

Blackburn 0 Burnley 1

It all worked out in the end.

Must confess, I was feeling a little dubious about this one. When my brother entered us for the ticket lottery, I was content to leave it in the hands of chance. If our numbers hadn't come up, I'd have accepted it. But they did, and so it became necessary to go. Little did we know when the decision was made what this game would mean.

I'd deplored the bubble match approach and welcomed the decision to let people go their own way. I'd stopped going to those bubble matches because I believe in freedom of movement – article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and because I found in them so little of how I want to spend my day as a football supporter. It was good to have the choice back, but then of course that brought its own problems.

My solution was Preston, both to stay and drink in. There's enough there, with an attractive selection of micropubs having sprung up in recent years, and we would approach enemy territory from the wrong direction. But there was a lot that could go wrong. The last viable train got us there too early, although at least it turned up. The walk to the ground was long, as expected, but harmless. I'd wondered about being exposed amid colours-sporting home fans, but there was no hint of a threat. After the most cursory of searches we were on the away end.

There were lots of spare seats to our left, of course. It will never be anything other than a disgrace that the home club chose to leave seats empty rather than let us fill them. Whatever point they wanted to make, they only made themselves look small and insecure. Not that I agree with the response of our club – not least in case they think it worked well and might do it again the next time there's a gulf between supply and demand. Any approach that left people with five figures' worth of loyalty points locked out was the wrong one.

Anyway, the game. The team selection has been hard to predict since promotion was assured on that glorious night in Middlesbrough – a combination of words that may never have been used before – and this was no different. This time the centre of defence was occupied by old school Charlie Taylor and promising newbie Ameen Al-Dakhil; Taylor Harwood-Bellis was back on the bench and Jordan Beyer, it later transpired, was injured. In midfield, utility man Vitorino was preferred to my boy, the in-form Manuel Benson.

We'd put out our strongest available side at home to QPR, and we'd all expected to be crowned champions that day. Funny how things work out. For a range of reasons – sheer first-half bad luck in front of goal, epic away side time-wasting enabled by a dreadful referee, a gradual ebbing of confidence, poor defending late on – we'd surrendered our home record and long unbeaten status. The next game could have been the first meaningless one, a match we might well have lost. Instead it became this: the ultimate assertion of our current supremacy.

Not that it came easy on the night. A decent enough start by us gave way to a large chunk of the game where the opposition were broadly on top. They got into us, interrupting our rhythm, not letting us settle down. Unlike the home game, this time they were touching the ball. But the pattern of their play became evident early: they had the better of midfield, but absolutely no kind

of goal threat. They got more on top after half time, but I still don't recall Arijanet Muric having to make any kind of save during this spell. Perhaps we were content to let them have it in the middle on that basis.

We'd, however, offered little of our own, and at half time the away end felt a little subdued. Perhaps this wasn't to be the night after all. A point started looking acceptable. Above all, not getting beat was the thing.

Vincent Kompany, a born winner, had other ideas. He'd made no half-time subs but repeatedly this season we've seen him give it 10 minutes or so and then make changes, as he did here. And once again they paid off. We've scored a ridiculous number of goals from substitutes this season. Vitorino, who'd offered little, made way for Benson. Jóhann Berg Guðmundsson, who has had a fine season, was replaced by the steadying presence of Jack Cork. Cork's role was obvious, to toughen up midfield, break things up a bit, do simple things. Benson's job was obvious too: score another wonder goal.

The home team surely must have been briefed that they had one job to do on Benny: stop him cutting in on his left and banging the thing into the corner of the goal. But it's one thing knowing you need to do so, quite another to be able to stop this player when he's in this kind of form. He just did it again.

Cork started him off, winning the ball and, via a one-two with Annas Zaroury, placing a perfect cross-field pass at Benson's feet. But the diminutive Belgian wizard, out wide on the right, still had so much to do. And he did it, taking the ball on, a carded defender reluctant to put in a tackle, cutting inside and then from miles out placing the ball precisely in the corner of the net, right in front of the away end. The away end went predictably barney, arms and legs everywhere.

How ridiculous. He'd just scored the same goal three games running. Some people call it *déjà vu*, but that's because they're French. Of course, he went on and made it four in a row at the next match, scoring an even better version at Bristol City. I'm looking forward to seeing this guy next season, because I suspect these skills will transfer one division higher, where defenders will still be wary of diving in and the same shot will find the same corner. If it works out, perhaps Benny will be the first player we sell for a massive mark up to a mid-ranking club, as that's surely part of the business model.

