

Review of the Season(Jan 2010) "I felt some of the play was pleasing to the eye"

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I FELT SOME OF THE PLAY WAS PLEASING ON THE EYE.

The Sunday Papers after the Cup exit praised Reading but I fancy in private Brian Laws was a bit shell-shocked by the paucity of his own team's display. Clarke Carlisle later in the week on the club website explained they'd been re-learning defensive duties, finding a happy medium between attacking and defending, and hinted in the Reading match they'd fallen between two stools. Was that a nice way of saying they didn't really know what they were doing? The feature that took the eye however was the report that Preston were interested in taking Robbie Blake on loan having noted that he was no longer a regular and his contract was up in the summer. It produced mixed reactions ranging from we must keep him, to, time to let him go. He was one of the successes of the promotion season in spite of an indifferent start that had us wondering if his legs had gone. A spell on the bench rejuvenated him and for the rest of the season he was terrific. Which of us will ever forget his game of a lifetime against Spurs in the Carling Cup? In the first few games of the Premiership he was like a house on fire. His goal against Manchester United will be talked about for years to come. But as the games went by his form dipped. Coming on from the bench for short cameo roles in the final minutes of a game did him no favours at all.

The signs were there in January that the team of '08/09 was on the verge of breaking up. In addition to the Blake story, the next was that Jensen would be looking for a move in the summer to warmer climes – Portugal. Plus Laws bringing in his own players, Nimani being the first; Cort and Weaver the next, and so many players being out of contract in the summer; it seemed reasonable to think that a fair chunk of the old team might be unsettled, thinking what will happen to me in the summer, and a 'new' team would soon be in the offing. It seemed equally reasonable to suppose that it might well be in the Championship rather than the Prem unless the football gods intervened, there was some miraculous recovery of form, some dramatic results, and at least 5 wins in between January and May from the remaining 17 games.

We sat having our lunch on Bolton matchday – fried eggs and mushrooms on toast, the yellow all runny just the way it should be, garni avec tomato sauce. 'I need tonight like a hole in the head,' said Mrs T. 'It's not fun any more this season.'

Before I could grab the salt pot she had spilt salt all over the table, a sure sign of bad luck. 'Quick lob some over your shoulder before it's too late,' I yelled. 'It's bad luck.' 'I don't believe in that rubbish,' she countered. 'That's another away defeat then,' I groaned. Suddenly, watching Fulham and Spurs on SKY seemed an attractive proposition.

There had been more spin from Alan Nixon in the Mirror that morning explaining "what really happened," and that it was only because of Owen Coyle's own insistence that Burnley had received any compensation at all. That bit might well be correct if indeed Brendan Flood's text message to Gartside had been taken as permission to approach Coyle. However, neither of them seemed to get the picture that the grumble supporters had, and will have for a long time, is that it was the timing of the mid-season disappearing act, the fact that he walked out in January. For the umpteenth time, the pair of you, nobody would have begrudged the move had it been at the end of the season.

By half time in the game I was bemoaning the lack of any luck, or any run of the ball coming our way; and the scrappiest goal Bolton will score all season, following what should have been an offside decision according to the Bolton commentary that someone behind us was listening to. I ranted and raved at what a joke scoreline it was. Bolton had hardly been in the game. They could have played till midnight without scoring but somehow they did. God they were abysmal; and we hadn't played that badly; despite seeing both McCann and Alexander go off injured very early – goodbye gameplan. Whilst the gods kicked us in the teeth, they smiled on Bolton, the ball hitting the crossbar and then coming down and bouncing two and a half inches over the line, then coming out again. We were stunned to say the least. The half hadn't been that bad a display by Burnley, we'd been threatening, sliced them open several times and made them look quite the worst side we'd seen all season. What football there was certainly came from Burnley. Megson or Coyle or whoever, this was still pure Allardyce stuff from Bolton much of their play reminiscent still of Tommy Banks and Roy Hartle, two terrifying full-backs of the 50s who kicked first and asked questions afterwards. NASA doesn't need rockets to put satellites in orbit, they can just ask a Bolton footballer to kick them into space.

"Not fun any more is it?" I said to Mrs T remembering what she'd said at lunchtime, and the salt. "This score is a joke."

Disappointed then at half-time, nothing could have prepared us for the ghastly, abject, wretched, dismal, demoralising, poverty-stricken second half. I think it was in this half that I saw football as I know it die. It was football that two Conference sides would have been ashamed of.

