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Football's Greatest Season?

DANIEL ABRAHAMS

Foreword by John Motson

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Greatest
Season?

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CONTENTS

Foreword	9
Introduction	12
Pre-Season	18
August	29
September.	49
October	77
November.	98
December.	122
January	143
February	172
March.	201
April	233
May	261
Post-Season	293
Postscript	318
Stop Press.	341
Acknowledgements/ Bibliography	343
Notes	346

PRE-SEASON

*'... I was born in this team, and in
this team I will die.'*

Georgi Asparuhov

BY THE summer of 1971, England were no longer world champions, having lost to West Germany in the quarter-final of the previous year's World Cup. A few months later The British Empire was no more, bar a handful of scattered possessions such as Hong Kong, Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands, which few in Britain at the time could point out on a map. In place of the Empire came a Commonwealth, holding its first conference in Singapore the following January.

The Brutalist concrete architecture of the 60s was already falling apart, while violent crime had risen 62 per cent since 1967, signalling the start of inner-city estates becoming the crime-ridden hellholes they remain.

America was mired in Vietnam. The South Tower of the World Trade Centre was topped out at 1,362ft, becoming the second tallest building in the world, just six feet shorter than the North Tower. Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, became the most unpopular politician in Britain with her proposals to end free school milk for children aged over seven years old. She added to her popularity amongst children the following February, when she raised the school leaving age from 15 to 16.

The summer had seen the last showdown between the old moral pillars of the British Establishment and the new wave unleashed in the 60s, with the obscenity trial of the editors of *Oz* magazine. The title had featured children's cartoon character, Rupert Bear, having sex with a naked granny, and the courts sentenced its editors to prison. The public response to the harsh sentences served to further discredit the old censorious laws.

With pre-season preparations and the football season fast approaching, a strong case could be made for eight or nine sides winning the title, coupled with at least a dozen who could challenge for the domestic cups. Among the favourites were the previous season's Double winners, Arsenal. Charlie George apart, they had been fortunate with injuries the previous term, with nine of the team playing in at least 36 league games. The veteran of the side, Frank McLintock, 32 in December, was at his peak and would be good for a couple of years yet.¹ The next oldest outfield player, Bob McNab, had just turned 28, with goalkeeper, Bob Wilson, on the right side of 30. On the eve of the season, their coach Don Howe left to manage West Bromwich Albion, replacing Alan Ashman, who learnt of his dismissal from a waiter while holidaying in Greece.

Howe's appointment started a sequence of Don, John, Ron, John, Ron, Ron, Ron, John, Ron and Ron, as Messrs Howe, Giles, Allen, Wile, Atkinson, Allen (again), Wylie, Giles (again), Saunders and Atkinson (again) took turns holding the West Brom reins. Brian Whitehouse (two months) and Nobby Stiles (four months) would be the only interludes in 17 years of Don, Rons and Johns.

The 1969 champions, Leeds United, runners-up for the last two years, having only lost two away games the previous season, would have to play their first four home games away from Elland Road. Strong and experienced in every position, all were the right side of 30, bar Jack Charlton and Johnny Giles. Leeds would be considered as favourites for every competition, but fixture congestion had cost them before.

Spurs would be a strong contenders for any cup and, if new signing Ralph Coates settled and Steve Perryman continued to mature, many thought they could be worth a bet for the title, due mainly to having Martin Chivers, the best centre-forward in the country.

Wolves' fourth-place finish had brought top-level European football back to Molineux for the first time in a decade, making them another good cup bet.

Fifth in the previous two seasons, Liverpool hoped the rebuilding of their side was over. Shankly had been slow to break up the 60s side before their cup defeat at Watford in February 1970 forced his hand and saw the last start of Ian St John, who left to become a football coach in South Africa during the summer of 1970.² Ray Clemence immediately replaced Tommy Lawrence in goal, utility man Geoff Strong was quickly moved on to Coventry, and Larry Lloyd took over from Ron Yeats at centre-half. Steve Heighway, one of the discoveries of the previous season, was likely to keep Peter Thompson on the periphery, and although he was struggling for goals, Liverpool hoped that John Toshack could recapture his Cardiff form and that teenager Alun Evans would start justifying his £100,000 fee.

Chelsea had been in the top six for the last four seasons, without seriously challenging, but the Cup Winners' Cup winners could beat any team on their day. While Alan Hudson had recovered from his broken ankle, he was no longer the mercurial presence he had been previously, and Peter Osgood had also been below par, scoring just five goals in the league. Keith Weller, their acquisition from Millwall, had been Chelsea's top scorer in his first season, while goalkeeper, Peter Bonetti, had missed a third of the previous season with illness and injury.

