship with a spring in their step. Paul Stapleton and his fellow board members, who had heeded Sturrock's advice by giving Williamson the job, came out smelling of roses once again but there'd been a shift. Would Argyle, deprived of the man who picked the club up from the floor and gave it its dusting, be able to hold their momentum and establish themselves back in this, their habitual stomping ground?

5) Saturday August 27th 2005 Vs Hull City (Home)

No they wouldn't. Though the Pilgrims started well, gaining 10 points from their opening four games at this level, the club fell slowly down the table in a similar manner to present day Millwall. The core of the Division Two title-winning squad remained intact, but a number of new faces arrived and the squad began to look bloated for the first time in years.

A small, close-knit group isolated in an inaccessible corner of the country had forged an enviable team spirit over the past few seasons, but that togetherness was chipped away by a bundle of new signings, and the departure of midfield lynchpin Friio two thirds through the season following a bust-up with Williamson went down like the proverbial lead balloon.

Crowds were, however, about as good as they could be, and the club possessed enough drive to survive their debut season. Yet, results had become increasingly patchy through Year One and question marks were being raised over Williamson's tactical approach. Players were brought in throughout the season to try to plug holes with mixed success, but few supporters held much hope of anything more than hanging on for dear life by the time Williamson's second full season in charge came around.

Popular loanee Ákos Buzsáky had been signed

permanently, but the signing of Taribo West suggested a manager with a straw in his mouth, and it was no surprise to see the Scotsman depart on the back of a most atrocious 1-0 home defeat to newly-promoted Hull. With the attendance down to the 12k mark and the likes of West, Rufus Brevett and Bjarni Gudjonsson holding down starting places, drastic measures were required to steer the ship back on course.

And that's exactly what happened when the board pulled a masterstroke by hiring Tony Pulis to 'do a job'. Elliott Ward, Lilian Nalis and Vincent Pericard followed, and the Pilgrims no-nonsensed their way to safety for the second successive year. However Pulis, who publically complained that chairman Stapleton cancelled dinner plans to go out with his old friend Sturrock, never appeared to feel any love for the club and he was off to Stoke by June 2006, where he made a start on finishing what he started a few years earlier. Argyle were on an even keel, but the search for a new man to bring momentum was back on.

6) Saturday August 12th 2006 Vs Sunderland (Away)

It may have taken a few months, but supporters were reinvigorated by the news that Ian Holloway would be the next man to have a go at knocking Argyle into Championship shape. 'At least we'll go down laughing' was a sentiment shared by more than a few of the Green Army, whose undivided attention had begun to waiver after a stoppy-starty couple of years. Holloway started as he meant to go on, securing the inspired signings of Sylvan Ebanks-Blake and Barry Hayles to add much needed guts up top following the retirement of club legend Mickey Evans, who'd led the Pilgrims' line with admirable guile since Sturrock brought him home in 2001.

In amongst building a team capable of continuing the club's upward momentum, Holloway also fell off a chair, but if actions such as those painted a picture of a loveable joker, then his offer to buy those fans who'd made the long journey to Sunderland a pint on Plymouth's Barbican sealed the deal. The Green Army were smitten, particularly so following a 3-2 win against Niall Quinn's men. It helped that the football was good; with Buzsáky given a licence to roam, the Pilgrims easily finished

in mid-table, the sixth time in a row that the club had improved upon the previous year's finish. But could Argyle make it seven the following season?

The average attendance was in decline as fans became accustomed to seeing the likes of Sheffield United and Wolves at Home Park, so doubts lingered over the club's wherewithal to fund a promotion push under Holloway given that a break even figure of an average of 15,000 fans hadn't been met for the second season in a row. Rory Fallon was brought in from Swansea towards the season's end to offer a different type of option in attack while Hungarians Peter Halmosi and Krisztián Timár joined for modest fees after promising loan spells. With budgets tight, would pragmatic signings such as these do the job and if not, how would the board go about remedying the dilemma?

7) Tuesday, October 23rd 2007 Vs Charlton Athletic (Away)

The answer, several directors believed, was to develop new revenue streams in order to expand earning opportunities beyond a mere 23 days a year. Phase Two of Home Park's redevelopment had been shelved for a few years now, and there was a strong belief that the back end of the club should be prioritised ahead of the team. Plans needed to be chivvied along, and a core group of directors believed that the purchase of the ground's freehold from Plymouth City Council would help them push through the final phase of the redevelopment, which would comprise the club's conferencing and hospitality facilities.

Five wins on the trot at the end of the 2006-07 season suggested that the right team was in place for a promotion push the following year, but the purchase of Home Park for £2.7m had already been sewn up in the December, necessitating a strong focus on off-field issues. The decision divided the boardroom, and several directors including Michael Foot, a strong advocate of putting the team above all else, subsequently stood down. Money was ploughed into planning the development of the South Stand, and with crowds continuing to disappoint at the beginning of the 2007-08 season, supporters began to wonder exactly how the club planned to simultaneously manage progress on and off the pitch.

The result was that Holloway was beginning to feel as though he had one hand tied behind his back. A bright start saw the Pilgrims flirt with the play-offs, but something was amiss behind the scenes and in the know messageboard posters began to fan the flames.

The team, however, continued to impress and a Tuesday night 2-1 win at recently-relegated Charlton saw Greens all over the world puffing out their chests in pride the following morning. Even so, a dark cloud was had its eye on Argyle. The game was to mark flair man Buzsáky's final game in a green shirt as he agreed a move to QPR. The money ostensibly paid for the signature of Wycombe's League Cup hero Jermaine Easter, but signs of the events that were to follow were already in place.

8) Tuesday March 11th 2008 Vs Scunthorpe United (Away)

Argyle supporters won't need reminding but for those unfamiliar with the club's modern history, Holloway departed for Leicester in November 2007. Key players Norris and Ebanks-Blake as well as youth prospect Dan Gosling also scrambled for millions of pounds, leaving fans dazed, confused and angry, but ultimately distraught at the realisation that their best team in years had been pulled apart over the space of a few short months.

Paul Sturrock, our Messiah, returned only to be met with a mixed response. Many were touched by sentiment on the back of Holloway's desertion, but more than a few doubted his old mate Stapleton's decision. Were other candidates even considered? Swansea, a breathing example of the need to hire along the lines of footballing philosophy, have demonstrated that continuity is king but the Argyle board showed naivety in going for a man whose approach could not have contrasted more with Holloway's.

The points dried up as the panache and guile that Holloway had fostered became a distant memory, but a good run of results in February, catalysed by a heartening win at Leicester, put the Pilgrims back in touch. A calamitous 1-0 defeat at Scunthorpe, though, knocked Argyle's play-off hopes into a cocked hat. Left-back Lee Hodges ended the game in goal, and with that came the acknowledgement that this was no top six side.

9) Sunday May 3rd 2009 Vs Barnsley (Home)

Sturrock had in the January 2008 transfer window reacted to frenzied calls from the Green Army to bolster a squad shorn of Ebanks-Blake and the rest, but the signings of Steve Maclean, Yoann Folly, Chris Clark and Jim Paterson, all on decent contracts, did more harm than good in the end. Jamie Mackie's capture was a sliver lining, but the Pilgrims finished the season on a low and with the beginning of the stadium development still nowhere in sight, Argyle were crying out for new investment towards the season's tail.

The Westcountrymen should have been careful what they wished for, however. With due diligence out of the window, Stapleton and his fellow board members snapped up Japanese businessman Yasuaki Kagami's offer at the mere sniff of his cash in April 2008. The deal had come about via local suit Tony Campbell, who had ongoing business relationships in Japan, and supporters were told to expect the establishment of the Argyle 'brand' in the Land of the Rising Sun with Japanese players set to arrive at the end of the J-League season. Reason enough to worry about the legitimacy of Kagami's intentions, I'm sure most would agree.

On the pitch, the Pilgrims went into 2008-09 with scant hope, and it took until the eve of the new season to sign the dogged central midfielder that Sturrock had been after since releasing Nalis and one club man Wotton at the beginning of the summer. Simon Walton arrived with fanfare from QPR as the club's record signing; fans recognised him as the teenage prodigy who'd gone off the rails, and high hopes were generated amongst a set of supporters in need of a new talisman.

It wasn't to be, though, as a terrible start to the season led Sturrock into dropping most of his new signings and stripping the team down to a core group of trusted individuals. Argyle went on to record four wins from five matches and Walton's card was already marked by the time he was granted another opportunity. One stupid sending off at Barnsley later, and his chance was gone as supporters confirmed their suspicions that the Yorkshireman had been another expensive mistake.

Lest we forget, Emile Mpenza was also brought in

during the same season on astronomical wages, and it was around this time that the majority of supporters came to realise that this lavish spending was killing the club. With a host of loanees arriving to help boost the options available to Sturrock, the club's profits were heading in one direction only as Argyle became overloaded with players, many of whom were on fat contracts. The football continued to be awful, and it was a minor miracle that Sturrock managed to keep his team in the Championship by virtue of Norwich, Southampton and Charlton's awfulness.

Safety was somehow recorded with a game or two to spare, so supporters went into the season's finale at home to relegation-threatened Barnsley hoping that their side could make another set of fans miserable for a change. Having taken the lead through Gary Sawyer, it all seemed to be going well enough but promising news from elsewhere boosted Barnsley's confidence, and the Tykes strolled to an easy 2-1 victory, making the feckless home side look well out of their depth. The Pilgrims had just about staggered over the finishing line, but the nature of this final day defeat suggested that it was surely time for a clean sweep.

