



Something to Write Home About

Dyche's Glory

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A monumental achievement

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2017 -2018 season review

As we all know, the season ended up being the club's most successful since the sixth place finish in 1973-1974, and, even better, through the somewhat quirky and convoluted system of Europa League qualification, Burnley managed to qualify for European football for the first time since 1966. Just to emphasise the point, that's fifty years ago: two generations, pre-decimal coinage, Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, television was still in black and white, and I was 12 years old. I attended every one of those European games in the Inter Cities Fairs Cup and fleeting memories of those nights are still etched on my brain. The first tentative win over Stuttgart, the slaughter of Lausanne, the triumph over Napoli, and the disappointment of the defeat vs. Frankfurt having secured a draw in Germany to remain unbeaten in the competition. At the time, attending the home games meant catching two buses back from Burnley to Haslingden via Rawtenstall, so that was an adventure in itself, now I am thinking about the logistics of flying 7,000 miles to Almaty for the opening leg, or attending the final in Baku, Georgia.

To underline Sean's achievement, back in those European days, the Clarets were still a force in the land, a fading one, but nonetheless a force. Blacklaw, Angus, Elder and Miller featured in that European campaign and they had all won Championship medals with Burnley in 1960, plus Harris had made a smattering of appearances. We were not to know it at the time, but the European elimination was the beginning of a long 20 years' decline in the fortunes of our beloved club.

More pertinently, the whole financial landscape has shifted exponentially since 1966. This year's Champions, Manchester City, were languishing in Division Two awaiting the Allison/Mercer revival, although United, Chelsea Liverpool and Spurs were around the top end of the table. Currently the top six have a stranglehold on the top end of the league, and if they have all their ducks in a row then they are more or less guaranteed to finish in those positions. However, there are still opportunities for the likes of Leicester to burst through if enough of those clubs are in sufficient disarray. Arsenal's away form provided the only chink of light for the rest of the teams this season, but their home form was second only to Man City, and Burnley's inconsistency maintained the status quo. Nonetheless, for our team to finish the best of the rest was a monumental achievement.

Interestingly, the battle to become best of the rest and to break into the top six seems to claim more victims than the process to stay in the top six. At clubs like West Ham, Southampton, Swansea, Stoke, Everton and West Bromwich – where they have had some moderate success either in terms of their league position or winning the odd cup and thereby qualifying for Europe – the expectations seem to crank up and the next step is to

break into the top six. As we have seen this season, all of those clubs have struggled at some point or other and in some cases for the majority of the season. They have attempted to take the leap across the chasm and fallen down it instead. Indeed, Leicester struggled initially to kick start their season and the expectation there accounted for Craig Shakespeare early doors.

On the other hand, the likes of Burnley, Bournemouth, Watford, Brighton and Newcastle, all recently promoted clubs, are content just to make up the numbers and survive at the moment. Already I am wondering if the 'European Tour' will affect our psyche in a similar way, although our Board and manager have done an outstanding job previously at managing our expectations.

Returning to the start of the season, very few anticipated the outcome at the outset. The bookmakers had Burnley among the favourites to go down, and most fans I suspect would have been happy to merely finish in 17th place or just above at the finale. Although the Clarets had secured their place in the top flight the previous season with a couple of games to spare, the end of the season was a real struggle to cross over the safety line. Only two games were won out of the last 15 and there were some dour and dogged performances, such as the two goal-free draws in the North East vs. Sunderland and Middlesbrough.

The comings and goings over the close season were a mixture. From the last fixture vs. West Ham, which ended in defeat, only Gray from the starting XI was to depart. However, Keane had been "injured" and Boyd had suddenly been chopped from the 18, no doubt as he refused to accept the one-year offer tabled as he was probably already Championship-bound to Sheffield Wednesday. Darikwa, Ulvestad and Kightly were also shown the door after minimal involvement in the first team, plus Barton was banned by the FA. Gray and Keane potentially would leave significant holes in the line-up down the spine of the team, and neither were replaced at the start of the season. Boyd was a tireless runner and despite his limitations had contributed to the previous season's successful campaign with over 30 appearances and a couple of vital match-winning goals.

