

## Review of the Season (May 2009 The Play-Off Final)

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This is the last instalment of Dave Thomas' fantastic review of the season, who would have thought when he started writing this season that it would end in the ultimate goal ! Promotion and Premiership football .

### FINAL THOUGHTS

### BURNLEY 1 SHEFFIELD UNITED 0

So: we were ready, the tickets were collected last Wednesday and £90 was spent on Wembley tat from the club shop. Barry Kilby was honest enough in the Reading programme to say that Burnley were just not geared up to supplying this volume of tickets. But the front line ticket office, foundation and commercial staff worked miracles. Even the chairman's partner mucked in. Of course there were grumbles at the 'systems' both at the club and Ticketzone; but at the end of the day 36,000 tickets were shifted in 5 days and a logistical nightmare ended. That's no mean achievement. 36,000 tickets; there were bound to be a number of gremlins and glitches. But, having survived the stress of ticket ordering with long phone waits, long on-line waits and long queue waits, the next round of stress came from waiting for postal deliveries that came so very late for many people.

Meanwhile, the Chief Executive was on holiday and missed the frantic mania. But he returned in time to pick up a megaphone so that he could step out onto Harry Potts Way to bellow angrily at the street traders who had set up their stall outside the Lounge opposite the club shop, and to exhort Burnley fans not to trade with them. Apparently the town was full of traders and this particular one replied that he was not going anywhere and would be there next season when BFC are in the Premiership. Video footage of all of this was on the Burnley Express website and I must confess I haven't laughed as much since seeing Kitty Usssher's expenses claim. So what's wrong with Artex?

(Forgive me for digressing but surely the best and most creative politician's expenses claim must be the one put in by Sir Peter Viggers who claimed £1,645 for a floating duck island in his garden pond. You have to feel sorry for all these fiddlers now they have been rumbled &ndash; some of them don't know where their next sofa is coming from).

It didn't look as though Fletch was too aware of how close he was to being flattened by passing traffic, in particular one large lorry that must have been inches away from sending him to meet his maker. Then, to compound matters, fake tickets began to appear in the town. Maybe he'll have a go at the ticket touts that appear. Sorry, they have a new name, attendance facilitators.

Burnley was bedecked with flags and banners flying from scores of houses. Cars drove round with window flags. You

could sense the build-up. Even the hallowed town hall clock for the first time in 120 years was bathed in claret and blue light. We were informed that this was achieved with coloured light bulbs. So, the secret was out. Gee, I would never have thought of that. My house in Leeds was decorated with flags and scarves. I got some funny looks. My local newsagent banned me from reading every paper in the morning without buying them to see if there was a Burnley mention.

The newspaper features began. On Thursday it was Brendan Flood (&ldquo;Burnley money man&rdquo; according to the Mirror) and the Bad Beat Bob bright red Robbie Blake underpants he wore into the Chelsea boardroom after the win down there. If we win on Monday he thought he might be exultant enough to do anything, even in the Royal Box. On Friday it was Barry Kilby in The Times and on Saturday it was Graham Alexander, soon to receive his free bus pass, in The Mail. Barry K was in again over the weekend in a piece that contained one of the great lines:

&ldquo;Kevin McCabe plays up Sheffield United&rsquo;s expansion plans in India, China, Australia and Hungary. Kilby says Burnley&rsquo;s reach extends to Todmorden, Rawtenstall and at a push, Skipton&rsquo;.

On the day itself the features switched to Owen Coyle and his liking for Irn-Bru. How long before Barr the makers have him in an advertising campaign?

The money flowed into the club coffers but no one could think the corner was turned unless the dream came true and the SKY millions began their journey to Turf Moor. We all know that one leading director/benefactor is suffering business, credit crunch, recession problems; so it was the quieter directors who put substantial amounts of money into the club round about the time of the Southampton game. There are some unsung heroes in that boardroom who make no fuss and seek no publicity for what they do and the props they provide. I know who they are but being the people they are they would not thank me for giving their names.

Yes we were still skint then on the morning of May 25th. Austerity still ruled OK. A staggering 50% of play-off semi-final gate receipts went to the Football League leaving the four semi-finalist clubs to take just 12 and a half% each. And that damned street trader across the road was skimming off another 0.001%

Henry Winter probably the best football writer around at the moment rated Owen Coyle as manager of the season. That&rsquo;s the good news; the bad news is that Gordon Strachan has left Celtic, and Owen Coyle is the fans&rsquo; preferred replacement. The big news too was that the Ghurkas are to be allowed to apply for residency in the UK. That must surely represent the best news since we stole £4million from Rangers for Lafferty. In the next Olympics he will represent Northern Ireland in the swimming pool &ndash; in the diving events. Did you see his fall to the floor against Aberdeen clutching his face? As Ken Bates once said: &ldquo;I haven&rsquo;t laughed so much since granny caught her t\*ts in the mangle.&rdquo;

You felt for Alexander. He has played in 6 previous play-offs and never once been on the ultimate winning side. Robbie Blake has played in two losing finals. Surely the football gods, you thought, would see them ok this time. Surely the football gods would see the wonderful symmetry in a win that would give Burnley a Premiership place 50 years after the championship season. If you read Thomas Hardy novels as I do, you will know that there are universal and cosmic forces greater than ourselves that shape our lives and destinies and that by and large our lives are all mapped out for us.