10) Saturday December 11th 2010 Vs Exeter City (Home)

Needless to say, that didn't happen. A board room shake-up occurred over Summer 2009 with Keith Todd and ex-Manchester United chairman Sir Roy Gardner incoming, and Sturrock was deemed a safe pair of hands for the time being. Supporters, many of whom were still raw from the way that the former board handled the events surrounding Holloway's departure, seemed quietly encouraged by the changes off the field, and hopes for the development of Home Park were reignited again.

However, it soon became clear that the stadium was just about all the new men were interested in and a bid for hosting games in the 2018 World Cup became the sole focus. Taking their collective eye off the ball, the board failed to act when it became clear that Sturrock wasn't up to the task of keeping the Pilgrims in the second tier, and the Scot remained in charge even after he'd lost seven on the bounce between August and September.

The directors also showed incredible naivety in their approach, and little of their much-vaunted business acumen was on show when defender Marcel Seip was loaned to Blackpool and allowed to play, and score, against his parent club, leading to an ugly stand-off between Seip's family-in-law and a number of players.

Sturrock did eventually go, albeit after a botched attempt at supporting 'Head Coach' Paul Mariner, brought in on the back of Plymouth's World Cup bid, but Argyle were never going to stem the tide, and relegation was confirmed as Newcastle fans celebrated their title win on the Home Park pitch.

Argyle's rise through the leagues had been characterised by a collective effort from a small squad on affordable wages, but by the time of their downfall the playing roster was top heavy with big earners on long contracts, who the club would never be able to flog. Debts had crept right up on Argyle, and players went unpaid several times during the season. As if that wasn't enough, a winding-up order had been placed on the club in January and, to round things off nicely, a transfer embargo was slapped on Argyle at the season's end.

Rookie Mariner would never be able to deal with such an array of issues, so the board did the right thing in pushing him aside at the season's end. Even so, in stipulating that any new manager would have to work alongside Mariner and his sidekick John Carver, the board showed a lack of guile yet again, reducing the potential pool of interested candidates in one stroke. In the end, Peter Reid was confirmed as Argyle's new man, and the football has been as unspectacular as one might have expected in the ensuing six months.

In truth, the supporters' focus has instead been on off-field matters with attention divided between the (failed) sale of Home Park to an investment group set up by Todd and Gardner, and the latest round of non-payment of wages and winding-up orders. As one fan put it, 'they've forced us to become interested in the things that they are most concerned with – property portfolios, SPVs, share options, land values and development opportunities. Along the way, we've all become barrack room lawyers with a workable knowledge of tax issues, company commercial law and accountancy. For that, I abhor them.'

So almost 10 years to the day on from that 2-0 win at St James Park, Argyle once again line up against their Devon rivals. The Green Army had practically forgotten about the Grecians in the intervening years, who'd been lining up against Farsley Celtic as they'd been taking on Leeds, West Ham and Newcastle, but the Pilgrims go into Saturday's game as underdogs. Broken and betrayed, Argyle fans now have to deal with the consequences of having lived the dream without ever really living it.

Hostility towards the board boiled to the surface 10 days ago as news of the latest winding-up order broke, and the establishment of a Supporters' Trust will hopefully go some way to rallying fans around a solution should one be required from outside the current board's circle of power. More questions than answers remain about their intentions now that the World Cup is going eastwards, but with Todd and Gardner seemingly scrambling for new investment it appears that a fan-led voice will be needed sooner rather than later.

FROM BOURNEMOUTH TO BURNLEY: THE EMOTIONAL EXIT OF EDDIE HOWE

David Bevan

15th January 2011 | The Seventy Two

Eddie Howe's move from Dorset to Lancashire seems one of a kind in many ways. In the end, as with so many managerial departures, it had the feel of a break-up. And it was always going to be like that, given the depth of feeling involved and his length of service on the south coast.

Bournemouth's final game under Howe's leadership involved a Friday night in Essex, one final fling to bring a long love affair to a close. Colchester United were the hosts and there was also, through the live broadcast of the game, an invitation for the world to watch on. It made for fascinating viewing, if slightly uncomfortable at times. Bournemouth love Eddie Howe and Eddie Howe loves Bournemouth.

Howe's demeanour throughout the saga of courtship from a succession of clubs has been deeply apologetic. No bullishness. No treachery. Very little in the way of open excitement at interest from Crystal Palace, Charlton Athletic and Burnley. Instead, there was just resignation. Perhaps the perfect end, if any mid-season exit could ever be so, to such a successful time.

Perfect for a supporter, anyway, dealing with the familiar feeling of being jilted. One imagines the majority of Bournemouth fans could not possibly begrudge Howe his move and would wish him every success with Burnley. Most enlightened football supporters would join them.

There is also an enormous amount of goodwill towards Bournemouth and the new man, while facing an unenviable task in replacing such an incredibly popular and successful figure, will find the club in a far better position, both on and off the pitch, than it was before Howe's arrival.

The sparsely-populated surroundings of Colchester's Weston Homes Community Stadium provided an eerie backdrop to Howe's last game with the Cherries. Thousands of seats were left unoccupied, a snapshot of the apathy he is aiming to leave behind in pursuit of a place in the Premier League. Some of them, the ones facing Howe, even spelled out the word "jobs" in white on blue, as if to remind him of these terrible things that dominate our lives and often dictate our moods.

It was, nevertheless, just another game for Colchester and John Ward's men approached it with an efficient ruthlessness which brought about a fully deserved victory. Former Liverpool trainee Steven Gillespie was the home side's hero, coming off the bench to net two late goals after fellow substitute Steve Fletcher had opened the scoring for Bournemouth.

Fletcher and his team-mates celebrated by running to the sidelines and mobbing Howe, which at least provided everyone connected with the club one last celebratory moment before he departed. But the evening otherwise felt extremely melancholy. After years of fairytale stuff, maybe the happy ending was asking for too much.

Anyone who doesn't "get" football, who doesn't understand how or why it affects people, anyone who fails to grasp its wider impact, just needed to tune in and absorb the emotion of this occasion.

If things worked slightly differently, Howe would never be leaving Bournemouth. The connection he has with the place is clear. The problem, as Howe himself outlined in a post-match interview that felt like an intrusion on grief, is that the offers kept coming and the answer could not be "no" forever.

Sure, this is all laying it on very thickly. But any opportunity to empathise with those fortunate enough to earn a living through football must be grasped with both hands. One game into his Burnley career, all this will be in the past.

Documenting events from the perspective of the new club in Eddie Howe's life could easily be forgotten. Burnley may be seen as unfashionable by some, primarily those who base their opinions on whether a club has enjoyed an extended stay in the Premier League, but there is much to admire. Turf Moor, currently entering its 128th year, is certainly not afraid to draw on its history and Burnley are also still basking in the more recent glory of their play-off final victory over Sheffield United and a top-flight win over Manchester United.

An interesting challenge awaits Howe in Lancashire. QPR may deservedly head the Championship table but there is a very long neck beneath them and Burnley are just one of the many hopefuls attempting to clamber their way upwards. Similar to League One in the non-stop nature of its fixture list and propensity to punish the merest hint of an off-day, Howe's new division will provide a steep learning curve.

There is also the small matter of a south coast boy having to adapt to a new way of living. Howe was born in Dorset, all but two of his league appearances came for the club he is leaving and the exceptions were a pair of performances for near neighbours Portsmouth.

Once he settles into his new habitat up north, Howe might find time to glance 35 miles or so west to the coastal life he has just left behind. He may not seem sure at the moment, but if Burnley climb to the same heady heights currently enjoyed by Blackpool, Eddie Howe will know he made the right decision.

It was certainly the most difficult one he has ever had to make.

DOUBLE-BARRELLED MEN OF THE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Rob Langham

26th February 2011 | Two Unfortunates

In the run up to last year's election, David Cameron briefly got himself into hot water with Tory grandees by suggesting that the candidate for the Somerton and Frome constituency Annunziata Rees-Mogg might just want to tone down her name a bit.

This shows that a double barrelled name, with or without the addition of a frankly ridiculous first name, is still a sign that silver spoons may have been sighted in the vicinity of the cradle.

Football is a working man's game of course so, until recently, immediately identifiable posh boys were rare in the ranks – aside from Peter Rhoades-Brown, whom I once saw open the scoring for Chelsea against then mighty Liverpool in an FA Cup tie, and the Panini sticker album legend Forbes Phillipson-Masters, those who sired soccer stars liked to keep it simple.

Watching a recent edition of the Football League Show, I was struck by the number of players with dual surnames operating among the seventy two clubs. Was this a sign of football's gentrification going too far? – have the playing fields of Eton and Harrow eschewed egg chasing and are they indulging in a new populism?

I have identified 31 football leaguers with double barrelled surnames although we should leave aside those born abroad where such nomenclature comes minus any class implications – hence Aldershot's Mikhael Jaimez-Ruiz, Barnet's Kwame Adjeman-Pamboe and Brian Barry-Murphy of Rochdale should all be discounted, their hailing from Venezuela, the US and Ireland respectively – even Shrewsbury's Shane Cansdell-Sherriff gets off the hook by dint of being an Aussie.

But the forces of globalization still explain the background of some of our more exotic sounding stars - Lateef Elford-Alliyu (Tranmere), Nathaniel Mendez-Laing (appropriately Posh) and Hal Robson-Kanu of Reading and Wales all hint at marriages across cultures. If we should mention our Dear Leader again it would be to point out that we are quite happy with multiculturalism thank you.