To offset these losses, in through the entrance door came Cork, Walters and Bardsley, more or less first-team regulars at their respective clubs and all with massive amounts of Premier League experience. Cork for me was the real eye-opener as he had been captain at Swansea and had an excellent game against us in the 3-2 reverse at the Liberty. Furthermore, Cork was a stylish player and this indicated the possibility of a change in the style of play in the midfield department as one imagined that Sean did not buy him to watch the ball sail over his head. Additionally, Charlie Taylor and Adam Legzdins were brought in, presumably as back-ups, as well as Anders Lindegaard later on in the window. Two more window signings to bolster the forward department were Chris Wood and the

more curious acquisition of Nahki Wells. However, there was significantly no replacement for the departing Keane, which caused much consternation as it had been evident for some time that Keane was on his way. The club had been linked with one or two players, but in the event there were no new centre-backs.

The fixture computer had been very unkind in a way to Burnley, with Chelsea, Spurs, Liverpool as the first three away matches, followed by big-spending, ambitious Everton as the fourth and then a trip to Man City. So it looked like the Clarets would have to maintain their home form as realistically a point or two was about the most one could expect, and it would be no surprise if it was zero points from the first five away games, given that it was not until the 18th away game of the 2016/17 campaign vs. Palace that the Clarets clocked up their first three points on the road.

As it transpired, the first two games vs Chelsea and Albion were a microcosm of the season. The Clarets pulled off a sensational result at the home of the reigning Champions at Stamford Bridge, when only the most diehard supporters expected Burnley to win. There were some, as I do know two fans who actually bet on a winning outcome. Looking back, there were some small indicators that a possible upset was on the cards. There were rumblings of discontent in the Chelsea camp, evident by the transfer listing of Costa and Conte's public grumbling about transfers. This manifested itself in the shape of the personnel on Chelsea's bench, with expensive new signing Morata the stand out individual, the rest were reserves or unknowns, Caballero, Tomori, Kennedy, Scott and Christenson. Thankfully, neither Hazard nor Pedro were in their eighteen either. Even more weird was that Jeremy Boga started up front for his one and only appearance for the club before going on loan to Birmingham City. Nevertheless, it was expected that the champions would still have enough to beat a Burnley side that only included one new signing in the shape of Cork and with centre-half Tarkowski in the line-up.

Chelsea managed to shoot themselves in the foot early in the proceedings by having their new skipper and ex-Burnley loanee Gary Cahill sent off for a two-footed challenge – a brave decision by the Mr Pawson as we have seen weaker refs let similar challenges go with a yellow. Furthermore, the Clarets had been in similar situations last season against top six sides and fail to capitalise, even losing to Arsenal and Man City in similar circumstances. Maybe these experiences came to the fore, but the Clarets had their *carpe diem* moment and swept to a three goal lead by the time the half-time oranges were dished out. It must have been lemons in the home dressing room. By all accounts Chelsea were disinterested and in disarray in the first half, but the second-half they gathered themselves and mounted a fightback to the extent that in the end the Clarets were hanging on, even against nine men, with the movement of Morata making a massive difference. Nonetheless, hang on they did, continuing a Premier League tradition of beating the reigning champions.



Cahill on his way at Stamford Bridge

I have dwelt quite a lot on this one game as it was easily the most significant of the season and the only time the Claretts managed to beat a top six team. A number of the players have reinforced this view, stating that it gave them the belief to go on and take on teams in their own backyard rather than virtually write off 14 away games as had happened the year before. With Tarkowski as one of the stand out players on the day, the pressing need to sign a centre-back was eased, while the three excellent goals were evidence that Andre Gray would not be particularly missed. Furthermore, us fans were in dreamland and perhaps most importantly it was fairly obvious if we could beat the Champs on their own ground, a relegation struggle seemed very unlikely. The whole club and town received a shot in the arm and it sent shockwaves way beyond our own humble domain and resonated throughout the football world. Burnley were on the global map.

