

BUZZING

NICK BROWN



THE STORY OF BRENTFORD'S
FIRST PREMIER LEAGUE SEASON

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CONTENTS

Prologue	7
Pre-Season	13
Season 2021/22	17
Epilogue	262
Season 2021/22 Statistics	267

PRE-SEASON

STRENGTHENING a squad after promotion to the Premier League is always a tricky business. What does the manager do? Does he show faith in the players who helped to get the club up, even though they may be untested at that level, or does he bring in lots of players with experience who have been there before? In the past we've seen various clubs try out both strategies only for them to backfire and win nothing but a return ticket to the Championship. In preparation for the 2021/22 season Brentford visited a halfway house, bringing in four players who would realistically be looking for a first team spot along with one or two others with an eye on the future. The new first team squad members were Kristoffer Ajer, Frank Onyeka, Yoane Wissa and Myles Peart-Harris.

Ajer is a Norwegian international who had spent the last five years in Scotland with Celtic. A towering defender, he is used to playing in big games and winning things, having secured three Scottish championships, three Scottish Cups and three Scottish League Cups during his time in Glasgow. Midfielder Onyeka is also no stranger to winning medals, having won two Danish titles with FC Midtjylland, from whom he joined Brentford. The pacy forward Wissa

joined from French club Lorient, and Peart-Harris, an attacking midfielder, was a product of Chelsea's academy before moving across west London.

A few players also made their way out through the exit door. Two goalkeepers left on loan – Ellery Balcombe to Burton Albion and Patrik Gunnarsson to Viking Stavanger – while the experienced defender Winston Reid saw his own loan period to Brentford expire and he returned to parent club West Ham. Three players also left due to their contracts coming to an end. Luke Daniels, another goalkeeper, joined Middlesbrough, Henrik Dalsgaard went home to Denmark to ply his trade with FC Midtjylland, and Emiliano Marcondes signed a contract with Bournemouth.

In preparation for the Premier League season, several friendlies were arranged before the big kick-off. First up was a trip to south London to take on AFC Wimbledon. As is usual for these matches, especially this early in the proceedings, the line-ups contained a mixture of first-team squad members and youngsters, and it was two such players who combined for the only goal of the game. Finley Stevens's lob caught AFC Wimbledon goalkeeper Nik Tzanev – a product of the Brentford academy before his move across the capital – off his line but, unfortunately for Stevens, the ball bounced back off the crossbar. Quickest to react, though, was Joel Valencia who dived to head in the only goal of the game.

A few days later, the Bees travelled to Hertfordshire for a match with National League side Boreham Wood. As expected, Brentford had most of the play and came away with a 2-0 win thanks to goals from Ivan Toney and Tariqe Fosu. The opener came when Sergi Canós found some space and played in Toney who curled a nice finish in off the far

post, and Brentford's second arrived when Fosu got on the end of a cross from Dominic Thompson.

As the season approached, the intensity of the friendly matches grew. The final three saw the Bees take on top-class opposition in Manchester United, West Ham and Spanish team Valencia.

The trip to Old Trafford saw an end-to-end match finish in a 2-2 draw. The home side took the lead with a stunning strike from young forward Anthony Elanga, who met Aaron Wan-Bissaka's cross to fire home an unstoppable volley. The equaliser came shortly after when Toney headed on for Shandon Baptiste to slam the ball in off the crossbar past United goalkeeper Tom Heaton. In the second period United once again took the lead, this time courtesy of Andreas Pereira. He fired the ball past David Raya after the Brentford keeper had originally thwarted Jesse Lingard's effort. The loose ball was only half cleared by Ethan Pinnock and Pereira pounced. The visitors equalised for the second time when Bryan Mbeumo cut in from the right to curl a shot past Heaton and Brentford could head home satisfied that, even though they hadn't come up against a full-strength Manchester United side, they could leave Old Trafford undefeated.

The next friendly match saw West Ham make the trip across from east London and inflict Brentford's first pre-season defeat. Saïd Benrahma notched the only goal of the game, but it could have been so different had Baptiste converted rather than hit the post. A defeat but, at this stage, the main thing is the development of the team and the fitness of the players leading into the big curtain-raiser.

The final game of the pre-season campaign saw Spanish side Valencia visit the Community Stadium. Thomas Frank

fielded virtually a full-strength team and the reward was a 2-1 victory. Brentford thought they had taken the lead when Marcus Forss converted after some good work from Saman Ghoddos but the goal was ruled out by VAR – the first time the Video Assistant Referee had been deployed at the new stadium. It was Valencia, though, who went ahead when Diego López broke into the penalty area and slotted past Raya. In the second half Brentford slowly took control of the game and Ethan Pinnock connected with Canós's corner and his header gave keeper Cristian Rivero no chance. The winner was scored by Frank Onyeka who pounced after Rico Henry's cross was only half cleared.

So then, pre-season over, squad prepared, fans excited. Let the fun begin.