

Rob Fletcher

CHAOS, CONTROVERSY AND THAT KUNG-FU KICK



94/95

The Premier League's
Most Dramatic Season

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The Beginning

NINETEEN NINETY-TWO was English football's modern 'Big Bang'. The birth of the Premier League changed the structure of the domestic game and created a new 'Super League' in everything but name. Money flowed into the top clubs' bank accounts through the bumper television deal with Sky Sports. Transfer fees spiked, wages increased and new talent arrived from abroad. Although the football looked similar to the old First Division, there was a clear change.

The biggest league in Europe was Serie A. Every Italian team had expensive foreign talent and some of the best domestic players money could buy. So, what better way for Premiership clubs to compete with Serie A than to bring over talent showcased in the biggest football event on the planet? By 1994, English clubs were flush with cash and scouted players over the summer months by turning on the television and watching a game from the USA.

Across the squads at USA 94, there were only 18 players who played their football in England. The pre-season of 1994 changed all that. Subsequent summers and World Cups consistently featured huge numbers of international players from the Premier League. A shift had started in the summer of 1994 in the way that teams spent their money and the amount they had to invest. Most clubs had begun work to make stadiums all-seater after the recommendations of the

Taylor Report, but now it was time to have the quality to draw in the fans.

Football in England had changed with the advent of the Premier League, now known, for sponsorship reasons, as the FA Carling Premiership, and there was a new team on top – Manchester United. Clearly, Alex Ferguson's team wanted to challenge for the title again. Many quickly installed them as favourites to win a third consecutive crown, but the challenge was certainly much stiffer and varied than in 1993/94, when United won with some style.

The reigning champions' preparations got under way when they allowed a legend to leave the club. Middlesbrough, led by young chairman Steve Gibson, had approached Bryan Robson, on the recommendation of outgoing manager Lennie Lawrence, to take up the post of player-manager at Ayresome Park. The ambition was to get Middlesbrough back into the Premiership and showcase top-flight football at their new state-of-the-art stadium on the banks of the River Tees. Robson accepted that his future was away from Old Trafford and made his first step into management.

Ferguson was not in rebuilding mode – far from it. The only addition to the side was defender David May, signed from the previous season's runners-up, Blackburn Rovers. The deal cost £1.4m and both player and manager were happy to join forces. May wanted to earn a place at Manchester United and thought the long-term prospects were better than remaining at Ewood Park. Rather than turning to the transfer market, the United boss bolstered the squad with a number of his youth players. The likes of Gary Neville, Paul Scholes, Keith Gillespie, Nicky Butt and David Beckham had a chance to play meaningful minutes as squad players and Ferguson did not want to jeopardise that.

Although Kenny Dalglish's expensively assembled squad of stars at Blackburn had pushed United closer than Aston

Villa had in the inaugural Premier League season, they still finished eight points adrift. They wanted to compete at the top table of English football and decided that the only way to do that was to invest heavily in the squad.

The first three summers of the new Premier League featured transfer battles between United and Blackburn. In the summer of 1992, Blackburn beat United to the signing of Alan Shearer and broke the English transfer record, paying £3.6m. A year later, Dalglish was furious not to repeat the feat when Ferguson and Manchester United stole Roy Keane from under his nose. That deal was almost signed and sealed until a late intervention from Ferguson made sure the Irishman played his football at Old Trafford.

Arsenal had tracked Chris Sutton even before the summer, when they tried to prise the striker away from Norwich City. They had allowed Andy Cole to leave in 1992, while neither Alan Smith nor Kevin Campbell had been able to become a consistent partner for Ian Wright. Smith and Campbell had contributed vital goals for Arsenal, but Sutton was seen as a long-term solution. George Graham, with a preference for English players due to UEFA's insistence that Welsh, Scottish and Irish players were 'foreigners' in European competitions, put Sutton ahead of Queens Park Rangers striker Les Ferdinand on his wish list and sent his bid to Norwich chairman Robert Chase, who had initially been reluctant to sell his star asset.

Another runner in the race were Arsenal's North London rivals Tottenham Hotspur, who were keen to find a partner for Teddy Sheringham and entertained the idea of signing Sutton, but chairman Alan Sugar balked at the player's wage demands.