On Saturday, Benny had scored this goal and it had counted for nothing. Now it had to matter. Our opponents looked deflated. They started chucking on substitutes but if anything this fragmented their play. A dickhead of a referee took to waving his cards around, mostly at us; he'd been one of those 'let the game flow' types early on, and those refs always end up ramping up the bookings as the game goes on, the first card acting as a gateway drug. He seemed determined to take the side of the underdogs, as though this was already the cup tie that's the only way these two teams could meet next season.

Late on brought some scares for us. This was after a couple of pitch invasions by home fans, clearly not the brightest, as their incursions had the effect of disrupting the home side's momentum. Has there ever not been a pitch invasion in one of these encounters? A pitch-invading man was dealt with swiftly enough but his flare, planted into the boggy ground, was allowed to go on for ages. The second invader, a kid waving either the world's smallest flag or an average-sized handkerchief,

was simply escorted back to his spot by the wall in the Riverside Stand to rejoin the rest of the youth making wanker signs.

With play finally about to resume, all sorts of things looked to be happening as the opposition prepared to take a corner, both sides claiming fouls, followed by a long break for the referee's lecture, and then when the ball came in there were shouts of handball. Ashley Barnes was apparently the culprit, and at least it makes a change from him handling the keeper, but nothing was given. It was down the far end so I have no clue, but I hope he did it.

By now Jay Rodriguez and Harwood-Bellis were on, because Jay simply needed to be on the pitch if this was going to happen, and Harwood-Bellis, in his chest-thumping way, seems to get it too. Their goalie was going up for corners. But one broke free for Benson, and with the keeper absent, from a ridiculously wide position he tried a shot that no one else would have thought possible – and it hit the bar. It would have been an even greater goal, but he already has his personal goal of the season competition, so let's not get greedy.

The game ended seconds later, and the celebrations could begin in earnest. These were part two of what we'd seen at the Riverside. Déjà vu all over again: the waving of inflatable trophies that hark back to that golden, sunny day at Charlton, Guðmundsson leading the team and fans in the Icelandic thunderclap – I think we're getting better at it, a coordinated run and knee slide towards the away end. I love this team, forged in adversity, built transfer by transfer even as the season progressed, but evidently very quickly bonded, with everyone seemingly enjoying just playing with each other and being part of the same team, new recruits and old heads alike. Kompany deserves immense credit.



I love too how in both these celebrations he didn't do the chin-stroking, checking his piece of paper thing many modern managers do. After negotiating some opposition nastiness directed at Cork and persuading Josh Brownhill, shadowed by the of course always up for it Nathan Tella, to stop flaunting his blow-up trophy at the diminishing ranks of the home fans, Kompany was right there in the thick of the joy, celebrating like the player that until recently he was.

We stayed until the players went off, fooled us by running on again – like late-era Fall waiting for the lights to come on before encoring with Blindness – and then when they'd finally gone realised that if we legged it to Mill Hill we could make it back to Preston in drinking time. Another incident-free walk followed, the home fans largely having sneaked off long ago – and rightly so, for who would ever want to watch any other team's championship party, let alone that of your bitterest rivals?

Our journey back, in the company of a couple of Preston-area familiar faces, was serene. We found room for a few pints in the inevitable post-11 Spoons, reflecting on what we'd just done. Apparently that's six wins in this derby in a row, and it's years since they've even scored a goal against us. Good, isn't it? And say it again and again: by the fateful workings of the fixture list, we won the league at Ewood Park. Hahahahaha.

Me and my brother have been incredibly lucky since we started going to watch a shitty Fourth Division team. We've seen seven promotions, and have been there when it's happened every time. We've three times seen Burnley become divisional champions, ditto. I'll always say 1991/1992 was my season, with that night at York the crowning moment. But now it has a rival. Really, what's better than this? Savour it. Drink it in. We are the best.

Blackburn: Pears, Rankin-Costello, Carter, Hyam, Pickering (Brittain 74), Travis (Lennard 85), Wharton, Hedges (Thomas 74), Szmodics, Brereton, Dolan (Dack 75). Subs not used: Kaminski, Phillips, Garrett.

Burnley: Muric, Roberts, Al-Dakhil, Taylor, Maatsen (Harwood-Bellis 90+5), Cullen, Brownhill, Vitorino (Benson 58), Guðmundsson (Cork 58), Zaroury (Rodriguez 90+5), Barnes. Subs not used: Peacock-Farrell, Obafemi, Foster.

Attendance: 18,166.