Elsewhere, a portmanteau surname can denote a host of reasons beyond privilege alone. If there are no players as yet brought up as a result of same sex civil unions, there will be those who decide that the practice of automatically conferring the father's name on a child is outdated, others who are the result of adoption or a second marriage, and still others who feel that a vanilla last name needs spicing up a bit – I couldn't say that's why Craig Mackail-Smith is who he is, but Lenell John-Lewis of Bury is certainly never knowingly undersold.

Then there is choice too. Ex-Burnley hero Ian Moore switched to Ian Thomas-Moore not because he enjoyed the novel Wolf Hall, but due to his marriage to Victoria Thomas in 2009; and Abdulai Baggie turned up for training one day asking for Bell to be inserted between his two monikers.

Which leaves those who still sound suspiciously well heeled. Of these, Exeter's Troy Archibald-Henville, Barnsley wunderkind Reuben Noble-Lazarus, the surely willow-wielding A. J. Leitch-Smith of Crewe, Paris Cowan-Hall of Scunthorpe and Keanu Marsh-Brown of Milton Keynes stand out – the latter first saw the light of day in August 1992 – just before Francis Ford Coppola's Dracula was released - now there's some effective pre-movie marketing.

THE MAKING OF MAX GRADEL AND ANDY KING

David Bevan

27th December 2010 | The Seventy Two

When Leicester City and Leeds United met at the Walkers Stadium on Boxing Day, it represented the latest event in the burgeoning careers of two young men attempting to realise their huge potential as professional footballers at the highest level. Max Gradel and Andy King each scored for their respective sides. Their celebrations said everything.

“Hey, f**k you man, f**k you”.

Max Gradel was born in Abidjan, the capital of the Cote d’Ivoire, in November 1987. He always wanted to be a footballer, and he has succeeded in that ambition, but, to the young Gradel, the East Midlands of England surely would have seemed an unlikely location for his football education. Following trials with Auxerre, Werder Bremen and Arsenal, it was at Leicester City that he finally found a home.

It was a great place to learn. Leicester’s youth setup focuses strongly on developing players to an advanced standard before they are thrown into the first team or loaned out to the lower leagues. Often, this means shaping raw talent and providing the building blocks of organisation to mould a player into one suitable for professional football. In Gradel’s case, it was more a case of ensuring that he understood the discipline of the game.

During a youth team game against Aston Villa, an opposition supporter disputed a Gradel opinion and received the response noted above. It was a nothing incident, which probably went unnoticed by most present and certainly anyone not at the game, but it also provided a glimpse of the temperament that the Leicester academy staff were dealing with.

Gradel went out on loan to AFC Bournemouth during the 2007/08 season, during which Leicester were relegated to the third tier of English football for the first time in the club’s history.

Following a successful spell on the south coast, albeit one hampered by personal tragedy after the death of his mother Maimouna at the age of 46, Gradel returned to the East Midlands and began the season a Leicester City player.

The campaign began with a 2-0 success over Milton Keynes Dons, in which Gradel looked every inch the exciting, creative winger that Leicester fans had craved during the previous season.

Although in and out of the team due to inconsistent performances, Gradel provided one of the many high points of Leicester’s short time in League One.

Against the same opposition he had helped to defeat on the opening day, a team that had become one of the few to offer a threat to Leicester’s title challenge, Gradel floated in a 97th-minute equaliser which was met with rapture by everyone connected with the club.

It extended a long unbeaten run. It sent a message to all of the side’s competitors. Above all, it was meant to be the goal that made Max Gradel.

But Gradel did not make the grade with Leicester, at least not to the extent which some supporters expected of the promising Ivorian. Instead, he made another loan move to League One – this time to the more illustrious surroundings of Elland Road – and soon this was his new permanent home.

And so it came to pass that Gradel returned to his previous employers on Boxing Day and headed his current club into an important lead halfway through a first half devoid of any other action.

It was his seventh goal in ten games and he is one of the main reasons why Leeds United sit third in the Championship, well placed to complete the circuitous comeback from the depths of League One to the Premier League.

Gradel did not celebrate. He knew that many Leicester fans never wanted to see him leave.

Football can be a ruthless business, in which entertainers are often underappreciated. Simon Grayson, a solid, no-nonsense right-back who made his name at Leicester, knows that Gradel has what it takes and is thankful that he is in the best form of his life at the best time possible.

Leeds United led 1-0 at the break.

“Number ten and captain...”

Andy King was born in Maidenhead in October 1988. He always wanted to be a footballer. And then Chelsea came calling. King’s early football education came in his days at their Cobham training complex between the ages of 9 and 15.

But soon, like Gradel, he was off to Leicester after being released prior to reaching Academy level. King played alongside Gradel in the FA Premier Youth League winning side of 2007, a trophy won after defeating Sunderland, featuring King’s current Leicester team-mate Martyn Waghorn, on penalties at the Stadium of Light.

The whole team was built around King, particularly through the constant inclusion of Tom Tejan-Sie as his midfield partner.

The diminutive Tejan-Sie, who has been a Dagenham and Redbridge reserve for the last three years, anchored the middle of the park and allowed King to roam forward in search of goals.

It was a winning formula, which saw King net eight in 21 appearances during the young Leicester side’s successful season. Although not blessed with electric pace, King looked a durable perform-

er with a canny knack of arriving in the box at the right time.

King’s first-team debut for Leicester came in October 2007. The manager at the time was Gary Megson. Within six weeks, it was instead Ian Holloway.

At a time of great upheaval, King’s unpolished quality was seen as a luxury and, despite scoring what remains arguably the best goal of his career in a 2-1 home defeat to Southampton in December that year, Leicester brought in the former Saints stalwart Matt Oakley the following month to play alongside Stephen Clemence in the centre of midfield.

On paper, Oakley and Clemence were one of the strongest midfield duos in the division. In reality, they offered little resistance as a succession of teams dominated and Leicester were demoted. All the while, King bided his time.

In the summer of 2008, with a long League One campaign ahead of them, Leicester needed a settled side – and quick. Pre-season saw new manager Nigel Pearson field King in his reserve side to face local non-league opposition such as Quorn, against whom the young midfielder netted a sumptuous lob.

It was only Quorn, but Pearson had seen enough. When the campaign started with that opening game against MK Dons, King was in the starting lineup.

King’s career has been on the up ever since, having been a virtual ever-present at club level for two and a half years, collected Welsh international honours – including a first goal for his country against Luxembourg in August this year – and assumed the Leicester captaincy at the age of just 22 under new boss Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Despite an ability to retain possession that belies his youth and stamina that would match any athlete, King’s foremost quality is unquestionably his goalscoring. In his first two full seasons at first-team level, he reached double figures.

At the halfway stage in the current league campaign, he is just one goal away from that tally yet again. When the ball drops in the penalty area,

Leicester fans do not want it to fall to a striker. They want it to fall to Andy King.

It didn't drop to King in the penalty area on Boxing Day. It fell to him 25 yards from goal. His side, a team that gains weight from the presence of the band on his arm, were 2-1 down.

His side needed a goal to maintain a strong unbeaten home record and provide a platform for the remainder of the busy festive fixture list. In a heartbeat, his side were level from two goals down against 2nd-placed Leeds United.

King glanced around quickly and noted the lack of closing down. Taking the ball down on his chest, he volleyed it towards goal.

It flew beyond Kasper Schmeichel, striking the underside of the bar and rippling the net. It was a goal every bit as good as that struck by Robert Snodgrass just minutes earlier, the one that gave Leeds their two-goal advantage.

The captain runs to the corner flag, leaps into the air and clenches his fist. This is now his team and one that he must lead by example.

At the final whistle, Gradel and King exchange shirts. They know where they've come from. They know where they want to go.

Leeds United and Leicester City supporters must hope that Max Gradel and Andy King will achieve Premier League status each wearing the shirt now in the other's possession.

FASCISM AND FOOTBALL COLLIDE AT SWINDON TOWN

Niall Slater

1st June 2011 | Two Unfortunates

Any visitor to the County Ground on a Saturday afternoon is virtually guaranteed to hear fans in the Town End chant their Oxford-baiting song ending in the following couplet: “Keep the red flag flying high/Cause Swindon Town will never die”.

Only an incredibly naïve attendee would think this only refers to the team’s home shirt. After all, Swindon represents a heritage rooted in the industrial working-class that is somewhat at odds with the rest of predominately rural county of Wiltshire, thanks to the town’s former status as the home of Brunel’s Great Western Railway.

A visit to the town’s STEAM museum, clearly displays the social history of the railway’s impact locally, as well as the collectivist trade-unionism that the industry forged on broader community.

And despite the railway works ceasing production in the late 80s, the town remains an industrial hub, the home of the large Honda and Mini car factories, as well as many business headquarters.

And fans of the football club maintain a strong hold on these working class roots, particular in order to snipe at the perceived posher neighbours up the A420.

Swindon Town FC’s link to this heritage has been displayed more directly than a terrace chant half inching the tune of the Red Flag – the club received an annual sponsorship from the GMB, the UK’s third largest union to sponsor players and to use the club’s conference facilities.

But that was until a fortnight ago, when Paolo Di Canio was appointed as the club’s newest manager which resulted in the withdrawal of the sponsorship from the outraged local branch.

You needn’t look too far to find out why.

Di Canio has made no secret of his right-wing political beliefs, openly describing himself as a fascist, indulging in a Nazi-style straight arm salute to fans whilst at Lazio, and being open in his admiration for Benito Mussolini in his autobiography (currently available for the princely sum of 1p from Amazon Marketplace for any Robins who want to read up the new boss - his description of ex-Town boss Danny Wilson as a “frustrated nobody” may well endear him to a few fans).