Jock Stein had verbally agreed in the summer to take over at Manchester United, but changed his mind. Having signed just three players in seven years, United looked stale. New manager Frank O'Farrell would have to inspire his current crop

of players or hope that the club would allow him to break out the cheque book.

Across town, City, title winners in 1968, had settled into being a mid-table cup team. After eight games the previous season they looked to be the side to beat, but Glyn Pardoe's broken leg against United had all but stopped their momentum. As well as losing Pardoe, they were without Mike Doyle, Tommy Booth, Keith Oakes, Neil Young, Colin Bell and Mike Summerbee for significant parts of the season. They finished 11th after taking just 14 points in the second half of the season. There were also problems off the pitch, with boardroom strife and tension between the management team of Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison. They hoped new signing, Wyn Davis, could recreate his Bolton partnership with Francis Lee, and a reduction in injuries might see them challenging for the title.

After finishing fourth in 1970, ninth place in 1971 was a disappointment for Derby³. Having lost the talismanic Dave Mackay⁴, they looked to Colin Todd to prove himself an adequate replacement. They had a decent enough first team, but their squad was painfully thin.

Many blamed the conditions in Mexico which had seemed to affect their England players, most notably Alan Ball, for Everton's woeful defence of their 1970 title. They also missed the injured Brian Labone for long periods. New signing Henry Newton didn't settle into the team and, with the league beyond them, they suffered a dreadful week in March when they were knocked out of the FA Cup and European Cup by Liverpool and Panathinaikos respectively. Given that they had the same squad as in 70, plus Newton, many felt they must surely improve and challenge for the title.

Newly promoted Leicester and Sheffield United looked strong enough to avoid a quick return to the Second Division.

In the Second Division, relegated Burnley were tipped to challenge, although Coates would be missed. Of the other

contenders, Hull would lose Chris Chilton to Coventry early in the season, and Luton would miss Malcolm Macdonald and the 'resting' Graham French. Cardiff might have achieved promotion in the previous season had they held on to Toshack. Bob Latchford and Trevor Francis looked capable of firing Birmingham into a promotion slot, while Ron Saunders' rebuild of Norwich looked complete.

After the previous season's sixth place, many tipped Luton for promotion. The sale of Malcolm Macdonald, however, coupled with the absence of Graham French, might be too much to overcome. In an era of mavericks, Graham French reigned supreme. This is a bold statement about a player most haven't heard of, but one I can best justify by explaining his absence from the Luton side. It wasn't through injury, suspension, lack of form or even a bust-up with the manager. No, French was unavailable due to being in the middle of a jail sentence for shooting someone. He spent his childhood in care, only attending school long enough to impress at football. A Shrewsbury Town scout spotted him, and at 18 he was a key figure in the England team which won the European Under-18 Championship in 1963.

Swindon signed him for £15,000, but French's love of partying and gambling meant Swindon moved him on after just seven games.

His next stop was Watford, where he played just four games after ignoring Bill McGarry's insistence that he shed some of his 14 stone. He moved to non-league Wellington Town, where his performances persuaded Luton to sign him for £5,000 in 1965. Luton had earmarked French to replace the precociously talented David Pleat, who had broken his leg in training. That injury all but finished any chance the former England Schoolboy and Youth international had of living up to his early promise. Still only 26, Pleat had recently joined Nuneaton Borough as player-manager, but he would rejoin Luton the following year as a coach.

French seized the opportunity and would play more than 200 games for the Hatters. His goal for Luton against Mansfield Town in September 1968 is regarded as Luton Town's greatest. Legend has it that French placed a bet at 15-1 that he could dribble past every opposition player in a single run before scoring. He made two unsuccessful attempts in the first half of the game, beating seven men on one occasion and then five during the second attempt. In the second half, he collected the ball on the edge of his own penalty area and worked his way from one side of the pitch to the other and back again, outwitting opponents with sleight of foot and fast surging swerves, on a mazy run through the Mansfield team. Allegedly, he beat a couple of players twice as they doubled back to try to stop him. French ended his run by drawing the goalkeeper off his line, rounding him and slotting the ball into the net.

In the summer of 1970, while absent from training due to a contract dispute, French entered Caesar's Palace nightclub in Luton with some friends, looking to exact revenge on a local character known as the King Joker. French was in possession of a revolver which went off, lodging a bullet in his victim's shoulder.

