Well Almost Losing Interest

Contributed by Dave Thomas
Monday, 26 March 2012

Was Almost Losing Interest

It must be end of season. It must be the end of any lingering play-off aspirations. It must have been another game where the general verdict was ‘stinker.’ But I saw the 0 – 0 score at Cardiff come in and thought so what, ‘thank God we didn’t go’. A beautiful spring day was better spent in the garden clearing the area round by the pond and deciding which fences and benches and tables needed painting again … not to mention the shed and the decking. Sometimes I wish it was all concrete and rustic flagstones but then she-who-must-be-obeyed soon nips that in the bud. It’s like painting the Forth Bridge.

But for the life of me I couldn’t see where this bunch of players (if these are our hopes for next season), will end up. Young Master Eddie said before the game he still had faith in them. I’m afraid I didn’t. If these were the lads being groomed to take the division by storm next season, I just couldn’t see it. I looked at Blackpool and their canny fox, Ian Holloway, and thought surely that should be us. I saw the last two years since the defector left, as a wasted two years.

Young Master Eddie certainly talks the talk in his measured, quiet, beguiling way. He was at it again after the defeat at Ipswich. If ever a game was a banker cert home win then this was it. It was a game when Burnley had not one shot on target. They had the grand total of two in the whole 90 minutes. The patience awarded to him continues to be enormous. If this was Cotterill the calls for his head would be widespread. If this was Laws they would be deafening. My only explanation is that we have been brainwashed into believing that we must not expect too much; brainwashed into believing that there is no money, conditioned over the last 15 months into believing the spin about transition and change. But that’s the problem, it’s been 15 months.

But for the life of me I couldn’t see any progress whatsoever in the last 15 months. Even with a player exodus the wage bill is still up at 12 and a half million. It cannot remain that high so cuts will be made and sales will take place. We can assume that the likes of Stanislas, Treacey, Trippier and Mee are on good money. We know that this bill has to come down to a more manageable £8million or thereabouts. That means there will be no influx of good players in the summer and more likely than not, Rodriguez will have to go.

That means that next season will be a repeat of this one; a season of struggle and averageness.

Unless… unless… by some miracle some of the current youth team can step up a level, and are ready for a run in the first team. We’ll find out soon enough.

The mood was not improved by the guff I read from Henry Winter about Owen Coyle in the Daily Telegraph. There’s no question that Henry Winter is a superbly gifted football writer, maybe the best around. He was correct to write about the impressive way that Coyle faced the media after the near death experience of his player Patrice Muamba on the field of play at Tottenham.

Muamba’s collapse and subsequent battle for survival gripped us all, presumably because we saw it happen and shared the moment so that it was immediate and real and personal. We therefore followed his progress in the hospital fighting for his life as if he was one of our own. It’s one of the quirks of human nature that we sat glued to news of his progress for days. We were also hugely saddened by the deaths of 6 British soldiers in one incident. The coverage of the cortege of 6 hearses was heart-rending. But for that there was no happy ending. Was the attention focused on Muamba the greater because there was a battle for survival that he might win that had us on the edge of our seats– just like the Chilean miners? People pick tragedies and disasters to follow with incessant regularity and for emotional not logical reasons. The death of 6 serving soldiers in the hell-hole of Afghanistan was the greater tragedy, the event that was the more harrowing. But their deaths were simply added to the list of others and generated far fewer media pages. Was it because these soldiers were ordinary and basically anonymous – but a Premier footballer has a celebrity status that immediately makes the media deem it more newsworthy?

And Coyle was impressive too; immaculate, articulate, and passionate about his player. Winter wrote about all this, but then got carried away into areas that made Burnley fans cringe. It was the bit about, “This is a man of principle, a figure who inspires trust among his players.” It left me open-mouthed and piqued. Coyle was made for this moment said the title. If he was talking about the moment or moments in front of the ranks and rows and rows of cameras, then indeed he was. Phil Gartside got a passing mention as well. No one knows if there was collusion behind the scenes before his move to Bolton actually took place. If there was; then one day it will inevitably come out into the open. These things always do. And probably no-one outside of Burnley will care one jot.

Two days later Winter was at it again in another Telegraph full-pager, another homage-to-the-great-man piece. It struck me that there was some major sucking up going on.

After the Ipswich defeat (just two shots in 90m minutes and neither on target, a sorry statistic) Manager Howe cleared the decks. Out on loan went Bikey/Amougou to Bristol City. Out went Treacy to Sheffield Wednesday. Out went Hines to Bournemouth. It was a sad reflection of two things. Firstly there was Howe’s inability to coax Bikey from his apathy and torpor. There’s either a tremendous player there when motivated, fit and trim, or more possibly one that reached his peak at Reading and we saw only the back end of him. Secondly Hines and Treacy being sent out is a reflection of wasted money. Hines has barely figured. Just why was he brought in the first place? Treacy has been one of the poorest signings for years.

