

Crawling over the line

Burnley 2 Brentford 1

Steve Corrigan

So all the omens were good for this one except, of course, that we are talking about Burnley 2023/24 version – a team that consistently falls just below the bar with an occasional dip to total ineptitude. We have seen some good performances, but usually not quite good enough to get a result. Even Bournemouth at home wasn't terrible. Burnley dominated the game but with no bite and a lack of real threat in attack, it was all huff and puff and very little in the way of real chances. Meanwhile at the back, the defence always gives the impression of being easily breached or a second away from an error. It's not a good combination and being great in the middle third of the pitch never won anyone any games if they just weren't up to it at either end.

So why did I think the omens were good? After all, I hadn't seen the Clarets pick up a single point at home this season. Brentford were on as bad a run as Burnley and had a terrible injury list. The whole of their first choice defence was out so it was interesting to see Nathan Collins making an appearance. Ben Mee was unfortunately one of those missing as I think many fans would have liked the chance to show some appreciation for his time at Burnley, something we sadly missed during the great clear out. Also, Burnley had picked up an unexpected point at West Ham the previous week. They had needed a two goal lead and some fortunate VAR decisions to hang on, but it had still been a definite improvement.

More importantly though, I got parked in my favourite spot and there was no queue in the Park View Chippy! In fact, there was no one in there at all, so maybe everybody had just given up and decided not to come? Nic will always say that when every omen goes right the football is bound to be terrible. I'm not sure the players, officials or VAR gods take much notice of how our day has been up to kick off time, but we will clutch at any straws we can (pessimistic ones in Nic's case).

The first shock of the day was the team news. There was one change from last week with Muric replacing Trafford. No disrespect to the young man as he has endured a baptism of fire behind the shakiest defence since OJ Simpson's, but the change has been needed for some considerable time, just to give him a rest. He will be a great keeper in the near future, but there are aspects of his game that he needs to sharpen up, especially his distribution. He had got into the fear mindset every time he got the ball and it was badly affecting his game. The other surprise was the return of Lyle Foster, which is much needed as VK seems like he will never pick Jay Rod again.

To the kick off, and Muric's inclusion seemed to have perked the crowd up a bit and Burnley started very brightly and on the front foot. Not to get too excited though, as one journalist said, you could almost write the match report before the game (which I had considered). Start brightly, fail to score, get punished for bad mistake, labour through the remainder of the game and, if they are lucky, concede only one goal at the death.

But what a minute! What's this? Some sustained pressure before a clipped ball to the far post found Vitorino who had sneaked behind the full back. What looked like a blatant push was waved away by the ref. It took some time before VAR recommended stopping the game to review the incident. The ref was called to the monitor but it stayed obstinately blank whilst we all waited. At first, it was thought the system had broken but Sky later said the delay was whilst the VAR officials checked whether Vitorino had strayed offside. Once the screen sparked into the life, the referee

still took some time to make his decision but it was not only a penalty but a red card, as Reguilon had made no effort to play the ball. Thomas Frank, who I like a lot as a manager, had no complaints about the decision. I do always find it strange why VAR and the ref have to watch things a dozen times to make a decision so it ends up causing quite a delay. Rugby and cricket don't have those problems!

Anyway, back to the game. Brunn Larsen dispatched the penalty, so surely we could now sit back and watch the Clarets boss the game, get a substantial lead and we could have a nice peaceful afternoon? Well, they started about it in the right way. Lots of possession and even some good chances, but as I said, there is always that chance of a mistake. Sure enough, it came when O'Shea made a blind pass back to Muric, not realising he had moved across the box for a better angle. It was a lot closer than it looked at the time as Muric scrambled across to clear it off the line. Maybe with the VAR decision and not giving the goal away our luck was changing?

We then had the miss of, not just the season but possibly ever. How Fofana didn't score will forever be a mystery. If it had just hit him, it would have gone in. From the opposite end of the ground, we couldn't see how bad it was at the time. It was brilliant work from Assignon on the right as he danced to the byline and put the ball across the box only a few feet from goal. It was fair to say that Fofana had a very up and down afternoon, but was at the centre of most things that happened. His next involvement was when he hid behind the Brentford goalkeeper. Surely no one falls for that anymore? But Flekken did, and when he dropped the ball Fofana sneaked round him and stole the ball only to slip at the vital moment and allow Flekken to scramble back and put the ball out for a corner.