The following Saturday now looked like it would be a routine win against West Brom, who had also won vs. Bournemouth on the opening day, and so the crowd arrived in great anticipation. However, a Pulis-led West Brom have proved a very tough nut for the Claretts to crack in the Premier League, and so it proved again with Burnley losing by the odd goal in a match where they failed to land a single shot on target despite numerous chances and most of the possession. With Defour and Cork in the engine room the Claretts looked solid

but laborious going forward. The wide men Guðmundsson and Brady looked ineffectual, and up front Big Sam looked well-shackled having scored twice against Chelsea the previous week.

The arrival of Wood looked to sharpen up the attack, and he scored in his first two appearances after coming on as a sub: at Wembley vs. Spurs and on his full home debut vs. Palace where, as early as the third minute, Wood cashed in on a defensive mistake against De Boor's winless and goalless side. Typically, the Clarets spent the rest of the game defending it and hanging on for the three points. Subsequently, De Boor became the first manager to get the chop after a defeat by Burnley.

I almost forgot to mention that early on in the season the Clarets glided over the banana skin of a trip to Ewood Park, with Brady and Cork becoming the latest Clarets to put the ball in the "Bastards' net". Thus we had the beginnings of a cup run which pitched the club against another nemesis in the shape of Leeds United. Unfortunately, Burnley went out on penalties and that was the end of that bit of excitement.

Back in the league, Burnley picked up a point at Liverpool after an outstanding performance at the home ground of one of the potential title contenders, thus scoring in every one of those fixtures and remaining undefeated and matching their opponents in every department. Then they went one better by snuffing out a stuttering Everton unable to find a cohesive shape, scoring one of the goals of the season with 23 passes in the build-up and the much-maligned Hendrick finishing it off with a neat execution that dissected Keane and England's current number one (!) Pickford. Back at home, Huddersfield successfully shut up shop, and the lads were somewhat fortunate that Andy Carroll saw the red mist when it looked like an attack-minded West Ham might score with abandon, with Chicarito, Arnautovic, Carroll and the very pacy, marauding Antonio all in the Hammers' line-up. A neat Guðmundsson cross found Wood late on after the former had come on as a sub, and the Clarets salvaged a point from an unconvincing performance.

However, despite the mediocre home form and results, after eight games the Clarets were in 7th place and had lost only once despite a very daunting set of away fixtures, and with two wins on the road they had already matched the previous season's entire away points tally. Indeed, it was a tad frustrating as against 'lesser' opposition they had dropped points and might have been even better placed. Away from home the team had looked confident and seemingly on a par with many top six sides. The most amazing feature so far had to be the form of Nick Pope, who had come on for the injured Heaton vs. Palace and made his full debut at Anfield. Straight away he looked like he already played 200 Premier League games and the fears of a collapse following Tom's injury completely evaporated. If anything, with Pope's ability to come and take crosses, the defence looked slightly more solid. Also, Tarkowski was now attracting rave notices with some outstanding

performances. So due to the depth of the squad and the improvement of existing players, the Clarets were able to shrug off the loss of Heaton, Marney and Walters to injury and Gray and Keane in the transfer market. Sean was really beginning to attract the plaudits now, and when Koeman was axed at Everton there were strong and persistent rumours that they might come in for Sean. Thankfully, they eventually opted for Big Fat Sam to steer them away from the bottom.

Meanwhile, the Clarets' major problem still was finding the back of the net at home. It had taken them five games to score as many home goals as they had in the first half at Chelsea back on the opening day, and this problem was to persist throughout the season. Sam had



A dominant performance at Bournemouth

fallen away a bit, and playing the new system of only one up front even at home meant the burden fell heavily on the shoulders of new boy Chris Wood.