I spent the weekend pondering. Maybe the result of the game was already pre-determined. Maybe the gods had decided that it would hinge on luck, the referee; a decision this way or that, the bounce of the ball, one split second moment that might decide the game. Maybe one player was already destined to be the one that decided the result. I wondered if it would be an Alexander penalty that netted us the £60million jackpot, or a Robbie Blake 25 yard free kick. Maybe Pato would slide home a low, diagonal cross, or Carlisle thunder a header home from a pin-point corner.

By Sunday night sleep was difficult. By then I was thinking that Sheffield would be too big, too strong, and too muscular. I was sick of hearing (living in Leeds) the local news channels wishing the Blades good luck. In short, I was going through the worry and pessimism that is normal in the life of any football fan, and when you're a glass-half-empty kind of bloke like me, I was thinking that a win was just too much to dare to dream.

It was a 4 in the morning departure from Leeds on a gorgeous morning. Early morning drunks weaved their way home through Halifax. One of them walked smack into a lamp post. It broke the tension for us as we fell about laughing. Bright sun rising early in Burnley, milling crowds, lines of coaches, street traders, familiar faces, and the smell of bacon sandwiches from the Lounge. Motorway service stations heaving with claret and blue, just one slow hold-up. Car after car with claret flags flying. Hundreds of coaches, vans, stretch limos. London in sight and then Wembley itself. The surrounding areas shabby and near derelict, the streets where the coaches drive in, at the Sheffield end, a sea of intimidating red and white. And then round to the Burnley end and the homeliness of claret and blue.

Inside the stadium is truly awesome, but why the rows of empty seats. They could have been sold in Burnley easily.

The game itself: as ever in hindsight what a comfortable win it was. Jensen after the game said he had little to do. A couple of routine saves, a block, a few catches, rarely troubled. They had a decent first ten minutes and then there was some inevitable pressure in the final ten. But in between, Burnley controlled the game. Might there have been two penalty decisions against us? Who knows, Mike Dean said no. But when the gods are on your side these decisions go in your favour. And today the gods were on Burnley's side. We made all the best chances and only heroic last-ditch Sheffield defending on at least three occasions kept the score down. Paterson might have replicated his wonder-strike at Reading in the first half with a lovely shot that went just wide. Thompson with a looping header shaved the post. A golden

chance fell to Gudjonsson. A Sheffield leg was in the way and the leg knew little about it.

Every Burnley player played his part. Man of the match Carlisle yet again but all of them were on top form. Blake worked so hard and twisted and turned till we all went dizzy, Caldwell was not far behind Carlisle, Paterson ran and ran, Eagles in his cameo caused mayhem on a couple of occasions. The minutes dragged by, we counted the seconds. Five minutes of extra time and for once they went quickly as Burnley again were rarely troubled.

And the goal that won the game; one man, one moment, one strike, one moment of destiny. A stunning weaving run from deep from Elliot, he slips the ball to McCann, the tackle on McCann sends the ball to Elliot outside the box. He looks, weighs things up, strikes the ball, and places it into the top left corner of the net. Not that many minutes have gone and from that moment on the game is won. Of course there are hairy moments, tension, pressure and nerves. But Sheffield, in truth, offer little.

The spectacle of the Burnley end is stunning, a sea and riot of claret and blue, flags, banners, fancy dress, hats and scarves. The clock winds down, the Burnley end screams for the final whistle. Mike Dean blows and the tears flow. Exultation, exhilaration, exhaustion, joy, and more joy. The noise is deafening and as we celebrate and dance and hug with strangers the Sheffield end quietly empties. They are emotionally wrecked. We are too but for different reasons.

Football, bloody hell. It wrecks your head and health.

What do we think of at a time like this?

The old team of 59/60 who were there today; what must they have been thinking?

Fans who travelled from distant continents far away to be here.

The fans who watched this club spend seven years in Division Four.

Barry Kilby: who has put his heart and soul into this club and the directors who have kept it afloat.

Stan Ternent: who began this long journey with promotion in 2000.

Steve Cotterill: who kept the club in the Championship, albeit just, and brought in half the team.

Graham Alexander: the old warhorse, seventh time lucky.

And Owen Coyle, man of the moment, the man who took over a tired, jaded, disenchanted bunch of players, inspired them, reshaped them, cajoled them, nursed them into a bunch of never-say-die fighters, added his own men into the mix, brought a new style of football and has inspired us to dream. He has the magic touch. He is a winner.

We are little Burnley, a founder member of the Football League; no-one can say we have not earned this place in the Premiership. This team and manager, no matter what happens next season join the ranks of legends. We will recite their names just as we do those of the 59/60 team and then years later, Adamson's team. We are immediate favourites to be relegated next season. Oh how we laughed when that was announced on SKY.

Mrs T and me had a couple of bottles of wine for the journey home. The slow inch by inch departure from the Wembley coach parks and filthy streets a disgrace. The wine was there in case we won or lost. Win and celebrate, lose and commiserate. Boy did it taste good as we spent well over an hour and a half trying to escape the threadbare Wembley streets.

Home at two in the morning; the flags and scarves are still flying outside my house. It will be several days before I take them down. And still all the newspapers to savour and read over and again.

Dave Thomas May 26th 2009