On 7 December, with Luton lying second in the table, French's case was heard in court. Although the attempted murder charge had been reduced to GBH and possession of a firearm, French was still sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Needless to say, Luton's promotion bid faltered after his sentencing.

After being released on parole in September 1972, French made his comeback appearance three months later, scoring against Millwall. Despite the goal it was obvious that prison had finished off what little fitness French's much-abused body still had. He would make just seven more appearances before going to Reading on loan in November 1973. However, French couldn't settle. Reading, needing a calmer, steadier character, signed Robin Friday from Hayes a month later to replace him. It was like The Who replacing Keith Moon with Ozzy Osborne

French left for America but played just three games for the Boston Minutemen before returning to England and drifting out of the game for two years. In March 1976, the now renamed Graham Lafite played a couple of games for Southport before disappearing from the game.

In the Third Division, it was hard to look beyond Halifax and Aston Villa, although Notts County and Bournemouth, freshly promoted from the Fourth, might make an impact.

In the Fourth, Oldham, Colchester and Northampton had their supporters, while Scunthorpe, Lincoln, Southend and Grimsby all struggled in the previous season and needed to improve.

Another new manager joining Frank O'Farrell and Don Howe in the First Division was Jimmy Bloomfield at Leicester. As was the fashion of the day, they could all expect a decent length of time to build a side.

Ted Bates, Tony Waddington, Bill Nicholson, Bill Shankly, John Harris, Ron Greenwood, Harry Catterick and Don Revie had been at the helm of their clubs for over ten years.⁵ some admittedly surviving past their sell-by date. Greenwood was only the fourth manager in West Ham's 70-year history.⁶ While he'd had some previous success at Upton Park, the 1970/71 season was their sixth without silverware, and most of that time had seen them at the wrong end of the table. Nowadays, Chelsea regularly sack managers even if they've won the Premier League or Champions League the previous season. Leicester sacked their manager in the February after winning their first-ever Premier League title as 5,000-1 outsiders.

The big news of the summer, at least from a ten-year-old's immediate world perspective, was the amalgamation of *Scorcher* and *Score* magazines at the start of July. For us insatiable football nuts, the new title gave us the greatest hits of the game in comic strips for the generous price of 3½p. Despite the loss of some favourites, you still had an abundance of riches as you flicked through the pages, including the 'Billy's Boots' strip, which had

started in *Tiger* ten years earlier. It chronicled the adventures of Billy Dane who, when cleaning out his Gran's attic, had found a pair of old football boots that once belonged to Charles "Dead Shot" Keen. When Billy wore the boots, it gave him the ability to play football like the old England star, but when he didn't, he went back to being useless. For 20 years the story comprehensively depicted every conceivable way in which a young boy (he remained around 12 years old throughout the storyline) could lose a pair of football boots. It was 'Billy's Boots' that supplied the big story of the new combined issue, as Billy finally met the cobbler who claimed to have made Dead Shot Keen's boots. Pierre Callet, operating out of a little shop on a cobbled backstreet in France, made Billy a second pair so that he'd never again be bothered by having the boots stolen or accidentally dropped in a dustbin. Obviously, the new boots didn't work otherwise that would have killed the story.

Scorcher and *Score* ran until 5 October 1974 when it amalgamated with *Tiger* to share space with the daddy of all football comic strips, Roy Race, who had starred in the 'Roy of the Rovers' strip since 1954. Roy was busy himself during the summer of 1971, meeting the secretary to Melchester Rovers manager Ben Galloway, Penny Laine. During the subsequent season, as their romance blossomed, his 17 goals fired Rovers to their first league and cup double. Despite worrying about how his mother would feel about him leaving the family nest at, by my calculations, just 37 years of age, Roy married Penny in 1976. The same year he earned his own spin-off comic named, appropriately enough, *Roy of The Rovers*, taking with him 'Billy's Boots', 'Hot Shot Hamish' and 'The Football Family Robinson', among others. In March 1993, Roy Race's playing career ended prematurely at the age of 54 when his left foot had to be amputated following a helicopter crash. A further tragedy shattered the Race family two years later, when Penny died in a car crash, the true circumstances of which remain a mystery.

NOTES FROM ABROAD

Football's second biggest story of the summer was in Germany, where the revelation of a match-fixing scandal would lead to 50 German players and coaches being suspended for corruption. The man who blew the whistle was the chairman of Kickers Offenbach, Horst-Gregorio Canellas.

Canellas initially contacted the DFB (the German FA) after receiving a call from the Cologne goalkeeper, Manfred Manglitz, demanding 25,000 Deutschmarks (around £3,000) to beat Essen. The DFB advised Canellas that there was nothing in the rules which forbade such a third-party 'win bonus'.