A major impact of the new television money flowing through the Premiership was the increase in player wages. Transfer fees were nowhere near those paid for stars on

the continent, but they were on the up at a rapid rate, as were salaries. The going rate for Sutton was rumoured to be £12,000 a week. Sugar did not entertain that and said that paying those wages 'to an unproven player was out of the question for Tottenham. It's not greedy asking for it, but how would the others react?' The idea of more established stars getting wage increases followed the boom in modern transfers.

Arsenal fought Blackburn fiercely for Sutton's signature and in the ensuing auction the bidding started at £4m. Ferguson and Manchester United obviously wanted a piece of the action, too, so matched Arsenal's bid, but claimed that was the limit of what they were prepared to spend on such an unproven player. Norwich acknowledged the bids, but set a price of £5m and a deadline of the 14 July for any club to match the valuation. Sutton would have the deciding vote on where he played his football.

The bidding continued and, despite his insistence that £4m was the maximum he could offer, Ferguson increased his bid to £4.2m. Clearly, money was no object to Blackburn, who were poised to pay the £5m if all of the other clubs could not meet Norwich's valuation. Next, it was Arsenal's turn to up their offer, which trumped United's and reached £4.5m. The story kept the press interested all summer and certainly provided plenty of headlines that were usually reserved for the demolition of the England team's performance at a World Cup.

An interesting wrinkle to the whole transfer saga came when Everton joined the bidding race at the last minute. Their manager, Mike Walker, had led Sutton through the reserves at Norwich and into the first team. Sutton was loyal and one of the reasons he wanted to leave was the fact that Walker had left the club and Norwich were now in decline. Although aware that Norwich wanted and would

accept £5m, the Everton boss declined to meet that price and offered £4.75m.

As Norwich's deadline approached, Arsenal's managing director Ken Friar announced that Arsenal had withdrawn their offer for the striker. Blackburn had their man. Chris Sutton became the most expensive player in English football history at a fee of £5m. It was a huge moment for domestic transfers, but it barely made a ripple in the wider context of the game. The transfer record remained at £13m after Gianluigi Lentini's move from Torino to Milan in the summer of 1992 and Sutton's transfer was only the third highest of the last year, with Luca Marchegiani and David Platt commanding higher fees after moves to Lazio and Sampdoria respectively.

Blackburn used a similar transfer policy as some of the biggest Italian sides with their huge outlay on transfers, comparative to other English clubs, to transform a second-tier side into one challenging for a Premiership title. By the time Sutton had the pen in his hand to sign for Blackburn, Dalglish had spent more than £25m in less than three years.

Jack Walker had bankrolled one of the most successful players and managers in British football to elevate the club he had supported as a boy into a force in the Premiership. Money was spent well and the plan was working. If not for an injury to Alan Shearer on Boxing Day in 1992, Blackburn might have competed with Manchester United all the way to the last day for the title. In the end, they finished fourth – a fantastic achievement for a side who had just returned to the top flight. The 1993/94 season was a different story. Disheartened but not defeated by the Keane transfer disappointment, Blackburn pushed United further than any team had the previous season. A victory at Ewood Park in April 1994 closed the gap to three points and gave Dalglish and his side hope, but the United juggernaut rolled on and victories up to the end of the season allowed them to pull clear and lift the title again.

The signing of Sutton was seen as a gamble by many. It was a huge fee for an English club at the time. It was well over a million pounds more than United had spent on Roy Keane for a player who, at age 21, had scored 35 league goals in his career and no less than 18 months earlier had been playing as a central defender. Despite Sutton's age and track record, the amount of clubs who coveted him was telling.

Once Sutton signed on the dotted line, his new strike partner, Shearer, immediately received a call from the Blackburn hierarchy while he was at Ewood Park with his adviser Tony Stephens. The Rovers chairman Robert Coar called a meeting with the pair and they discussed their new record signing. It was a frank and open conversation and Coar revealed that the new striker was getting a higher salary than Shearer, who earned around £8,000 a week. Shearer notes in his autobiography that he was told by the chairman he was Blackburn's 'best player and should always be treated as such. We would like to give you a pay increase.' Shearer dutifully accepted and was surprised that there was no requirement to extend his contract. Blackburn had a big-money strike force ready to deliver on their big promise. 'The SAS' was born.