We wondered if any of the youth team would get a first-team appearance this season as it wound down to its predictable tame ending. They came away from Rovers with a chance of pulling off a win in the second-leg. They trailed by just 1 – 0 as they came off the field having received a real battering by all accounts from the bigger and certainly more physical Blackburn hoofers. Reports say it was football versus brawn, that after a timid first half Burnley were well back in it in the second half. By all accounts Rovers demonstrated all that was cynical in the modern game – and dear God these lads are only 18. Over 10,000 people there with more than 3,000 from Burnley.

My pal Tim Quelch sent me an email that made me smile:

“Went to Ewood last night; our lads put up a hell of a fight though outmuscled by a much bigger side. Still in it though; need to make sure BRFC don’t score early at TM. They will be able to sit on a two-goal lead with comfort. Our lads were just bouncing off them. But our boys carved out a few chances.

“Came back on the train with the “Suicide Squad” and a huge police presence. Jesus! This was only a youth team game. Talk about back to the seventies. Nice littler tension breaker on the way home. The Colne Express was only the two-coach effort so it was an almighty squeeze on board with these big beefy coppers all over the shop. Among the police presence was an attractive police-woman. She like her colleagues was grim-faced, jaws clamped. She saw this BFC bloke staring at her and aggressively demanded, “What are you looking at?”

“You,” he replied quick as a flash. “You look really fit.” Immediately the edgy mood was broken – smirks all round.

My mate was quite intimidated by the whole experience. I was intrigued. It’s a long time since I have been so close to some real hard types. I couldn’t help wondering what sort of home they were going back to. What tomorrow would bring? Hey ho

.

And I had a smashing steak pudding, amazing chips, fabulous mushy peas and divine gravy in a Blackburn chippy; all in all a good night out.”

It’s certainly the exploits of the youth team that kept the season interesting going. Regarding the rest of the season; by now we’d have planned on going to the Portsmouth game and staying with Mrs T’s sister in Sussex only 20 miles or so away. Southampton and Portsmouth games we have always been to for some years. We decided not to this time. Not that long ago we’d planned to get Blackpool tickets. We decided not to.

And so to the home game against West Ham. What an afternoon it was down there in London with that unexpected win. The West Ham rank and file are restless. Boos ring round the ground now after most home games. The West School of Soccer Science is no more. This is Allardyce football. It sure ain’t pretty and only has its admirers if there is a win. He was wooed by Brendan Flood when Brian Laws was dismissed. How would we have reacted? Easy – you sing if you’re winning.

So it was hello to the odious Nolan on a most beautiful spring day. I was still miffed at the Budget measures. Increases in tax allowances don’t come into force until April 1913. There’s VAT now on a Gregg’s sausage roll. Average petrol now is £1.40 a litre – another reason for not going to Portsmouth. A bus driver sacked because he ate a grape while sitting in his empty stationary bus.

You couldn’t help but expect a West Ham win. But in an edgy, action-packed game that was worth the admission money, it ended 2 – 2. Somehow Burnley fashioned a most unexpected 2 – 0 lead despite West Ham wasting good chances at the other end and having had a goal disallowed for reasons that I couldn’t see having seen the replays. There were times when the Burnley goal had a charmed a life. Carlton Cole missed from three feet – nothing new there then. Grant was in good form. The football was slick from Burnley in the first period and leaden from the other lot but the West Ham style – get it in the box, was effective. Until Duff contrived to give away as soft a goal as you’ll see, Burnley looked sure winners. Dithering, hesitation, the ball bounced over Duff, Grant presumably didn’t call that Nolan was lurking. The lob was precise. Their second goal was only a minute later. Awful marking from a free-kick flick-on allowed the scorer all the time in the world to stroke the ball into the corner.

From then on it was pretty much backs to the wall stuff and West Ham in truth could have had two or three more. Allardyce fumed and couldn’t believe they hadn’t won. For us it was par for the course stuff with two soft goals conceded, albeit more exciting than other games of late. But it was another game without a win. Without that good spell pre-Christmas where would we have been.

This is a far better, stronger team with Bartley added to McCann and Marney in midfield and just the one wide player. But how fit were they? Several of them looked done in long before the end. The weaknesses in this game were in the centre of the defence. Bartley stormed up and down and added muscle and brute force. The sunshine was beautiful. The queues at the ticket office were lengthy, presumably for the youth semi-final. After this cracking game I didn’t feel quite so morose. But the brittleness remains and I saw nothing to convince me that next season will be any better.