The local GMB might be open to accusations of manipulating the appointment for their own publicity, and it’s also difficult to imagine their £4,000-a-year sponsorship made a massive difference to the club finances (especially when the £1.8million transfer fee received for Charlie Austin does not appear to have been enough to help strengthen the squad), but the decision does raise the question of how the owners of a club which trades off a proud working-class tradition and promotes community inclusion and cohesion square their decision to endorse a man with such questionable leanings.

The appointment has certainly led to disagreement between supporters online, but we’ve yet to hear the classic ‘It’s a business decision’ from the club’s owners and rightly so, this is an area that goes beyond business.

After all, Swindon is a club which lost three of its players - Alan Fowler, William Imrie and Dennis Olney – during the fight against fascism in the Second World War, and who still play at a ground which was used as British prisoner of war camp during this period.

Also concerning for Town fans is the fact that Di Canio has never managed anyone and is launching his career in the guts and grind of fourth-tier English football. It's not a massive leap to ask whether Di Canio's appointment is a publicity stunt by the bosses worried that relegation to League 2 will be accompanied by a fall in match day attendances.

Perhaps the big issue is that Swindon fans actually know what Di Canio's political beliefs are and that, as a former professional footballer, he has any at all. Recent Twitter scandals have led Joe Public to acquire an unflattering view of the private lives of the players representing their clubs, but a footballer acknowledging far-right political tendencies is somewhat uncharted territory.

But how many fans could confidently say that they know whether their team's boss is a card carrying SWP member or whether he's always felt Maggie Thatcher was the best PM the country ever had? Perhaps none of this matters, and it's unlikely that Town fans will maintain much socialist ire if Di Canio leads their club to the league title, whilst playing beautiful football (and beating Oxford United on the way).

Where most managers either don't 'do' politics or at least would rather fans believed they're too busy to read the front pages of the papers, with Di Canio that particular genie is already out of the bottle.

All this writer can hope is that he'll show Swindon's broad and varied fan base the same respect the club have shown him by giving him his first break in management, ensuring that he keeps his politics out of his post-match comments.



LEAGUE 2



Accrington | Andrew O'Mara | @chutestoonarrow
Kept the joint most clean sheets in League 2 (17) | Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 3rd best in the Football League | Longest average unbeaten run in League 2 (4.6 games) | Won 68.5% of their points at home, the 3rd highest proportion in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Coid Agrees Deal with Stanley”. I think if we can keep him fit, the free signing of Danny Coid from Blackpool will prove inspired and he will be one of the best defenders in the league next season. He has already shown a fantastic attitude and has a great pedigree.

Any major worries?

We have lost a lot of key players this summer in the likes of Jimmy Ryan, Phil Edwards, Terry Gornell, Joe Jacobson and Alex Cisak.

The worry is that we will be unable to fill the gaps with adequate replacements, however I have faith in John Coleman who has always shown that he has the ability to uncover real gems.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

At the moment, I'd say around 5 or 6. That is a massive improvement, as if you'd have asked me only four or five months ago when bailiffs were putting our floodlights up for auction, my answer would have been around minus ten.

Our ownership situation has been sorted out and we have a new main sponsor, so I'm the most confident that I have been in a long time as far as our finances are concerned.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

With the way they're dealing in the transfer market, Bristol Rovers look like they'll be tough to beat this season.

Where will you finish this season?

Despite the aforementioned losses, I'm confident that we'll continue our trend of year-on-year improvement. I'll say 4th.

AFC Wimbledon | Rob Dunford | @RealSW19Army

Averaged 1.61 goals per game away from home, the highest in the Blue Square Premier

Headline of the Summer?

Nothing to do with the play-off final, but the Evening Standard's "AFC Wimbledon draw 'home' clash" for the possible Carling Cup clash against Palace at Selhurst.

It brought home everything about the play-off victory, going up, and the nine years of the AFC Wimbledon era in a nutshell. And how annoying it is that we still have to play a preliminary round against Crawley though.

Any major worries?

Getting relegated, which will be a painful kick to the stomach and may put back our search for a new ground. Nobody is dreading mid-table; in fact we're all quite looking forward to a season of relative mundanity.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7 or 8. There's little likelihood of being taken over by Peter Ridsdale, but we'll find trying to replace the likes of Kedwell and Gregory that bit harder due to funding, or lack thereof.

Hopefully being on the telly a bit will help, but we'll still need to think about how we can generate some more income.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Strangely enough, nobody.

We expect everyone to be tricky to beat, although it's fair to say we're looking forward to playing clubs like Plymouth, Bristol Rovers, Aldershot,

Barnet, Daggers, Bradford and Southend. Not so enthusiastic about Crawley though.

Where will you finish this season?

Mid-table, somewhere between 10th and 15th.

We have a good unit of players, some of whom have League experience.

The need for a decent striker is one that every club in this division faces, though.

Aldershot Town | Stephen Aspinall | @steveyasp

Only conceded 3+ goals in 2 matches - the joint best in the Football League | Took the fewest shots of any Football League side (8.2 per game) | Scored 3+ goals in just 3 matches - joint worst in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Shots Lovely Bubbly Deal”, in regards to our signing of Bradley Bubb from a resurgent Farnborough.

Any major worries?

We’ve brought in a few non-league players, Michael Rankine from York City, Jamie Collins from Newport County, Bradley Bubb from Farnborough and we have a few youngsters who I feel will be asked to step up this season in Adam Mekki, Doug Bergqvist and Henrik Breimyr.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

No one outside of the club really knows, so I would have to go for a 5.

We currently have a Polish chairman, Kris Machala, who seems to be making up the shortfalls but I’m not sure how long that can go on.

The CEO has promised a Shareholders’ Meeting even though the club doesn’t have to call one, but this has failed to materialise so far.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Has to be Crawley; no-one can match their spending.

Swindon seem to be spending a bit of cash as well (they can afford to when you see how much they charge to get in), but their success will obviously depend on how Paolo Di Canio adapts to League 2 football.

Where will you finish this season?

Heart says play-offs, head is telling me mid-table.

This really goes back to my answer to the first question and depends on how the new and young players fit in.

I’m really looking forward to this season under Dean Holdsworth, though, which isn’t exactly something I could say this time last year when Kevin Dillon was in charge.

Barnet | Tim Fletcher | @timbee_bfc

Only took 57.1% of points from matches in which they scored first, the lowest in League 2 | Kept the joint 2nd lowest number of clean sheets in League 2 (8)

Headline of the Summer?

“Sanchez takes on Steve McQueen role as Bees plan for another Great Escape”.

Any major worries?

Just the usual - will we still be in the Football League this time next year, will anyone turn up to watch us, will someone stand on my piece of concrete when we finally get to play a big-name team in the Cup?

We can possibly add in to the mix: how long will Lawrie Sanchez stay and where we would be if (heaven forbid) something happened to the chairman, Tony Kleanthous?

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7.

Since the heady days of Stan Flashman we seem to have gained a reputation for being prudently run.

Whilst some would probably argue that this is why we end up at the bottom of the heap more often than not, I suspect that many supporters would rather we struggled on occasion than stumbled from one financial crisis to the next, or spent money that wasn't really there.

I guess the big question is what happens if the chairman decides to pack it in; is there a succession plan in place?

We do have the Hive as a training facility, and it has been mooted as a possible replacement for

Underhill which, for all its antique charm, doesn't really cut it as a venue for 21st century professional sport.

It also limits the club's ability to raise revenue from external sources, so we have to move at some time.

Unlike many other clubs we get little or no help from the local council, actually make that NO help, so a move away from the Borough is looking a distinct possibility.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Who we're playing next. We do have a few more local(ish) fixtures than in recent years so it would be nice to win some of those.

I'm not sure that we have any great rivalries especially now Stevenage have been promoted - other supporters may disagree.

Where will you finish this season?

If we can avoid a last day survival battle then that would be just fine.

We do at least have a squad of sorts in place along with a management team who have a certain amount of goodwill following last season's heroics, so perhaps we can start to build on that.

Bottom of mid-table with a cup run would count as a success. It would be nice to see us win a few games in the middle of the season rather than at the pointy end.

Bradford City | Michael Wood | @boyfrombrazil

2nd most profligate attack in League 2 (1 goal every 10 shots) |

Scored 3+ goals in just 3 matches - joint worst in League 2 | 3rd shortest average unbeaten run in the Football League (1.6 matches)

Headline of the Summer?

“Football Club to wear pink!”

There have been worries about the very future of the club, about where we would play, about how much the manager would have to spend on players and about who that manager would be, but none of these got the attention that Bradford City’s new away kit would be bright pink.

It is new, it is fashionable, and anyone who complains about it comes off sounding like your Dad.

Any major worries?

Only the usual growth of expectations which demand that anyone who is linked to the club be signed, reaching a peak when City are lambasted for not bringing in Nicky Butt.

Still, the club have started doing things right. A Development squad has been hatched by new Head of Football Development Archie Christie and training facilities have been nabbed. One just hopes that it is given time to work.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

8.

Despite the summer worries about the future of the club City seem to be in the black and solid going forward.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Crawley Town, but only because their rise to the league is so utterly romanceless that it seems to

dispel the last lingering hope that there is something charming in the game.

Crawley are to romance in football what dogging is to romance in, erm, romance.

Where will you finish this season?

The year will be 2012, but history advises me against any other prediction.

Bristol Rovers | Steve Gregory | @gasheadsteve

Scored 3+ goals in just 2 matches - joint worst in the Football League

Headline of the Summer

The massive turnover of staff and the announcement of a new stadium.

Any major worries?

At the time of writing Rovers have made no fewer than fourteen signings in preparation for the new season.