At the opposite end of the transfer spectrum were those who had not enjoyed the spoils of the first Premier League seasons. The inflated prices were sometimes a challenge for clubs who did not have the big budgets found near the top of the table.

For the three promoted teams, the goal was to stay in the league. Due to the Premiership reducing from 22 to 20 teams, four teams were relegated at the end of the season. In turn, this meant that only two promoted teams joined the Premiership from the Endsleigh First Division. There was, as always, a lot at stake without a lot of money to go around. That was certainly true in the case of Crystal Palace and

Leicester City, but Nottingham Forest wanted to do things differently.

Frank Clark first arrived at the City Ground in 1975, not long after Brian Clough took his place in the dugout. Clark was already a veteran then, having signed on a free transfer, and made his final appearance for the club in the 1-0 victory over Malmö in the 1979 European Cup Final in Munich. Now, in the summer of 1993, he was back after Clough's retirement. Clough had mentioned Clark to the chairman Fred Reacher, who took heed of the great man's recommendation when another Forest legend, Martin O'Neill, dropped out of the running.

Once installed, Clark set about reshaping the Forest squad with funds from the sales of star players Roy Keane and Nigel Clough. He splashed out a huge £2.25m on the Southend striker Stan Collymore. A fee of that size for a player who had cost Southend only £150,000 was a gamble, but one that paid off immediately as the club got back into the Premiership at the first time of asking. That season, he also added reliable defender Colin Cooper and Norwegian midfielders Alf-Inge Haaland and Lars Bohinen. The transfers were a big success and Forest finished well clear of third-placed Millwall, securing their place in the Premiership for 1994/95.

Back in the big time, Forest's main transfer target was an attacker to complement Collymore. Bryan Roy of Foggia, who regularly sold star players to keep the club afloat, was identified as the man who fitted the bill. He did not come cheap. Roy was coming off the back of a strong season, finishing with 12 goals and a place among the top ten goalscorers in Serie A. Forest had to break their transfer record to bring the Dutchman to the City Ground. Having agreed personal terms with Roy before the start of the World Cup, a fee of £2.5m was negotiated and the attacker left sunny

Serie A for a new career in England. Forest looked like they had a strong squad and could compete in the top half.

Having been relegated from the Premier League on goal difference, Crystal Palace were able to hold on to most of their established first-team players. The only player they lost after relegation was Eddie McGoldrick to Arsenal. That left manager Alan Smith with the likes of Nigel Martyn, Gareth Southgate, Richard Shaw, John Salako and Chris Armstrong to form the nucleus of a side that ran away with the title. They ended up finishing seven points ahead of Forest and a massive 16 ahead of Millwall. Smith added a few bargain signings in the summer, including Darren Pitcher and the experienced Ray Wilkins, but his hopes of a top-six finish looked lofty.

The third promoted team were Leicester City, who finished fourth at the end of the season, but earned their promotion in the most dramatic way possible with victory in the play-off final. Steve Walsh was the final hero as Brian Little's Foxes overcame big-spending Derby County to end seven years outside the top flight. The chairman, Martin George, made funds available to Little, but attracting players to the club proved difficult. They did, however, manage to sign the highly rated Mark Draper from Notts County, but a lot more quality was needed to make the side competitive.

One player to watch at Leicester was Julian Joachim. A forward blessed with blistering pace, his form for England Under-18s in the victorious European Championship campaign marked him out as a talent. His international teammates included the Manchester United trio Nicky Butt, Paul Scholes and Gary Neville, Sol Campbell of Spurs and Robbie Fowler of Liverpool. With Darren Caskey, Mark Tinkler and Chris Casper also featuring, England had a brilliant side who defeated nations who could boast young talents such as Olivier Dacourt, Clarence Seedorf, Patrick Kluivert and Dani.