For some reason Manager Laws took Eagles off, for all his faults and blind alleys, still Burnley's one threatening player. On came new boy Nimani recently borrowed from France. This meant goodbye to any wide play and any wingman. Now we had three centre-forwards all bundling down the middle, and Paterson who had played with some purpose and clear position in the first half after Alexander went off, somehow just joining in the general chase for the ball with the other three forwards whenever Jensen (or anybody else for that matter) hoofed the ball down the middle. If they didn't chase it, it was left to Nimani to try to head it, which even at 6'4" he generally missed, as it bounced over him. All football vanished and was replaced by kick and chase, kick it and hope, kick it and see where it went, or kick it and hope it went somewhere to a player in the same shirt. By and large it didn't. Not since I was last at Scarborough and watched a few lads and dads kicking and chasing a beachball along the sand that they couldn't catch, had I seen anything quite like it.

And it wasn't as if the two teams were evenly matched for Bolton were even worse. "I felt some of the play was pleasing on the eye," said Coyle about Bolton. Dear God he must have been at a different game than the rest

of us. Or did someone press a button and automatically out came the words we have heard so often. His technique suddenly became clear. Say the same words often enough and people believe you.

Coaches and pundits use jargon like position of maximum impact, at Bolton it must be positions of maximum kickenandchase. And the terrible thing is it produced a result. They won. The spirit of Allardyce there is alive and well. This was the football (I use the term loosely) from Bolton that Megson was sacked for; and although Coyle was hounded and jeered all night long by the Burnley ranks, not one of them could have failed to see that even Mourinho would have struggled to make this lot play football on the floor. I turned to my neighbour at one point to mutter: "fancy watching this lot every week," whilst Cahill, once a promising centre-half at Burnley, for the umpteenth time hoofed the ball into the stands so high it hit the roof of the upper tier and were it not for the roof would have hit Blackpool Tower some miles hence down the road.

Dire as it was, this was not a second half that sent anyone to sleep or induced boredom. Far from it; quite simply the sheer awfulness of it was riveting. It was hypnotic in its dreadfulness. The football depths it plumbed were spellbinding. This was toe-curling, buttock-clenching, jaw-dropping dross that under the Trades Descriptions Act should have qualified us for a refund.

The score stayed 1 – 0. A last volley of abuse was hurled at Owen Coyle, but no, it wasn't the last. Through our weary eyes we saw him walking towards the Burnley end to applaud his former worshippers. "The bloody cheek," said the indignant Mrs T and the last time I heard her swear was when I saw her new hair-do and asked was it finished. So, another volley of abuse was hurled at him. The banners said it all and face-masks with Judas on the forehead. "Never forgotten but never forgiven," was one that summed it up best. Had we won we might have felt magnanimous, closure if you like. But to add salt to the wound the win put us in the bottom three at last, and took Bolton out. Those who were really cheesed off by the whole affair noted that most Burnley players either hugged Coyle after the game or shook his hand. Steve Davis once of Burnley now a Coyle underling disrespectfully punched the air demonstrating a total lack of class. Many fans were angry, not so much at Coyle, but at the Burnley players and Davis's crass act. The Messiah had come deep into the Burnley half at the final whistle and approached every Burnley player. It begged the question: to whom should players be loyal, a former manager who walked out on them in mid-season ripping the heart out of a club and leaving players in the lurch, or the fans who pay their wages and will continue to do so? To be fair the still photos after the game showed more than one looking distinctly uncomfortable at Coyle's arm draped over their shoulder.

Post-match, Owen Coyle was in full, hundred-miles-an-hour flow, comparing himself to Moses. Something along the lines of: "They've called me God, they've called me Judas. If we're talking biblical should they not call me Moses for leading them out of the wilderness?" Clearly he hadn't paid much attention in Sunday school. What a dull-witted, misguided, inappropriate analogy. He must have forgotten that Moses was loyal and stuck with his tribe to the bitter end through thick and thin and plagues and pestilence. He didn't bugger off halfway through the march.

"Oh boy does Brian Laws have his work cut out now," I thought coming home, with injuries, appalling bad

luck, and confidence surely shattered by fluke goals going in the wrong end. A few questions did cross my mind though. Just wondering you understand.

Like – why was Eagles taken off? Are Guerrero and Rodrigues the forgotten men? Could Edgar not have kept his place? Is Nimani really going to be our saviour? How many more articles is Nixon going to write, aimed at Burnley fans, about Coyle? Can Bolton ever be trained to play football? Is the expression Bolton footballer an oxymoron? Why has nobody ever shoved those mindless drummers’ drumsticks up the nearest drummer’s arse? How many people go home from the Reebok with a migraine? Did Coyle notice how many empty seats there were? And: and I dread to ask; are we going to see Scarborough beach football at Turf Moor as well as away games?

And finally, please dear Lord, can Brian Laws, and us, have just a little bit of the good fortune that we enjoyed so much at the end of last season, and until September this season. Cos boy, I think we’re gonna need it.

Dave Thomas January 26th 2010