We have also employed a new manager, assistant manager and goalkeeping coach over the course of the summer.

With that level of personnel turnover there have to be questions as to whether they will gel as a unit and work well together from the beginning of the season.

The early signs from the pre-season games played so far look promising, but the proof will come when competitive football begins.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

8.

The current board of directors have taken a lot of flak in the past about their lack of spending and their unwillingness to take financial risks, but as a result of this conservative policy the club is unlikely to meet severe financial difficulty any time soon.

On the down side, relegation to League 2 at the end of last season means that income is going to be lower than it has been of late and a whole host of new signings over the summer can't have come cheap.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

In terms of winning the division, you'd have to say Crawley after their storming win in the Conference last season, as well as their performances in the FA Cup.

As far as individual matches go, Torquay is going to be a tough game.

They'll have a point to prove after we spent the summer figuratively poking them with sticks when we took their manager, first team coach and two of their better players.

Where will you finish this season?

This depends on how well the players and management team work together.

I believe that we have the talent and the manager to make promotion a genuine prospect, but it remains to be seen what they can achieve.

I think a top 7 finish is on the cards, but I'm reluctant to give an exact prediction for the reasons mentioned.

Burton Albion | Adam Drew | @adambafcdrew

68.6% of their points were won from home matches, the 2nd highest proportion in League 2 | 3rd most profligate attack in League 2 (1 goal every 9.1 shots)

Headline of the Summer?

For us, Jacques Maghoma signing a new 2 year deal is the highlight of our Summer.

Even at the beginning of June, everyone at the club was resigned to losing him - and his amazing talent had attracted interested from clubs in other countries, believed to be France and Belgium.

Around 6 weeks after being offered his deal, he eventually chose to stay with Burton Albion.

Any major worries?

Our defence leaked well over 70 goals last season, and our goalkeeper Adam Legzdins was awarded Player Of The Season by both fans and players, because he still played brilliantly consistently.

Now Derby County have signed Legzdins, I am hoping we sign another brilliant keeper to fill the void, as we have kept all the defence from last season.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

9.5.

Our chairman Ben Robinson is a very prudent man, who plans his budgets around our general turnover and he is very careful with club money.

This is great news, as other clubs push the boat out and blow big money on players in the hope of buying success, leading to financial difficulties.

We generally sign players on free transfers and always have done.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

It's hard to choose one, as there are plenty of good teams in this league this season, but Crawley's spending power makes them a big threat.

I don't want them to do well because their manager has a bad reputation for mouthing off, including when he called Burton Albion a pub team during our Dr Martens days in an FA Cup game when he managed Boston.

We went on to beat them. It'd be horrible to see money buy them instant success, and it'd demonstrate that football is about money.

Where will you finish this season?

I think we'll finish in a comfortable mid table position this season. Around 14th.

Having Maghoma, Cleveland Taylor, Adam Bolder, Chris Palmer, and John McGrath in midfield is awesome.

But we just need a keeper, and two more strikers, and we're sorted.

Cheltenham Town | Maxi Hobbs | @maxihobbs

Conceded 2nd fewest fouls in League 2 (9.1 per game) | Worst possession % in League 2 (47.7%) | 1 red, joint lowest in Football League

Headline of the Summer?

“The search to find another number nine begins”.

Any major worries?

As is the norm with Cheltenham, our main worry regards how to replace our top scorer from the previous season.

In recent years key strikers including Justin Richards, Steven Gillespie and Kayode Odejayi have all departed for pastures new.

Clearly this is to be expected, however the emergence of Wesley Thomas from the wilderness of Dagenham’s bench proved far more fruitful than any Robin could imagine. A flying start meant he lit our season up with his tricky runs, eventually yielding 19 goals.

Thus far Kaid Mohammed and Ethan Moore, a youth team graduate, are the names joining Jeff Goulding. These names, although still largely untried, don’t particularly speak ‘goals’.

Couple this with a defence which has proved generous to put it lightly, and Mark Yates’s summer signings simply must perform if Cheltenham are to endure a season of mid table mediocrity rather than another dogfight.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7.

The club is still recovering from the disastrous reign of Martin Allen. In what was a major gamble at the time, our chairman Paul Baker allowed Allen to spend large amounts on loanees including James Wesolowski and Ian Westlake in a frantic bid to ensure League 1 survival. It didn’t pay off and the club has been recuperating ever since.

However, at the end of last season Baker con-

firmed the club had made a “small profit”, groundbreaking news for fans of the club following a season that witnessed an average attendance of less than 3,000.

If we continue like this the rating will be far closer to 1 than 10, but at present I’d say we’re comfortable, yet still wary of increased wage spends or even lower attendances.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I wouldn’t say there’s one particular team to be worried about. In paper, the league looks as strong as it’s been in many years.

The likes of Bristol Rovers, Crawley, Northampton and Oxford have strengthened with some big names already, and have budgets that Cheltenham simply cannot complete with.

I expect these four teams, potentially along with Swindon, Shrewsbury and Port Vale to mount serious promotion assaults.

Although most teams in this league bar a select few could put forward a solid case for a top seven finish, especially going by the success stories of Dagenham, Stevenage, Accrington and Morecambe in the last two seasons.

Where will you finish this season?

My heart says comfortably mid-table but my head feels, at present anyway, that a season of struggle lies ahead.

There is genuine potential in this squad. The signatures of Marlon Pack and Russ Penn give us a central midfield with lots to offer.

Alan Bennett and Sido Jombati in particular come with good references from previous clubs, meaning that we’ll hopefully have a tighter, more experienced defence than last season. The main worry lies in the front line.

Crawley Town | Peter Bellamy | @peterbellamy

Scored an average of 2.02 goals per game, the highest in the Blue Square Premier | Conceded an average of 0.65 goals per game, the lowest in the BSP | Kept 23 clean sheets, the highest in the BSP | Failed to score on 6 occasions, the lowest in the BSP | Went 30 matches without defeat, double the 2nd highest sequence in the BSP

Headline of the Summer?

“Hands off my Willie” - Steve Evans warning St Johnstone that Scottish winger Willie Gibson is not for sale.

Crawley Town signed Gibson from Dunfermline in January for an undisclosed fee on a 2 1/2 year contract.

Gibson recently got married and has settled in the area.

Any major worries?

The club have a winning mentality, having only lost 3 league games last season, one being on the opening day.

We haven't seen how they respond to a run of defeats.

Hopefully we won't have to find out.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Having made over £2m from last season's FA Cup run that saw us play a Fifth Round tie against Manchester United at Old Trafford you'd have say the club is in the best position it's been in for a long while.

And whilst the club spent “big” last summer only one signing this season has commanded a fee.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

The bookies would suggest Swindon and Bristol Rovers.

We played Swindon twice last season and came out top, although they have since changed their manager.

We also beat Torquay when Paul Buckle, the new Rovers manager, was there too.

It'll be interesting to see how they both do. Gillingham have made some good signings and I'm sure they will do well.

Where will you finish this season?

The club management will tell you we are going to win the league.

I'm sure most fans would love a top 3 finish.

Some have even suggested a play-off spot would be a failure due to the club talking themselves up.

It's unknown ground for us fans.

I'd take a play-off spot now, although 7th on goal difference may test the nerves.

Crewe Alexandra | Matt Withers | @mattwithers

Most efficient attack in the Football League (1 goal every 5.4 shots) | Fewest fouls in the Football League (7.5 per game) | Only conceded 36 yellow cards, the lowest in the Football League | Only failed to score in 7 matches - best in League 2 | 69.2% of their points were won from home matches, the highest proportion in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

Will the last one out turn off the lights?

This summer we have lost League 2's leading goalscorer of last season, Clayton Donaldson, to Brentford on a Bosman; a number of other players have also moved on while, at the time of writing, not a single new signing has been made.

In other news, Dario Gradi turned 70...

Any major worries?

Yes - we've not signed any players.

Gradi seems to have placed great faith in the young players coming through the Academy, but, for example, hotly-tipped Max Clayton is 16 and slightly built.

How will he cope when Wimbledon turn up with their 6'10" brutes? We simply don't have the money to compete with the likes of Crawley when it comes to attracting players.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7. Gradi has admitted there is no money to buy new players, but on the other hand we're stable.

Little of the money which has come into the club from selling players over recent years has gone on newcomers, while much hope is placed on Bristol City selling Nicky Maynard as we have a 20% sell-on clause.

2,000 season tickets have also apparently been sold.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Without looking carefully at who everybody else has signed, it's difficult to know.

Many worry about Crawley's financial muscle but it's too early to say.

Where will you finish this season?

While I'd love to make the play-offs, looking at the current squad, we're realistically looking at finishing just below mid-table.

Dagenham and Redbridge | Mark | @9men

Kept the lowest number of clean sheets in League 1 (6) | 2nd most profligate attack in League 1 (1 goal every 10 shots)

Headline of the Summer?

Unfortunately it's the departures of Danny Green and Romain Vincelot to Charlton and Brighton respectively.

Any major worries?

I think we may struggle for goals, as we did last season.

The early loss of Paul Benson (to Charlton) and Josh Scott (to a blood clot) took away a large portion of our attack and the various replacements we tried didn't really do the business.

This time we've lost Green and Vincelot who scored 22 of our 52 goals from midfield last season. Scott should make a return at some point as he has resumed training, but our signings will need to make a big step up from various levels of non-league football.

It seems Gavin Tomlin is also back in the frame after failing in front of goal last season before being loaned to Torquay.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

We're not rolling in cash, but I'd still give us a 7 or an 8. Very few clubs are run within their means but we are one of them - we won't break the bank for a player and instead rely on our excellent record of bringing players through from lower leagues.