Inevitably, the lads got done over at the Etihad with a bit of help from the ref for the opening penalty, which was Aguero's record-equalling score. Then the club embarked on an easier run in terms of opposition through to mid-December, with the only big team the lads had to face being Arsenal at home. That resulted in a number of very tight games most of which could have gone any way. Fortunately, they came out narrowly on the right side five times out of eight of those games, and at one point after they beat Stoke, they sneaked into the Champions League places and then back down to fifth after a dour tense 0-0 draw at Brighton where they rode their luck a bit when Murray skied a penalty into the Brighton sea air. They lost at home to Arsenal when the referee once more gave a very dubious decision in the last minute in the London's club favour, awarding a penalty when Ramsey gave the impression of a man being shot by a circus cannon after backing into Tarky when the ball was six feet over his head. Burnley also lost a very closely fought encounter at Leicester, when they went behind to an early Gray goal but in fact played some excellent, fluent football until the departure through injury of the vastly-improved Robbie Brady after a reckless lunge to try and dispossess Maguire. Brady had been the catalyst for some strong attacking displays, particularly away at Bournemouth where he also scored a smart goal, and had begun to win over his many doubters, of which I was one.

Although the Clarets secured victories against Stoke and Watford, thereafter as an attacking force the Clarets became more muted as they had no direct replacement for Brady, with Dyche reverting to the ever-dependable Arfield, who duly scored the winner vs. Watford. The lads endured a long run of 11 games without a win, which included some excellent performances, none more so than the match at Old Trafford where they took a two-goal lead only to be pegged back in injury time after being unable to prevent United from flooding forward in search of an equaliser. The run included a home biffing from a top six club, Spurs, another pattern to emerge over the course of the season – from the top six, they only took a point at home off Man City, ironically the best side of the lot. During this period Wood was in and out of the team with an injury picked up on international duty, but as ever with our club, another player stepped up to the plate to take his opportunity, and in this case it was Ashley Barnes, who opened his season's account with a finely-taken winner against Stoke.

December was an intense month in terms of matches, seven in total with Liverpool at home on New Year's Day, where the lads succumbed to another late, top-six sucker punch after Liverpool had put out a fairly depleted line-up to give our lads a bit of a chance. In the early New Year, we had the worst FA Cup draw we could possibly have had, and despite taking the lead at the Etihad and holding it until half-time, our Wembley dreams

were soon over, but at least not at the hands of a bunch of farm hands as in the previous season.

Results-wise, the boys were in the midst of a poor run and the injuries were piling up: Defour was out for the season plus Tarkowski and Ward were also injured, although Westwood, Long and Taylor again did the Burnley thing and did a decent job deputising. I do not think I have ever known a time at Burnley when the players that have come in have performed almost as well and in some cases better than some of the players that they have replaced, but this seems to have been a Dyche hallmark ever since Ings and Vokes stepped in for Austin.

During this period, performances began to falter a bit and goals became scarce, cracks were also beginning to appear in the Burnley Wall as clean sheets began to dry up too. As usual, fans looked to the window to strengthen at this time of the year and Dyche initially signed Georges Nkoudou on loan from Spurs, an archetypal tricky but enigmatic winger albeit with little Premier League experience, and before the window shut Sean also added the much more experienced Aaron Lennon to his armoury of attacking wide players, and we looked forward to a stream of crosses planted onto the heads of our attacking players. However, it takes time for a new player to bed in and none more so than for new players coming in to try and slot into the Burnley “framework”.

A close defeat to Man United maintained the pattern of succumbing to top six clubs at home, although there was not much between the two teams on the day except the width of a cross bar for either goal. At Newcastle the lads scraped a fortuitous draw when Sean unleashed his dual wing wizards as subs to salvage a point having fallen a goal behind and seen the Mags fail to apply the killer blow, with Pope saving a penalty and the home strikers missing a couple of other plum chances. Nobody expected the Clarets to beat the Champions-elect City and they didn't expect us to acquire a point either, but the switching of Lowton for Bardsley seem to perk the team up and after Sterling missed an absolute sitter the boys somehow found an extra gear or two to mount a successful bid for an equaliser which Joey the Iceman provided.