Joachim was the breakout star for England. He had been compared to the Brazilian striker Romario during the tournament by his manager Little and *The Guardian's* Patrick Barclay. He was touted, along with Caskey, as an England prospect for the 1998 World Cup. His star was rising and Leicester hoped he would translate his promise to the Premiership.

Some teams were destined to avoid a relegation battle but not have the quality to compete for a title. However, Premier League riches meant they could afford to be bold in the transfer market. Where the promoted teams were still conservative in their ambition, a group of clubs looked to make a splash and be more competitive.

One of the clubs happy to spend money were Chelsea. Glenn Hoddle had been brought in with the hope of moving the club out of mid-table mediocrity, but a finish three places below what they had managed the previous season hardly provided the fans with a sense of promise. Reaching the FA Cup Final against Manchester United helped. It meant that Hoddle's men competed in the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup, as United's league victory gave them a place in the European Cup.

Chelsea prioritised investing in a striker to lead the line. Paul Furlong was the man they chose and had the task of getting them goals. The deal cost Chelsea £2.3m, which was a huge sum of money for the club but roughly half the price of Chris Sutton. In 1991, Furlong had joined Coventry City for just £150,000 and his time in the First Division was far from a goalscoring success. A return of four goals in 37 league appearances hardly suggested a move back to the Premiership. But Hoddle was happy enough to break the club transfer record after seeing his exploits for a struggling Watford side. The Chelsea boss liked Furlong's 'good touch, pace and [the fact he] is genuinely two-footed'. Making a

wider comment on the state of the market, Hoddle suggested that any decent striker cost a minimum of £2m.

Another player hopeful of making Chelsea the top side in London was Scott Minto, who moved to Stamford Bridge from Charlton Athletic. The £775,000 fee was small change for a player wanted by Arsenal and rated as one of the top young prospects in English football. Minto was convinced the Hoddle effect separated his new side from Arsenal. First-team football was another carrot that the manager dangled in front of the young Minto, something George Graham would not have been able to do with such an established pro as Nigel Winterburn looming large in the left-back role.

Chelsea had another link to the Gunners that summer, with the arrival of David Rocastle from Manchester City for £1.25m. Having only moved to Maine Road in December 1993, it was a real shock to the player to move again. Since leaving Arsenal for Leeds in 1992, Chelsea were Rocastle's third club in as many seasons. He had come a long way from being a core part in the Arsenal side that won the title in the iconic game at Anfield in 1989. But, with a four-year deal in his pocket, a move back down to London and the prospect of European football, Chelsea seemed like a great place for Rocastle to rediscover his best form.

Staying in the capital, Tottenham Hotspur were about to have the kind of summer that became typical of Premiership teams. Not content with buying the best talent in England, such as Teddy Sheringham and Darren Anderton, Spurs brought in some of the best talent the continent had to offer. They certainly had their scouts' eyes firmly fixed on what was going on across the Atlantic, with the eventual signing of three World Cup stars.

Before all of that, there was the small matter of the legal wranglings that dogged the club and a very public war of words between owner and Amstrad supremo Alan Sugar and

former manager and chief executive Terry Venables. Both parties were not the kind to go quietly and their battle was in the public eye for the next few years. Before the two of them could bring lawsuits against each other, Spurs were punished for financial irregularities under former owners.

The FA came down hard on the club and proposed a punishment in the form of a £600,000 fine, expulsion from the 1994/95 FA Cup and, most alarming of all, a 12-point penalty for the upcoming season. After surviving relegation by only three points, the future did not look bright. With the genuine prospect of relegation looming large, an appeal was quickly lodged. Starting on minus 12 points when the league was reducing in size was certainly not helpful.

Once Spurs' appeal was heard, with Sugar particularly vociferous in his opinions on the way the FA had acted, the punishment was reduced. Now, Spurs faced a six-point deduction, but the fine had been increased to a massive £1.5m, which at that point was the price of a Premiership footballer. Sugar was apoplectic. He felt like his club were being made an example of, claiming that at least 70 per cent of clubs in the top flight were involved in taking improper payments. This included his own ex-manager Venables, in the form of a cash exchange at a service station on the completion of Teddy Sheringham's transfer from Nottingham Forest to Spurs in the early stages of the 1992/93 season. A light shone on the dark side of football.