Under the current stewardship you won't see us in millions of pounds of debt.

The success we've had on a sensible budget is an

enormous source of pride for our fans.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I haven't seen many clubs signing players who make you sit up and take notice.

Bristol Rovers have been quick to put a new side together and should do well, and I think Gillingham will be up there.

Where will you finish this season?

Quite tough to call. Some of our bigger players like Peter Gain and Scott may miss the start of the season, and it will probably take a while to find the right attacking formula with several inexperienced players.

If we are to do well, we must find a replacement for Vincelot and hope that Damian Scannell can have a big season as he will probably take Green's place.

Realistically, I think we'll be around 10th, but I am really looking forward to seeing some of the young players come through - if they hit their stride in the way Green and Scott did two years ago, we may surprise a few.

Gillingham | Simon Head | @gills365

Conceded the most fouls in the division (12.2 per game) | 23% of all goals scored at Priestfield came in the opening 15 minutes, the highest proportion of any Football League ground | Never went more than 4 matches without a clean sheet, the best streak in League 2 3rd lowest average winless run in League 2 (2.2 games)

Headline of the Summer?

“Hessenthaler’s signings mean Gills mean business”.

Gills fans were hugely concerned about the squad’s strength (or lack of it) after we released eight and saw three key players walk away from contract offers.

But manager Andy Hessenthaler has brought in some very strong replacements who should make us a much tougher proposition than we were last season.

Any major worries?

Nothing too major.

I just hope we can make a better start to the season than we did last year, when it took us half a dozen games before we registered our first win.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

3. We were around £14m in debt, but the chairman sold the ground to his own holding company under the banner of debt restructuring, meaning he owns the ground, not the club.

It reduced the club’s debt by a shade under £10m, but we remain £3-4m in the red with no assets to stand against it.

It’s a precarious position for a club at our level.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

There’s no one club you can be more concerned

with than any other in this division. Everyone can beat everyone else.

At this level players make mistakes. It’s all down to who can capitalise the most at one end while minimising their own errors at the other.

Sounds so simple doesn’t it?

Where will you finish this season?

Top 7.

Hereford United | Martin | @bullsnewsblog

No side in the Football League won a higher proportion of their points away from home (56.6%) | Failed to score on 17 occasions - joint worst in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Sneekes Promises Shexy Football”

Any major worries?

Some are concerned that there is a lack of ambition this term, with last season’s play-off aim being replaced with a more sedate mid-table anonymity.

The board’s focus is going to be on rebuilding the ground, and any visitor to Edgar Street knows it’s not in the best of shape.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

10.

The historic debt from the 90s has been recently cleared meaning that we’re debt free for the first time in living memory.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Given the size of the club everyone is going to be a concern.

Oxford seem to be assembling something special, and the Crawley juggernaut will probably be more likely stopped off the field than on it.

Where will you finish this season?

Comfortable mid-table is the stated aim and it sounds fairly reasonable.

It would be a welcome spot after a relegation and two flirts with the drop in three years.

Macclesfield | Rob MacDonald | @magicspongers

Won 54.5% of their points away from home, 2nd highest in League 2 and 3rd highest in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

“Big Players Leave, Town Crosses Fingers”.

While it's not uncommon for us to start the new season with a new-look squad, it's a bit disconcerting to have seen last season's important players departing. Losing Hamza Bencherif (to Notts County) and Tyrone Barnett (to Crawley Town) was fairly inevitable, but has left us with some big boots to fill, in every sense – those two scored 23 goals between them last season.

Izak Reid moving to Morecambe also takes away some of our attacking thrust from wide areas, although he wasn't as dynamic as he could have been last season. But Simmo's been relatively busy in the market and Ben Tomlinson from Workson, though diminutive, will hopefully prove to be as shrewd a signing as Barnett was last year.

Any major worries?

The problem with being a club our size is that a lot of players we sign are either making the step up from lower league football or the step down from a bigger club's reserve squad or bench. This is true of Tomlinson, from Workson, Scott Kay, even though we've got him from City and Arnaud Mendy, who was at Derby but spent most of his time on loan, as did Jon Bateson, even though he started the season at Accrington.

League 2 is a fairly rigorous test for those not used to it and for every player that swims, there are plenty who sink, although our two newest forwards, Tom Fisher from Stockport and Waide Fairhurst from Doncaster, have recent experience in the division.

So I'm generally positive. Reports from pre-season suggest all have settled well enough (Tomlinson got two on his debut) and we've retained a lot of players who know the drill. What's more, Simmo had a great first year in charge. After their heroics following the tragic death of Richard Butcher last

year they deserve our support and belief and I've no doubt they'll get it.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

The spectre of meagre attendances is always hanging over us, unfortunately. But it's been that way for years and even though we've got some money from Crawley for Barnett and may get some for Izak Reid, we'll be on a tight budget again. We've never been a club to spend beyond our means and while we might not have a great deal of money, I reckon we're pretty stable, at least relative to some others in the Football League. I'd probably give us a 6 or 7.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

I genuinely don't worry about other teams in the league – whenever I go and watch Macc I (perhaps foolishly) expect us to win. The one historical precedent we have is to get an absolute shoeing in the first couple of months at some point (3-0s at Accy and Vale last year, 4-0 at Notts County the year before), so I'm hoping it doesn't arrive in our second game of the season away at Crawley. I'd love to beat them actually. And I love beating Port Vale, those jokers (we don't have many local rivals left really).

Where will you finish this season?

With a tiny bit more consistency last year I genuinely believe we could have finished top half, but with new players in crucial positions this year it could prove elusive again.

Much as I hate to say it we are rightly not among the favourites for anything other than a bit of a scrap, but we definitely have potential. While I know Simmo will be targeting improvement, I think we'll do well to better last season's 15th place.

And I'm almost always wrong, so we probably will.

Morecambe | Paul Styles

Took the most shots in League 2 (11.9 per match) | Most profligate attack in League 2 (1 goal every 10.1 shots)

Headline of the Summer?

Unquestionably, the departure of Sammy McIlroy who had perhaps taken the club as far as it could go but who cannot have left lightly after such a period of success.

As well as taking Shrimps into the league, he led us to victories over Wolves and Preston in cup ties and a play-off appearance just over a year ago.

Jim Bentley is a youthful replacement but has been at the club for nigh on a decade so there will be continuity.

Any major worries?

Proponents of business cycle theory will worry about last season's 20th place – the first appearance on the downward curve for some time.

Home form in the first season at the Globe Arena was also exceedingly worrying as is Phil Jevons' inability to find the net quite as regularly as at other points earlier in his career (that said, he did score in a great 1-1 draw with Blackburn in pre-season)

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Judging by the acquisition of Izak Reid from Macclesfield, not too bad, although for a club like Morecambe, spending will likely always be modest.

Chairman Peter McGuigan seems solvent but prudent and one hopes that the £12 million disbursed on the stadium will be reason enough for him to stay on board.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Blackpool next year of course! Seriously though, it's hard to look beyond Crawley and AFC Wimbledon might also do well despite the loss of Danny Kedwell.

Gillingham will push Crawley all the way and although it pains me to say it, John Coleman is such a good manager that I could see Accrington improving again.

Where will you finish this season?

I think there will be an improvement on last season as I can't see us being as poor at home this time – so I'm guessing at a mid-table slot.

Northampton Town | David Cox

Kept the joint 2nd lowest number of clean sheets in League 2 (8) | Scored 3+ goals in just 3 matches - joint worst in League 2 | Highest average winless run in League 2 (5 games), driven by an 18 match winless streak in the latter part of the season | Only took 51.5% of points from matches after scoring first, the lowest in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Bayo is back!”

The return of the talismanic forward Adebayo Akinfenwa has certainly got the fans excited for the new season.

Any major worries?

Defensively we look a little weak.

No senior goal keeper at the moment and a distinct lack of experience at centre half will make us exciting to watch at least.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

7, Sound financial management by our chairman David Cardoza has meant that we actually made a profit last season.

Our wage bill has increased this year though and the Chairman is hoping for our average attendance to rise by 500 to keep us in the black.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Bristol Rovers, Crawley and Shrewsbury will fight it out with us for one of the top three positions.

Where will you finish this season?

Anything less than the play-offs will be considered a failure.

I think we'll finish 5th.

Oxford United | Scott Walkinshaw | @oxtweeter

Went 22 games without keeping a clean sheet, the longest streak in the Football League | 2nd best possession % in League 2 (51.5%)

Headline of the Summer?

“Things that make you go mmm...”

We've signed former Cup finalist Tony Capaldi, ex-Champions League defender Michael Duberry, Andrew Whing from Orient and Peter Leven from MK Dons. Plus Jon-Paul Pittman and Deane Smalley, who were both promoted with their respective clubs last year.

Judging by the response, both from Oxford fans and their departing clubs, each new signing has been more impressive than the last.

Oxford fans seem to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of every player in the lower leagues and if they're right about the players we've signed, we might need to raise our sights from play-off botherers to automatic promotion. Maybe even the title.

Any major worries?

That we'll be relegated? Relegation to the Conference never leaves you. I don't recommend anyone tries hanging around at the bottom of League 2, but if you do, you quickly realise that it isn't the basement division; there's still a whacking great hole at the bottom to fall through. I'm paranoid that we'll go through it again.

But, Oxford is an angst-free place nowadays; we're still quite drunk on our return to the League. One of the worries is that we have no worries. As a result, there's a nagging feeling that this is all too good to be true. Exactly how are we outbidding established League 1 and even Championship clubs for well-respected players?