This fixture ended a sequence of four games vs. the top six at home and now the fixture list looked much more benign, with only Chelsea and Arsenal of the top six left to face with 12 games to go. The team had been stuck in the mid-thirties in terms of points from mid-December until mid-February, and as it transpired, the point gained vs. Newcastle at the end of January guaranteed safety. Nevertheless, at the time, that mythical 40-point level was the one that would virtually confirm Premier League football, and it remained tantalisingly out of reach. However now there were some very winnable games and the hope was that the boys could at last transform some of the performances into results and maybe even move up from seventh place to challenge some of the big boys.

First up was Swansea away, and given the previous away form, there was a distinct possibility of three points. Unfortunately, the Clarets could not build on their late surge vs. City and instead after a poor performance, conceded a late goal. Another opportunity presented itself with a home fixture against struggling Southampton. By all accounts this was a dire game but a scrambled Barnes goal looked as if it would be enough to carry the day. This time, the referee Mr Madley took a hand in the proceedings when, in injury-time, he failed to remove himself from the path of a pass from Barnes to Westwood. Southampton picked up the loose ball and scored. Very bad fortune maybe, but indicative of the luck of a side on a bad run and perhaps lacking in confidence to go all out and finish the job.

The following week they were to have another shot at the 40-point mark with the visit of Everton, a team that had clambered out of the bottom three under Allardyce but still had a very poor away record at the time of their visit. So hope abounded. I watched this one on television having been scheduled to drive up to the game but elected not to, due to the return of Siberian conditions delivered by the Beast from the East. Burnley started brightly, but it looked like they were going to have similar luck when, against the run of play, Everton took the lead. The portents were not good as the Clarets had never turned round a losing situation under Dyche in the Premier League, our method of obtaining victories being almost exclusively to sneak in front and sit on it until time runs out. So once again, the most we could hope for was another point. However, at half-time Sean overruled his inner Roundhead and made one of his few Cavalier decisions, switching Wood alongside Barnes for Hendrick and going with two forwards up front. Jeff was a shade unlucky as he and the Clarets had not played badly in the first half, they just needed more bite up front, and with the two dogs of war they were positively rabid, with the pair both notching to provide that much longed-for win, and Williams compounding Sam's woe by acquiring a red card.

A mixture of relief and joy was the overwhelming feeling as effectively the Clarets were home and dry and maybe we could look forward to some more expansive football as opposed to some of the functional and dogged stuff that had been served up for the past few months, and that is exactly what we got: a burst of five wins, 11 goals, achieved with some varied performances. Barnes and Wood led the charge and looked to be the perfect partnership, especially with Wood fully fit again. The last victory over Leicester more or less sealed seventh place, albeit it was a rearguard action for over an hour, but with this vital win, if all the ducks fell into a row, European football was more than a dream, it was a distinct possibility. Nine points clear of a faltering Leicester, their players and manager under severe examination, it would take a set of improbable results and Southampton to win the FA Cup to deny the Clarets. Furthermore, it was not beyond the realms of possibility that Burnley could catch Arsenal, another side with the manager under severe pressure, no points away from home in the New Year and banks of empty seats vacated by

the Arsenal 'faithful'. The knives were out.

Unfortunately, the victory over the Foxes proved to be a bit of a high water mark. Next up were Chelsea, a team with another manager under a cloud following a poor run of games. The previous Saturday whilst in the Fanzone, we watched them look disinterestedly fall behind to Southampton only for the Saints to collapse like a drunk man having had one too many, following the introduction of catalyst Giroud. Nonetheless, with an FA Cup semi-final coming up and their team sporting six changes in personnel, the Clarets stood a great chance to continue their fantastic winning run. In the event, Chelsea dominated proceedings from start to finish, the defence were under continuous pressure, the midfield overrun, and the attack was non-existent, emphasising the gap between the top six and the best of the rest should the former decide to turn up and play. If Morata had taken one or two of the simple chances presented to him, the scoreline would have been more realistic.

