

Something

to Write Home About



Lean pickings

Can we come off the long ball diet?

No.239
December 2018

The magazine of the London Clarets

A battle to survive – but we can do it

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Tim's analysis of our current troubles

I'm afraid my pre-season pessimism has been justified. All sorts of arcane reasons have been offered for Burnley's decline, ranging from the allegedly disruptive impact of Joe Hart's signing and of Tom Heaton's supposed sulking, to the first team players' alleged disgruntlement about not being selected to play in all of the Europa Cup games having worked so hard last season to achieve this distinction.

For me, the main reason for our failures this season is more simple. We have been found out and found wanting tactically and, much to our dismay, outfought. With the exception of Southampton, Bournemouth, and Liverpool, at least during their sluggish first-half performance, every side we've met this season has immediately pressed us hard and in force, deep inside our half. We have been denied the space and time to play comfortably from the back as we managed to do for much of last season. The impact of this has been to create uncertainty in our back line with possession frequently lost in dangerous positions. Consequently, our opponents have had greater scoring opportunities from the start. As well as Joe Hart has performed, although he is not error-free, he cannot keep out all of the copious attempts on our goal.

The other impact of this pacy pressing is to push our midfielders back to reinforce our beleaguered defenders. With our opponents often outnumbering us in central midfield this has meant that we have had fewer opportunities for setting up forays along the flanks or for offering support to our front men. Consequently we are frequently reduced to producing hopeless high punts from the back which our strikers have little chance of capitalising upon, particularly with fewer Burnley midfielders in advanced positions to help them pick up the second balls, something which we were good at during last season. This, I believe, is why we have created fewer chances for ourselves and allowed our opponents many more.

I contend that the unravelling process began at Arsenal last season. Before that traumatic battering, our system of squeezing the space between our lines worked well, with our opponents frequently pushed wide and forced into shooting from distance. The 2-0 victory over Liverpool in 2016 was the crowning glory of this tactical plan. Despite conceding 81% of possession we managed to win comfortably.

What Arsenal did last May was to obliterate the strength of this system with the intensity and pace of their pressing, their bewildering movement on and off the ball, their mesmerising inter-passing and ferocious shooting. With two Arsenal men always posted wide on the flanks we were forced to deplete our narrow fortress by assigning players to stop the supply of dangerous crosses from both wingers. This catastrophic defeat demonstrated to all who watched how our defence could be dismantled, how the discipline of our squeezed two banks of four could be broken.

Watford were the first to follow suit in our opening home game. We were well beaten 3-1 by a team which we had done the double over last season. Fulham then beat us 4-2 at Craven Cottage having run us ragged, despite having a leaky defence. Manchester United won at a canter in the next home game, as did wasteful Wolves away. In all of these games we were constantly under threat of conceding while threatening little ourselves. Although a skilful Bournemouth side perplexingly lost 4-0 to us, they paid heavily for their initial caution. Freed from the heavy press we immediately recovered our mojo, although a 4-0 win was hugely flattering. So was the 2-1

victory at Cardiff. They pressed us hard and should have won but were let down by their poor finishing and glaring defensive errors.

I doubted then whether normal service had resumed. And so it proved. We ragged an undeserved point from Huddersfield who comprehensively out-played us with a resilient three at the back and an impressive three in central midfield. Thereafter the calamities mounted, with the Palace defeat proving to be the worst of our woeful displays. At least the Liverpool performance was more like that of last season, but I'm cautious about whether this represents a turning point. Yes, we played with bravado and crunching determination, qualities that have absent from our play for too long. After all, Cardiff have shown what can be achieved with blood and sweated graft. But Liverpool's first half performance was poor, allowing us to play with renewed confidence. Their second half revival quickly swept us away though, assisted by more defensive errors.

If I'm right in this analysis – and here I'm well aware of the sharp rebuke of the secret footballer to all amateur football sleuths – then perhaps it would be better to try an alternative tactical plan. But I'm not entirely convinced that this is the answer. I'm not sure we have the players to adopt, say, a wingback approach. The players we have appear to be better suited to 4-4-2 or 4-5-1 set-ups – apologies for the tactical simplification here. After all, these are systems with which Dyche and his players have achieved outstanding successes over the last five years.

So what else, then? My conclusion is that we should stick with what we have but play each of our games with the intensity and aggression shown against Liverpool. For that to work I think we need the addition of a battling central midfielder like Barton, and a quick striker who is capable of running with the ball at opposing defenders, like Ings and Rodriguez once did. Our current strikers seem to rely on others' service to fashion a chance. If the service is not there they have difficulty in contributing. Can we achieve that within the resources available to us? Possibly not but I think we should try.

What do I think about our chances of staying up? Well, as things stand now there are seven clubs in a relegation scrap – Cardiff, Huddersfield, Southampton, Fulham, Newcastle, Palace and us. I'm excluding West Ham because they have enough good players and enough dosh to protect them despite a string of awful defeats. I expect Fulham to pick up too under Ranieri. Having spent £100m on players already, it seems as if their ultra-rich owner is prepared to splash a lot more cash on new players. Ultimately money screams.

I think Benitez will keep Newcastle the right side of the line and with a takeover apparently imminent their fortunes may improve prodigiously. Consequently it looks like a 5-way battle. If we can consistently play as we did against Liverpool in the first half, then I think we can stay up, just, but we will have to fight tooth and nail to achieve that and hope we are not afflicted by any further serious injuries.

As a final comment I think the recent vilification of Dyche on social media is appalling and totally without justification. The calls to ditch one of the most successful Burnley managers ever are as ludicrous as they are ungracious. This man is not only one the sharpest tacticians and best 'man managers' we've had at Turf Moor, he is a seasoned and rugged fighter, exactly the qualities we need at this critical time. For heaven's sake, let us give him and his players the support they need at this critical time. Wednesday's battling performance against Liverpool was a damn good start. Long may it continue.