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

5. Last year we had the second highest average crowd in the division; we've returned a profit for two years; and our debts are apparently 'soft'

ones. Metaphorically, I think that means we owe our mum the fiver we took from her purse but not the bank or Inland Revenue.

But, we don't own our ground, and while the signings we've made are impressive, are they too expensive? We're also not that far away from non-league football; we've added 2,500 fans to our average crowd since we rejoined the league, but what will happen to them if we hit a lean spell?

Their hardiness has yet to be tested. Will they just drift away when things get tough?

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Swindon, Swindon, Swindon. One tweeter announced the arrival of his season ticket by saying 'I've got my Swindon ticket and 22 other games thrown in for free'. Says everything, that does.

We're about to embark on our first season in the same division for a decade with only an FA Cup tie in 2002 in between. We haven't won at the County Ground for 38 years, and if there was ever a season to break that sequence, or even do the never-done-before double, this is it.

We've found stability and have been improving year-on-year. They've just been relegated, are struggling to sign players, and have one of the world's maddest men as manager. We've been there when we had Ramon Diaz as manager and a midfield of shivering Argentinian teenagers. It's not a good look for League 2.

My heart and head both say that we'll tear them to pieces. We'll lose both games 7-0 live on Sky.

Where will you finish this season?

Given the summer we've had, it could really be the title, but I don't think we have the experience as a club (fans or players) to sustain a year without a blip. I'm going to say play-offs, maybe the final, followed by... promotion?

Plymouth Argyle | Jon Holmes | @jonboy79

Joint highest number of red cards in the Football League (12) | 3rd most profligate attack in League 1 (1 goal every 10 shots)

Headline of the Summer?

“Argyle crisis is debated in Parliament”

Administration, a second relegation in 12 months, a controversial takeover plan by a mysterious off-shore property company and the financial plight of the club’s staff - all these factors led to Argyle making an appearance in the Hansard transcripts in early July.

The Commons heard how Argyle employees had been paid only a fraction of their wages for months on end, while Alison Seabeck MP highlighted the “cloak and dagger stuff” behind the administrators’ choice of Gibraltar-registered Bishop International Ltd - fronted by Truro City chairman Kevin Heaney, whose Cornish Homes company was liquidated three years ago - as the preferred bidder to take control of Argyle.

Any major worries?

It is nigh on 20 months since Argyle’s first failure to pay off debts led to a transfer embargo and a winding-up petition. The club, losing hundreds of thousands of pounds a month, rapidly proceeded down the slippery slope. Relegated from the Championship to League 1 in May 2010, a swollen wage bill and an ill-judged World Cup host city bid were two of the factors which led to Argyle suffering a chronic cash-flow crisis mid-season in 2010-11.

A January fire sale of players failed to raise enough funds and the club entered administration in early March, partly on the advice of Peter Ridsdale who had arrived on the Home Park scene several months beforehand. In May, a CVA was approved offering creditors less than a penny in the pound, with the administrator Brendan Guilfoyle surprisingly announcing he had chosen a mystery consortium as the preferred bidder.

Mark Murphy’s excellent summary of the ensuing events in south Devon for twohundredpercent makes fascinating reading and brings us up to July

when, at the time of writing, Guilfoyle insists the deal is “hunky-dory”. Yet worries abound over the long-term funding, Heaney’s development plans for the land surrounding the stadium, Ridsdale’s involvement and the thin playing squad.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

1. Until the Football League give their approval to the £5million-plus Bishop International takeover, it’s got to be 1 for maximum instability. And even if they do, the rating wouldn’t drop by much as the identities of Bishop’s owners and backers will likely remain unknown, hidden behind nominees on documents in Gibraltar and the West Indies.

One of Heaney’s partners is already reported to have pulled out in recent weeks. Ridsdale is standing by to take control of the football side of the business for £1 and has already passed a ‘fit and proper persons’ test, although he will come under huge pressure if a Cardiff court ruling on fraud charges goes against him.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

Having not been in this division for a decade, you’d have to say finishing below near neighbours Torquay would be embarrassing for Argyle, but even that wouldn’t come anywhere near the financial humiliations of recent months. Paul Sturrock has previous form in promotion campaigns out of this division with us and Swindon, and looks to have Southend in good shape for a push after a season of consolidation.

Where will you finish this season?

The bookies have priced us up for a play-off place, which seems hugely optimistic with the squad so short on numbers and off-field uncertainty persisting. If forced to guess now, I’d predict lower mid-table - a position which would at least indicate Argyle were still in business, which has to be the only sensible target after months of misery.

Port Vale | Rom Bourne

31% of goals conceded in final 15 minutes, 2nd highest proportion in League 2 | 5 clean sheets in a row - joint longest streak in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

“Civil War at Vale Park”.

Any major worries?

You could say that. There is a feeling that the coming season couldn't possibly be as eventful or as dispiriting as the last, but it is not one the majority of Vale fans are eagerly awaiting.

Uncertainty remains at boardroom level; discontent is prevalent among the masses, leaving even the hardiest of souls to contemplate not renewing their season tickets.

Micky Adams' return offers some hope, but he may well be hard pushed to repeat the success he enjoyed over the first half of last season before his move to Sheffield United.

A good start will be needed or the proverbial may well hit the fan.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I would say 4, although it remains the million dollar question and one that prospective director Mark Sims has been trying to establish.

The board go to great lengths to assure supporters that the club is nowhere near administration. Whether that is hope or reality will be revealed over the coming months.

The impact of the 'Starve 'em Out' campaign will not be fully known until the season gets under way. CEO Perry Deakin has claimed season ticket sales have been better than expected, but judging by the number of life-long supporters who are yet to renew, that seems unlikely.

The biggest indicator may have come by way of the new arrivals at Vale Park. Having shown little inclination to blood youngsters during his first

spell in charge, Adams has now fully embraced the youth culture, including signings from Glenn Hoddle's Spanish Academy and AFC Totton of the Zamaretto Premier League.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

The obvious answer would be 'money bags' Crawley Town.

Given the success enjoyed by sides coming up from the Conference over recent seasons, they may well figure in the promotion picture come May.

However, the heart warming tales of Accrington Stanley, Morecambe, Torquay United and Dagenham over recent years show that finance isn't everything.

A well structured club with ambition, a good manager and a hungry squad have every chance.

Last season's division was, in my opinion, very poor. I expect things to be much more competitive this season.

Having narrowly avoided relegation last term, I quite fancy Gary Johnson's Northampton Town to go close and following a season of consolidation, look out for Oxford United.

Where will you finish this season?

If last season taught the Vale faithful anything, then it is to expect the unexpected. Ever the optimist, my heart tells me Adams will rejuvenate the club resulting in a play-off spot.

However, my head tells me this may be another season of turmoil.

Unless there are any dramatic developments over the coming months, it may be the case that Vale figure in the press more for off the field matters once again. Mid-table.

Rotherham United | David Rawson | @davidrawson

Took 2nd highest number of shots in League 2 (11.6 per match) |

Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 2nd best in League 2 & joint 3rd best in the Football League

Headline of the Summer?

The season before the season after this one!

Any major worries?

Overshadowing everything else is what happens this time next year: move back from our Sheffield exile into Rotherham or be expelled from the Football League?

Groundwork has started, we've secured £17.3m funding, the plans and artist's impressions are tremendously impressive, but we still await final planning permission. We're Rotherham, something always goes wrong, often spectacularly, so worry is virtually part of our DNA. But this time, just this time, it'll work out. Right?

On the playing side, Andy Scott's been given carte blanche to remodel the club as he wishes. Long-serving staff members who've stuck with the club through its two recent insolvencies face redundancy. No more than three players who finished last season in the first team seem likely to start against Oxford on August 6th. Everything is being ripped up and started afresh. It could all work wonderfully. It could all collapse horrifically.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

Since Tony Stewart bought the club out of the ashes of the last administration, he's underwritten its trading and what we're told is a competitive wage bill. We've a very effective commercial director who's generated good revenue from the unprepossessing lease of Don Valley Stadium once a fortnight and so we're a relatively stable trading entity.

The bulk of the funding for the new stadium is from development and regeneration grants. The rest comes from private investment into a novel scheme that will see the club rent the stadium from a landlord that the club will be the majority shareholder in. The long term plan is for the club to be self-sufficient and, albeit speaking somewhat optimistically, you can see that coming to pass.

Clearly, though, if the ground project falls through at the 11th hour, all bets are off. So we're probably a 3 or 4.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

The lone, grudge-ridden Rotherham-based Wednesdayite that submits an objection to the planning committee and derails the new ground.

In terms of League 2 teams, no-one really. It'll be another season of pretty much unremitting mediocrity and identikit collections of not-particularly-talented footballers getting paid twice the average UK wage to overhit a routine pass to a colleague. Whoever gets the best cohesion in their squad, avoids injuries and has three strong months at some point in the season will do well. But no-one will be vastly better than anyone else, so I don't really worry about facing anyone.

Where will you finish this season?

On paper, the squad has more balance to it than at any time for years, as well as a decent mixture of pace, craft and potential. Whether it quite has the rugged physicality needed for the attritional games of midwinter on the notoriously uneven and boggy Don Valley pitch remains to be seen. The finger in the air says 6th, but it's a complete guess.

Shrewsbury | Andrew Harding | @andrewcharding

No League 2 side won a higher percentage of points after scoring the opening goal (84.8%) | Kept the joint 3rd most clean sheets in League 2 (16) | Scored 3+ goals in 12 matches - joint 3rd best in the Football League | Their 5 clean sheets in a row was the joint longest streak in League 2, tied with Port Vale

Headline of the Summer?