Dare I say it? Things were looking very comfortable. Brentford could only really play the ball long and generally Estève and O'Shea were dealing with the very dangerous Ivan Toney very well. Then a foul in midfield, the defence caught sleeping and a quick through ball allowed Wissa through on goal. I suspect VAR may have had a good look at it had it gone in, but Muric stood strong and made a great save to deny him.

Half time and it was okay. It was still hard at times to see who had ten men, but with their noses in front, the Clarets still had to be favourites. The second half played out much as the first. Burnley had a large amount of the possession, but still allowed Brentford the odd breakaway. How on earth we can end up nearly conceding from a break from our own corner is staggering. Vitorino gave the ball away outside the box but redeemed himself with a great block as Brentford broke into the box. There followed a sweeping move which ended with Odobert (who had a very quiet day) feeding Fofana who dinked the ball over the Brentford keeper to make it two. I thought it took a slight deflection but seeing it later he scuffed it a bit, but who cares? Some breathing space.

Amdouni came on. Had a shot. Rugby-tackled a Brentford player trying to break and was then subbed off just before full time. Kompany said it was because he committed another foul and he didn't want him getting sent off. Before that, Brentford had made substitutions and just gone longer and longer, getting the ball forward at every opportunity, but there hadn't been much to worry about – the defending was resolute and Muric had come out and punched a couple of crosses clear. But this is Burnley 23/24, and after failing (yet again) to stop a cross from being delivered, Ajer found acres of space to place a header into the net.

Cue a very nervy last 10 minutes as things got ever more frantic. Lyle Foster came on and did

provide an outlet that we had been missing, but Brentford kept lobbing the ball in from all angles, and it nearly brought them the equaliser they were after. The ball was sent high to the far post, Toney leapt with Muric and both the ball and the Burnley keeper ended up in the net. It looked a foul from our end of the ground and the ref was quick to give it, but it was an almighty scare and so it was to some relief that the referee's final whistle went.

Was it convincing? No. Does it fill me with optimism? No. Against an injury ravaged team that played 80 minutes with 10 men, it wasn't great to say the least. Fofana may have scored, but the rest of his day was far more hit than miss but you can't argue with 4 goals in 8 games in the situation we are in. Watching Cullen makes me wonder why he hasn't been playing all season. Berge carried a threat (but why won't he shoot?). Assignon is growing in confidence but he does look better going forward than defending. (Heard that before about Kompany's full backs?). Estève and O'Shea barely gave Toney a sniff, and Muric looked assured and his quicker distribution was much better than Trafford's.

So it wasn't all bad, but I just don't see the strength, the grit and the determination needed to succeed in a relegation scrap. Trying to build a completely new team in the Premier League set us off on the wrong foot, and, quite frankly, it hasn't got much better. Kompany should know better than anyone that Premier League experience counts, and he has shockingly refused to use most of that which he has at his disposal.

Too many untried players trying to find their feet has been a recipe for disaster. What's worse is that it is not a surprise. I feel sorry for Zaroury and Benson who have not had a look in and been told they haven't come up to speed in the Premier League when they have watched a parade of incomers play poorly week in week out and still start games. Remember they did play against and beat Premier League teams last season. No wonder Benson looks starved of confidence when he gets his 10 minutes and only ever receives the ball on the halfway line, facing his own goal. Even with Forest's four-point deduction (which is not guaranteed) I cannot see Burnley getting nearly enough points but as they always say, 'It's the hope that kills you'.

Burnley: Muric, O'Shea, Taylor, Berge, Assignon, Vitorino, Fofana (Foster 88), Cullen, Estève, Bruun Larsen (Amdouni 69) (Brownhill 90+5), Odobert. Subs not used: Trafford, Cork, Guðmundsson, Rodriguez, Benson, Ekdal.

Brentford: Flekken, Jensen (Maupay 80), Wissa (Mbeumo 79), Reguilon, Zanka, Onyeka (Yarmolyuk 59), Toney, Ajer, Collins, Janelt (Baptiste 80), Roerslev (Lewis-Potter 60). Subs not used: Strakosha, Ghoddos, Damsgaard, Ji-Soo.

Attendance: 20,431.

Cozzo's Man of the Match: Josh Cullen.