Still fighting his corner, Sugar spent money to ensure his team would not flounder at the wrong end of the table. First up was Ilie Dumitrescu, who was one of the best performers for Romania as they surprised many with their progress to the quarter-finals of the World Cup. Gheorghe Hagi and Florin Raducioiu were Romania's two other standout performers and, despite being linked with Spurs, signed for Barcelona and Espanyol respectively.

Dumitrescu was an intelligent player who provided Spurs with more creativity and attacking intent in the final third. The fee was £2.6m, which was a sensible investment for a 25-year-old player who had the potential to reach his peak at Spurs. It certainly added more depth to the squad and showed the club's ambition. Manager Ossie Ardiles tried as much as he could to add to his side to avoid a repeat of the relegation-threatened performances of the previous season.

Taking an almost exclusively international approach to scouting, Ardiles had dinner with Brazilian striker Muller in São Paulo with a view to him signing for Spurs. Another member of the Seleção to be linked with a move to White Hart Lane was powerful centre-back Marcio Santos, a consistent feature in the Bordeaux line-up and a member of the team of the tournament at USA 94. Santos was more interested in a move to Serie A and Fiorentina eventually signed the Brazilian.

Spurs' search for a star took them on a month-long pursuit of one of the most recognisable stars of European football, Jürgen Klinsmann, tracking him down to a boat in Monte Carlo. Although Germany had failed in their bid to reach a fourth consecutive World Cup Final, their No.18 scored five goals and was an integral part of their team; his tireless running and predatory instincts ensured he was a constant problem for opposition defenders. Transferring this to the fast-paced Premiership seemed to be a logical move, but there were detractors from his native Germany, with *Kicker* remarking that his 'displays in the World Cup were exceptional, but he is not such a good player as those observers in America assume'.

Klinsmann was bullish about his chances in England and did not let the doubters back home stop him from succeeding. This was a player who had excelled after moving to Italy in 1989 and he was not about to let his age or an unfamiliar style

of football get in the way of his continued success. It was true that Spurs had paid a premium in wages for the German, somewhere between £8,000 and £15,000 a week. There were also suggestions of a £500,000 signing-on fee and a bonus of £1,000 per goal, which were subsequently denied, but probably the going rate in leagues like the wealthy Serie A.

Whatever the financials involved, signing Klinsmann was a coup for Spurs and they now boasted a forward line made up of the German, new signing Dumitrescu, England Under-21 star Nick Barmby and two signings from the summer of 1992 in Teddy Sheringham and Darren Anderton. With the ability to play such an attacking line-up, the odds on Spurs' fortunes for the season quickly shifted from possible relegation candidates to top-six contenders.

Shifting to the other half of North London, Arsenal plotted another assault on the top six and more. In transfer terms, the Gunners were firmly in the shadow of their local rivals throughout the summer. Ossie Ardiles's side splashed the cash on European stars while Arsenal lost the struggle to pry Chris Sutton from Norwich and were beaten to Scott Minto by Chelsea. The strict wage policy at the club proved to be a stumbling block during negotiations. It was also clear that George Graham and the club did not have the same pulling power as the likes of Manchester United and Blackburn.

Despite their difficulties in the transfer market, Arsenal already possessed quality at both ends of the pitch. Not only that, they had just finished fourth in the league and had defeated Parma 1-0 in the Cup Winners' Cup Final in May 1994. It looked, from the outside, like Arsenal were genuine title challengers who, alongside Blackburn, were most likely to cause the most problems for Manchester United. A defence that featured Lee Dixon, Winterburn, Tony Adams, Martin Keown and Steve Bould and an attack of Wright, Kevin

Campbell and Paul Merson suggested tinkering and not restructuring was required.

The star man who arrived at Arsenal was Stefan Schwarz. A fee of £1.75m was agreed with Benfica and, despite George Graham being on holiday, the deal was completed in early June, which meant there was no post-World Cup inflation of the fee. Schwarz was a creative midfielder who had starred against Arsenal in the 1991/92 European Cup for the Portuguese champions. He was the only player of note signed by Arsenal before the season got under way.