From there onwards the season petered out somewhat, with only one point from three home games and a real thrashing at Arsenal when we were unlucky enough to be the opponents for Wenger's valedictory outing at the Emirates. With their red t-shirts aglow in the hot May sunshine, the Clarets were shredded by a five-star performance to celebrate Arsene's big day out. The only upside of the whole day was that, after the game, it was easy to use the public transport system due to the home fans rather hypocritically lavishing their appreciation for the man they had forced out of his beloved job whilst we all sloped off home. Afterwards, for once Sean made a very inappropriate choice of words when he said that the lads had "nothing to play for" when if they had won, unlikely I know, they could still possibly have overtaken Arsenal in the table, not to mention the expense, time and effort 1,500 away supporters had spent attending the fixture.

To sum up both home and away, with few exceptions defensively the team looked solid throughout the season. Sean and the players built the 'Burnley Wall', an edifice breached more than once in a game by a team that finished below them only in the 4th minute of injury time in the very last game of the season vs. Bournemouth following a disastrous slip by the otherwise dependable Kevin Long. Defensively, the table shows that we let in far fewer goals than Arsenal and were on a par with all but the two Manchester clubs. However, at home the boys struggled to find a way through the many well-organised and proficient Premier League defences. Along with Huddersfield, the Clarets finished with the lowest number of goals scored at home in the season. Furthermore, nearly all of the six sides above the Clarets finished with double or thereabouts the 36 goals Burnley scored.

Dyche and his team have also become remarkably good at improving the same players individually as well as training them to fit into the system as and when it is necessary. This development is particularly evident across the back four, all of whom are now much more

comfortable and confident at holding the ball. Players may leave the club or be injured yet there is always someone ready to pick up the colours and fight on. This season we have seen Pope, Long, Taylor and Westwood all have spells in the team where they have become solid dependable replacements, looking every inch Premier League quality players. They also do a remarkable job at keeping all the back players interested, motivated and ready to step in when needs arise.

Looking ahead to next season, we begin with a very early start in the Europa League, my guess is that despite all the fine words, Sean will take this as seriously as every other cup competition. He knows that there is no real glory in attaining a place in a Europe League group, and little financial benefit, although us fans would love it. However, the hard-nosed reality is that it is only all possible because we had retained our PL status the previous year, and that brings in the circa £120 million necessary now to maintain our £60 million+ wage budget. Next summer, the window shuts on August 9th, before the start of the PL season, so the squad has to be in place by then.

Provided all our players are fit, and have re-signed the contracts offered to them, I think that we could manage with our current squad plus one or two additions. We desperately need some pace in the wide and forward positions, and, if we are to progress, another 10-15 goal forward to supplement Barnes and Wood. Most importantly, we need to re-sign Ben Mee, as without a doubt he is the fulcrum of our back four, and I cannot think of many better left-sided central defenders in the Division. However, given the fact that an offer has been on the table for some time now and there appears to be no sign whatsoever of him putting pen to paper as some of the others have done, it looks as if Mee may well be in his way. So a top class defender becomes a priority.

With the focus on Mee, it has perhaps gone under the radar that Hendrick and Vokes are in the same position, i.e., their contracts run out in July 2019. I can see Sam going to a Championship club as a makeweight in a deal for a forward, West Brom and Rodriguez being the obvious one, with Bobby Reid from Bristol City being another possibility. Whereas Hendrick I am not sure about, it seems unlikely that the club would run down the contract of player they splashed out circa £15 million on, and despite being the fans' current favourite whipping post, Sean seems to like him, so it will be interesting to see what develops. Anyway, come what may, I am looking forward to our European Tour and another season in the top flight.

Happy days.

Igor