Fine-tuning is the aim of the game for Graham Turner.

Last season the smell of League 1 was so close to the collective nostrils of Salopians and now the determination is to finally taste sweet promotion rather than breathe in its aroma.

Squad overhauls have been a regular occurrence for Shrewsbury in summers past but not a lot needs changing and this pre-season will be surely a lot more restrained than last summer's creation of effectively a new squad.

The main transfer business has been the departure of fan favourite Matt Harrold but Marvin Morgan has arrived in his place and is the man who Turner wanted before he settled on Harrold last season.

Any major worries?

I suppose the biggest worry is not learning from the lessons dealt out last season.

The key lesson being when fate is in your hands, do not let it slip out and into the awaiting arms of another team.

There were also spells last season where the team started to abandon the style of play in which they've done well at and the games where the long-ball style seemed dominant saw the worst of the players.

We just don't want to go back to Paul Simpson's crook-in-the-neck fashion of play. Graham Turner will see to it that that does not happen.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

I'd say a rating of 9.

We have one of the largest budgets in the division and with the increase in stadium utilisation (the ground hosted Elton John in June), financially it appears we've never had it so good.

There is the feeling though that the longer Shrewsbury stay in League 2, the more doubts as to maintaining the positive financial form the club currently has. Promotion would allay any lingering thoughts of such a problem to occur in the future.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

It's not intended to be big-headed but there is no great worry, it's more a case of opposition to look forward to facing.

If pushed for names that will present the greatest challenge I would say Bristol Rovers and Plymouth. Northampton, Gillingham and Port Vale will be tricky opponents as well (please note that Jake Robinson playing for Northampton doesn't have a bearing on that opinion although we will not forget last season's exploits quite so quickly).

Last season's spectre will mean that the match away to Torquay may be met with a little trepidation but never in a predominant fashion.

Where will you finish this season?

Ideally in the top 3 thereby avoiding the play-offs and being promoted automatically.

That is the dream and that's what I'll stick to.

Southend United | Jamie Forsyth | @allatseafanzine

Best team at keeping possession in League 2 (average 52.1%) | Only failed to score in 8 matches - joint 2nd best in League 2

Headline of the Summer?

Little doubt that it's the signing of Neil Harris, a lifelong Southend fan.

He has dropped two divisions to come here from Millwall and gives the fans a real iconic figure, which could almost be as important as his goals.

Any major worries?

As usual, our financial situation remains perilous and we are losing £80,000 a month.

The powers-that-be insist work on our new stadium will start in the autumn, but there are still obstacles and the longer it drags on, the more chance there is that Sainsbury's, the major funder, could pull the plug, which would almost certainly mean extinction.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

3.

Up from last summer's 1, but still nowhere near comfortable.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Nobody really. It's League 2, there really isn't anyone to strike fear into us.

I'm a bit worried for Crawley as they will almost certainly go out of business in a couple of years time with the money they are throwing about but none of their signings have particularly impressed me.

Where will you finish this season?

A fight for the play-offs is expected, but in reality much will depend on whether we can keep a few players fit and on form.

Barry Corr, 21 goals last season, is one of them and if he and Harris hit it off with last year's leading League 2 "assister" Ryan Hall supplying them then we should be challenging for promotion.

Swindon Town | Ron Smith | @thewashbag

Highest proportion of goals in the opening 15 minutes in League 1 (23%) | Longest average winless run in Football League (5.3 games)

Headline of the Summer?

“Comazzi, NOT Cannavaro bound for County Ground”. We haven’t known a summer transfer frenzy like it since Colin Todd embarked on his destructive but frenetic rebuilding preceding the 2000-01 season. Transfer speculation has been on overdrive since Paolo Di Canio’s arrival back in May.

First we were jokingly promised Messi by the fiery Italian and then how AC Milan were gearing up to post their brightest young prospects to Wiltshire for the winter.

But the headline confirming Italian World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro wasn’t actually bound for Swindon and instead journeyman Italian third tier defender Alberto Comazzi is an apt way to sum up how things have actually developed.

Of course Cannavaro never had any intention of joining Swindon and vice versa. Even interim chairman Jeremy Wray was swift to dispel any rumours when he said “we need a forward, so maybe we can tempt Paolo Rossi out of retirement, maybe bringing in Paolo Maldini as well”.

Whilst the supporters may have expected several high profile names in a similar vain to the manager to line up in League 2, what we’ve quickly learnt is how Di Canio isn’t blinded by reputation.

Instead what is valued is fitness, teamwork ethic, determination and commitment; these being characteristics exhibited by players at any level.

Any major worries?

Di Canio’s maiden season in management is either going to be a blistering success or a car crash. There’s also the lingering worry that, if successful, there’s always a job elsewhere, such as we experienced with Dennis Wise.

However, judging by pre-season so far and the

changing of the old guard through the departure of all but a handful of Danny Wilson signings, Di Canio’s comprehensive rebuilding operation proves to me that he’s here for the long haul.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

8.

After years of mismanagement, the club is thankfully now being run as a business, resulting in some financial security. Since Andrew Fitton and his consortium took over back in January 2008 we’ve moved from the depths of a double administration, near bankruptcy and failed takeovers to become one of the only profitable clubs in last season’s League 1.

In the end that admirable financial prudence could be partly seen as contributing to our relegation as the board were unwilling to speculate enough hard cash to retain key personnel (Gordon Greer and Billy Paynter) and invest in proven players.

Opposition that you’re most worried about?

I’m never worried about facing any opposition, however having faced the obnoxious Steve Evans and his Crawley side in the Cup last season, I can’t say that I’m enthralled at the prospect of again facing the Red Devils in League 2.

Where will you finish this season?

Above Oxford United, that’s for certain. I couldn’t put our expectations any better than Di Canio’s war cry when trying to sign Alberto Comazzi: “Ciao Alberto, sono Paolo. Siamo d’accordo? Tu vieni da me, allo Swindon, qui vogliamo vincere il campionato, c’è entusiasmo, e io ho bisogno anche di te”.

This basically means: “Alberto come to Swindon, we need you, we want to win the league, there is enthusiasm”.

Torquay United | Ben Mayhew | @greenwichgull

Conceded a higher proportion of goals in final 15 minutes than any other League 2 side (32%) | Scored 27% of goals in the final 15 minutes

Headline of the Summer?

The tone of our summer was set by manager Paul Buckle leaving for the vastly larger budget on offer at Bristol Rovers and taking as many people with him as possible. The abruptness of his departure following our play-off final defeat seems to have caught the Board unawares and the delay while a replacement was sought has left us playing catch-up in the transfer market.

While nobody can begrudge him advancing his career after 4 seasons of continuous improvement at Plainmoor, the manner of his exit and his weasel words when asked during the playoffs about his interest in the Rovers job spooked fans (and possibly players alike) when it would have been classier to say “no comment” until the season was over.

His failure to tie down impressive loanee Craig Stanley and goalkeeper Scott Bevan to long-term deals, only to snap them up on free transfers once he'd moved up the M5, now looks calculated, making it harder to give him the warm reception his achievements here deserve when he next visits Plainmoor.

The silver lining is that new manager Martin Ling look to be an astute appointment which has already dispelled much of the pessimism that set in over the summer.

Any major worries?

My biggest concern is keeping the squad competitive, which boils down to adequately replacing the players who've left and not losing too many in January. It's always difficult to sell the West Country to potential signings and now that most of our neighbouring teams are in the same division there are even less willing, quality cast-offs around.

We don't have the budget to maintain two strong options in every position so there are inevitably a few 'key person dependencies', to borrow a

corporate phrase. At the time of writing, Ling's transfer activity has been encouraging but we're still worryingly short up front, arguably the trickiest position to fill effectively at this level.

On a rating from 1 to 10, how financially stable is your club?

6 - we've made a disappointingly large loss in each of the last 2 seasons but our Board aren't particularly ambitious and seem to favour securing league survival over bankrolling a promotion push. They'll be mindful that our last 2 outings in League 1 lasted a single season and didn't produce an attendance uplift commensurate with a competitive budget at that level, so I can't see them gambling our solvency on a glory-hunting spree any time soon.

Opposition that you're most worried about?

Most teams would rather not face promotion favourites Crawley given both their crass, competitiveness-quashing levels of spending and their almost universally reviled management team, which will add a sour taste to the probable defeat.

For us though it has to be Bristol Rovers for the reasons outlined earlier: the sour taste left by Buckle's classless departure and his subsequent transfer raids (at least 3 of last season's first XI will line up against us) will have Gulls fans eager for revenge. The gulf in budgets, underlined by the Pirates' close season trolley dash as they seek an instant return to League 1, means that it'll be a big ask though.

Where will you finish this season?

It's likely that we'll experience an uncertain start to the campaign while the new players and management team find their feet. If Ling can keep the squad together, relatively injury-free and effectively plug the remaining gaps, I envisage a late but ultimately insufficient surge upwards, ensconcing us in a respectable mid-table spot: say 11th.



THANKS

Just a brief closing note to say thank you to everyone who has contributed to this preview and also to everyone who reads it.

Thanks in particular to The Guardian and The Daily Mirror for their support in increasing Football League coverage among the national media over the past season and hopefully years to come.

You can read our thoughts over the upcoming season at:

The Seventy Two - theseventytwo.com

The Two Unfortunates - thetwounfortunates.blogspot.com

Here's to another thrilling Football League season. Both sites welcome contributions and you can contact us using our Twitter accounts below.

David Bevan, Joe Brewin, Rob Langham, Lloyd Langman and Chris Matthews

@the72football

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