

## Missed opportunities, misfortune and pure dross Tony Shaw

As far as I am concerned this season is best forgotten and will be, barring a highly unlikely turn-around in the points-gathering department. The disastrous start to the season will surely see us playing in the Championship from August, and given the players we have at present, I think that's our level. Who knows what next season will bring? BFC squad MK3, another complete rejig?

Our season back in the top tier of English football, so hard-earned and richly deserved has been thrown away, I believe, by the mismanagement of VK and all in charge. We have been playing a style of football that is guaranteed to fail. I said at the start of the season that, please God, let us not play the Norwich way, which guaranteed them relegation. We are playing losing football, we are not easy on the eye and a pleasure to watch, as a couple of managers have quoted (after they've beaten us). It is *very* frustrating watching us toil relentlessly at home to teams around us in six-pointers we hope to win but end up drawing or losing. I no longer wish to see or hear that we have improved, deserved something from the game and will eventually see points on the board. We will not!

Comparing us to the only teams we can realistically catch – Luton, Everton and Nottm Forest – Luton are playing to their strengths: physical, organised and well-managed from fixture one. They have a belief and play with energy. They have signed a player in Ross Barkley who, I assumed, was a waste of time; instead he is inspiring them to play winning football and from a neutral's perspective (not mine) they are good to watch.

Everton remain an enigma – surely they can't be in their position for long? They must be better than this and I don't believe they will finish in the bottom three, especially as they are optimistic that their points deduction will be reduced. It probably will be! I don't for one moment expect us to finish above them. Nottm Forest may not be the most consistent, they have had their VAR problems with one glaring exception, of course, but like Luton they now have belief and have managed to take points from teams where we have failed. They are more direct, and incredibly that b\*\*\*\*\*d Wood seems full of confidence and has started scoring.

I haven't mentioned Palace – an eleven point advantage is way beyond us – but, hoping for miracles, three points away will help. Away fixtures at Everton, Sheffield Utd and home fixtures against Brentford and Bournemouth will be yet others to add to the 'must win' list. I suspect that none will be pivotal come the end of the season.

After all the vitriol, the grinding and gnashing of teeth from so many quarters, me included, it can be argued that we haven't been blessed with the best of good fortune. I think it's clear VAR owes us points. I make it a minimum of six, with two points denied against Forest and Luton, and a point lost at both Villa and Bournemouth.

Injuries to in-form players has broken any rhythm in team selection that VK seemed to be adopting. It is sad to see Foster missing for an extended period. Taylor's dislocated shoulder is another problem – once a player gets the first one, another will follow eventually. Koleosho's final ball wasn't always up to snuff, but he gave us the pace and energy we now lack, plus the fear he instilled in defenders, he would probably have won us a couple of penalties at some point down the line. I hope I'm proved wrong about Beyer, but hamstringing injuries may well be his companion unless the underlying problem isn't properly addressed. Lower-back issues are very often a cause,

not to mention the worrying knee strapping he seems to require. The new centre-back Estève hobbled off at Anfield with a knee problem after landing awkwardly. These can seem innocuous but then more serious. Nothing has been mentioned, so let's see if he's in the squad for Arsenal.

Unfortunately, this is another game I'll miss so I'm hoping the ticket exchange comes good! This will be my sixth home game missed, with two more definite. As I type this contribution, an email has arrived. My LNER booked trip for the home game against Bournemouth will be disrupted due to industrial action. Grrrrr! Anyway, after all my merchant of doom stuff, I have this feeling of mild optimism that we could manage a draw against Arsenal, but I had the same feeling prior to Liverpool away, and no more needs to be said there.

I hadn't tuned into any football that day and was encouraged to find that our game at Anfield was the Sky 'Game of the Day'. Could this have meant a dramatic home defeat and an incandescent Klopp? I settled down to watch. It was a dramatic game of sorts, I suppose, Trafford making important saves, but making those saves are his job, as Dyche used to say. Unfortunately, he came for a ball, got nowhere near it and Liverpool scored. At the other end, Fofana was not the Fulham Fofana and we were made to pay for his missed chances, so all in all it was the same old story, and on to Arsenal we go. Let's hope the feeling of mild optimism isn't misplaced when, as usual, we take on not just 11 red shirts plus subs, but also referee, linesmen and VAR – a huge task but one we have to deal with twice a season whilst in the Premier League.

My cheque has been duly posted for a Palace away ticket. I'm quite sure we'll come away with nothing from there, courtesy of Big Sam!! I hesitated over West Ham, but no doubt I will apply knowing there will be no problem purchasing one. The last local away match I attended, along with a small, hardy bunch of London Clarets, was the FA Youth Cup tie at QPR. I was drawn in by the exploits of the youth team that reached the semi-final a few years back, when I witnessed an exciting game at Craven Cottage, not to mention a victory over much-fancied opposition. I was hoping for a game featuring similar levels of skill and entertainment at Loftus Road. Sadly, although we went through to the next round (only to be beaten by Bristol City), this wasn't a great spectacle.

Well, thank you so much Sky Sports for sucking me in again. Unaware of any results, tuning in on the off-chance that the 'Game of the Day' would be Burnley v. Arsenal – there it was. Could it be that my mild optimism would be rewarded? There would seem to be no reason to show a straightforward Arsenal win. Wrong! I sat and watched a horror show. It's patently obvious that we can't compete with the best teams playing our open system unless they have a really bad day. We were weak, uninspired and predictable. There is no point in taking individuals to task simply because we don't belong in this illustrious company at the moment.

Just referring back to our last Premier League season and the divide among fans as to whether a relegation and a re-set with new players would be better than to struggle on in the top division. The relegationists got their wish and the revolution (not evolution) took place. How the 2024/25 season will begin is anybody's guess. I'm past caring about our survival prospects now – they're zero – so I'm assuming we will begin the new season in the Championship, and that players will want out or be sold for less money than people are anticipating (we are BFC after all). Can we afford decent players to replace them, or will we have to buy at bargain prices and wait to see if they improve us? It will be VK Championship season MK2 and I think he'll find it a lot tougher this time, although we'll possibly benefit from a weaker division if Leicester, Leeds and Southampton

are promoted, and we are joined in the Championship by Sheffield Utd and Luton.

As for forthcoming fixtures, train trips are booked for the next three matches. I'm going because – like the rest of the London Clarets faithful – that's what we do, but whether I manage any away games I'm not so sure. One visit planned is to the new Tottenham stadium, but the result will no doubt be the expected home banker and will have no relevance to our league position.

So there it is. I never expected anything other than an uphill struggle with 16th or 17th position at best, but to have relegation virtually nailed on with just two-thirds of the season gone is a massive disappointment. There has been little enjoyment watching performances, either. Opportunities have been missed against teams looking ordinary/out of form (such as Man Utd at home) whereas other teams at the bottom have scrapped and managed to get something. As I write, I'm watching the beaming Luton manager being interviewed before their game against Man Utd, and you can guarantee that Luton will make them work for anything they get from the game.

As far as I am concerned, both the pre-season and the playing season has been a catalogue of total mismanagement top to bottom, and hopefully not to be repeated again. The respect from owners to supporters in every single aspect – season-ticket prices, admission, food & drink prices – has to be their No.1 priority or fans will be voting with their feet!

Up the Clarets!