Another team looking to mount a title challenge were Newcastle United. Although not quite at the level of Blackburn in terms of spending power, Kevin Keegan had the backing of his board to build on his side's impressive showing back in the top flight. Powered by the phenomenal goalscoring exploits of Andy Cole and his strike partner Peter Beardsley, Keegan knew his side had a chance to challenge for Europe again and that he was in a position to build a squad which could compete at the top end of the table every season.

After scoring a league-high 82 goals, Keegan focused his transfer attention on his defence. Having already signed Darren Peacock for a sizeable fee from QPR a few months earlier, Keegan added £2.6m Philippe Albert to his central defensive rotation after being impressed by his performances for Belgium at the World Cup. Albert took the No.27 shirt to match his age on the day of signing – his birthday, no less. A defender who was as good on the ball as he was stopping it, Albert gave Keegan's side depth and an additional ball player to enhance the impressive attacking unit. Before Albert's arrival in August, defender Marc Hottiger had already signed from Sion for a fee of £600,000.

Liverpool stayed quiet in the transfer market over the summer months, despite being linked to numerous players,

as had become the case for most teams. Instead, Roy Evans, taking a much different approach to managing Liverpool than his predecessor, Graeme Souness, wanted to wait until the right players became available. It was likely that defence was the area Evans wanted to improve, as the impressive duo of Robbie Fowler and Ian Rush provided more than enough firepower up front.

Off the pitch, an indiscretion involving nudity and a Budweiser bottle in Ayia Napa ended with Don Hutchison being transfer-listed. It followed a similar event the year before when he had used a particular area of his body to draw a group of girls' attention. There had been no interest in the young attacker as yet, but it looked like the writing was on the wall. Julian Dicks was another player that seemed to be on his way out of Anfield if the right deal came along.

After just missing out on European football in 1993/94, Leeds bolstered their squad with the expensive signing of midfielder Carlton Palmer from Sheffield Wednesday. At £2.6m, Palmer was the big-name summer signing in the vein of Brian Deane and David Rocastle in the preceding two seasons. Howard Wilkinson hoped that he could fit into the centre of defence and help his side remain towards the top of the table. The manager also added another player from his former club, with the addition of experienced defender Nigel Worthington. Unlike Palmer, Worthington had played under Wilkinson at Wednesday.

At the other end of the pitch, Wilkinson took a risk on South African striker Philomen (Phil) Masinga for a fee around £275,000. The tall striker was granted a work permit, which often proved difficult to acquire, and joined Leeds in pre-season training. Masinga's fellow countryman, highly rated defender Lucas Radebe, joined Leeds in another low-cost deal rumoured to be a similar fee to that paid for the big striker. With the league moving towards investing in overseas

talent, Wilkinson had two relatively low-risk/high-reward signings.

Ron Atkinson was another who took a risk on unknown talent when he signed Nii Lamptey from PSV Eindhoven. The Ghanaian attacker added to Aston Villa's up-and-coming young talent, with the likes of Dwight Yorke and Ugo Ehiogu already in the first team. There was plenty of excitement around Lamptey, but the signing of striker John Fashanu was more about experience than potential. The strong and physical striker had fitted perfectly into Wimbledon's ethos for a number of years, but his £1.35m move to Villa meant an adjustment in playing style.

Having won the League Cup but finished in mid-table, Villa hoped for a good European campaign and better form in the league to take them towards challenging for the top six. The signings they had made, compared to some of their rivals, suggested that was a tough ask.

Transfer deals continued to be discussed and negotiated as clubs worked through their friendly schedules and prepared for the new season. Even without new signings, it was clear that Manchester United were favourites to regain their title. Last season's runners-up, Blackburn, were next on the list. On paper, the £5m capture of Sutton provided the perfect foil for Shearer, but becoming a second striker could be a challenge. Arsenal had a disastrous 1992/93 season that saw them finish tenth, their lowest position for ten years, but bounced back in 1993/94 with a fourth-place finish and victory in the Cup Winners' Cup.

The title winners were not decided in pre-season or before a ball was kicked. There were plenty of teams in the race, ready to challenge Manchester United at the top.