Manglitz was left out of the Cologne side for the vital final match of the season versus Offenbach. Kickers were level and mathematically safe from relegation with 12 minutes remaining, but lost 4-2. Together with other results – Oberhausen's draw away at Braunschweig, and Bielefeld's incredible 1-0 win at Hertha Berlin – the loss proved enough to relegate Offenbach by a solitary goal on goal difference.

Canellas believed the relegation of his side, who were cup holders and had been promoted to the top division just 12 months earlier, would be temporary. Once he produced the information that he had gathered, the DFB would have no choice but to demote Bielefeld instead.

On 6 June 1971, the day after the final game of the eighth Bundesliga campaign, Canellas celebrated his 50th birthday with a garden party. Among his guests were national coach Helmut Schön, DFB general secretary, Wilfried Straub, and a selection of handpicked journalists. The guests were played a taped phone conversation between Canellas and two Hertha Berlin players discussing a 140,000 Deutschmark bribe from Canellas to guarantee a win over Arminia Bielefeld. Another conversation revealed national goalkeeper Manglitz demanding 100,000 Deutschmarks from Canellas to ensure Cologne lost to Offenbach. The calls were just the tip of the iceberg in what was the biggest scandal to hit German football. By

the end of the investigations, it was discovered that 18 games directly affecting relegation in the 1970/71 season had been fixed, and that 1m Deutschmarks had changed hands in the process. Canellas subsequently received a lifetime ban from German football as a result of his part in the affair. It was never clear whether he was playing along with the cheats to collect evidence or was playing it safe, so that if another club bid more money than he did, he could blow the whistle and still appear honest. Outraged at his ban, he dug some more and came up with enough dirt to keep the DFB and the courts busy for months, in some cases years ... By the time the whole story was revealed, more than 50 players from seven clubs – together with two coaches and six officials – were found guilty. All were fined and suspended, in many cases for life, although most were pardoned as early as 1974. Arminia Bielefeld were demoted to the Regionalliga by the DFB in 1972.

The DFB admitted that the maximum wage system had caused more problems than it had solved, and so from 1972 onwards players were allowed to earn whatever clubs were willing to pay them. Kickers have never returned to the Bundesliga, currently residing in the fourth tier of the German game.

As for Canellas, in 1977, the year after his ban was repealed, he and his daughter were caught up in the hijacking of Lufthansa flight 181 by four Palestinian terrorists. The German counter-terrorism unit liberated 90 of the 91 captives on the runway in Mogadishu, Somalia, after a five-day ordeal.

With Barcelona's new manager, Rinus Michels, eyeing Johan Cruyff, Ajax were keen to tie up the player's future. Cruyff signed a seven-year contract extension in July. He would receive a basic wage of 95,000 Dutch guilders (£11,000) per year, and an early pension from Ajax's main sponsor of 60,000 Dutch guilders annually until he turned 65 and received his state pension. So, Cruyff stayed and scored 33 goals to inspire Ajax to the most successful season in their history. They won their

first treble and added the Intercontinental Cup in September 1972, as well as the European Super Cup in January 1973. With Cruyff preparing to take on the mantle of the world's greatest player, 138,000 watched Pelé's last international for Brazil against Yugoslavia at the Maracanã on 18 July.

The summer saw the retirements of two giants of the game, Gento and Lev Yashin. Yashin's testimonial match was held on 27 May 1971 at the Lenin Stadium in Moscow, with 100,000 fans attending. A Moscow XI played a World XI captained by Bobby Charlton. Despite being personally invited to play by Yashin, Georgi Asparuhov was denied permission to attend by the Bulgarian Government over fears he would defect.

When most people think of Bulgarian football, they think of Hristo Stoichkov, as few remember Asparuhov, despite him being chosen as Bulgaria's best footballer of the 20th century. Asparuhov was courted by AC Milan, who offered him \$500,000, a safe escape from Bulgaria and a wage equal to that of Gianni Rivera. Asparuhov refused, informing the representatives from AC Milan: 'There is a country called Bulgaria and there's a Bulgarian team called Levski. You may not have heard of it, but I was born in this team, and in this team I will die.'

A month after Yashin's testimonial, Asparuhov agreed to appear in an exhibition match in the mountain town of Vratsa. He never arrived, dying aged just 28 in a car accident at the Vitinya Pass, along with his close friend and fellow Bulgarian great, Nikola 'The Cat' Kotkov. More than half a million people attended his funeral to bid farewell to one of football's greatest players