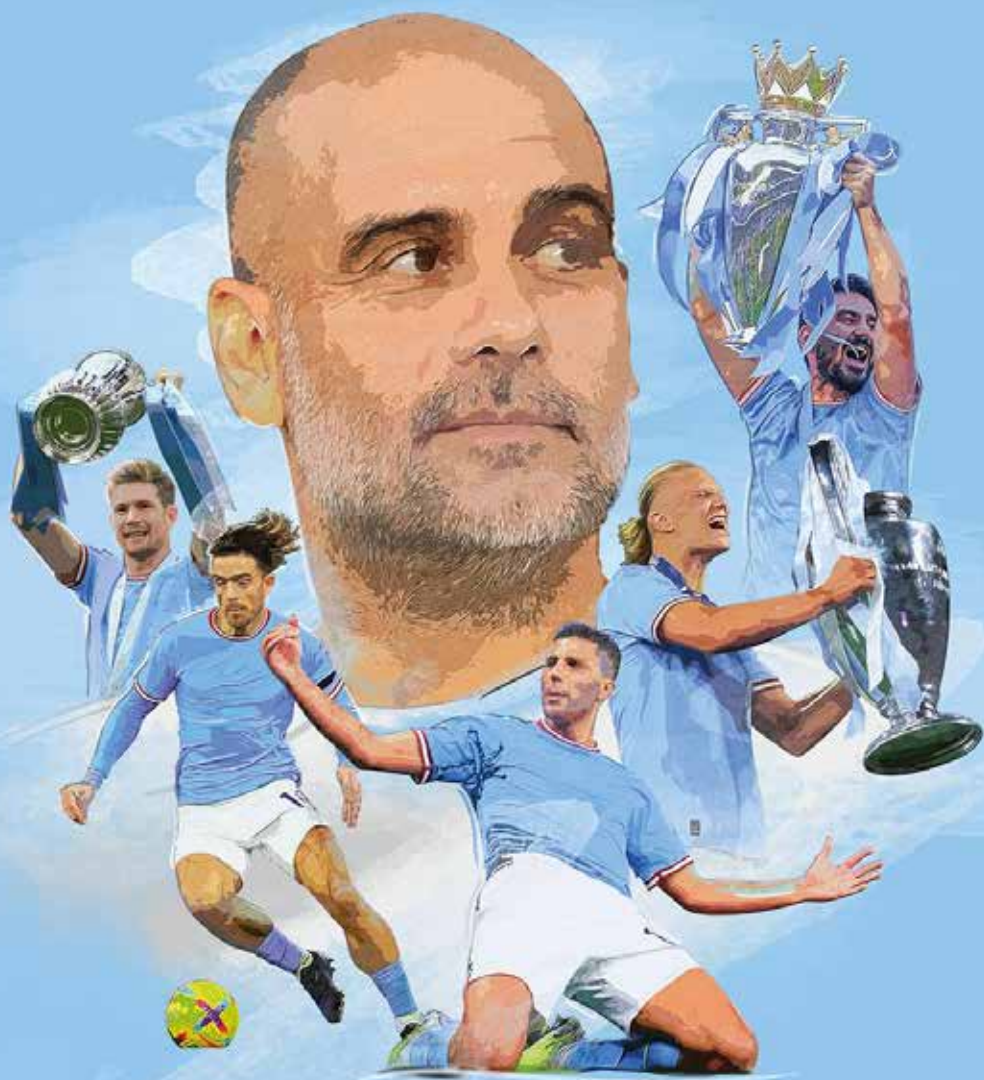


STEVE MINGLE

CHASING IMMORTALITY



MANCHESTER CITY'S
ULTIMATE SEASON

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7 August, 2022, Premier League:
West Ham 0 City 2

*'He would have punched his
team-mates in the face'*

BEFORE THE new campaign starts in earnest, City and Liverpool lock horns in the Community Shield. Liverpool, so close to completing the quadruple last season, had to settle for the two domestic cups, winning them both without scoring a goal in either final. But theirs is the name on the FA Cup and with both sides having been active in the transfer market, the build-up to the game is befitting of a far more meaningful occasion. While City have acquired Haaland, Liverpool now boast Darwin Núñez, signed from Benfica for £85m. On the face of it this dwarfs Haaland's fee, but the slug of money City needed to pay his agent to get the deal done brings the numbers much closer. Not to mention the sizeable disparity in wages. So which of them will get off to the better start?

Our recent performances in the Community Shield have generally been underwhelming, especially in the Pep era. We've often put out understrength sides, with the manager insisting on giving players a minimum period of complete

rest before they return to training. Equally, there's no doubt that Pep does ascribe some importance to this match as, on the last occasion we won it, he was quick to claim it as a 'proper' trophy. I wish he hadn't. As far as I can recall, José Mourinho was the first to do this, desperate as he was and remains to bolster his tally of silverware in support of his claims to be classed as one of the greats, rather than yesterday's man, a has-been who elite clubs no longer want anything to do with. Pep really doesn't need to sink to that level.

City field a very strong side, although their surprising shortage of pre-season friendlies means that they're seriously undercooked. Liverpool have managed to fit in a few more warm-up games and it shows, as they look the sharper team from the outset and take a deserved lead through Trent's deflected long-range shot. He celebrates with that horrible finger to the lips hushing gesture to City fans, as though the goal really matters. City almost respond before half-time, with Haaland twice getting a sniff of goal but unable to take advantage.

In the second half, Julián Álvarez forces home a scrappy equaliser and the game is evenly balanced until Liverpool bring on Núñez with about half an hour to go. He puts in a high-energy cameo and is a proper handful for the tiring City defenders, first winning a penalty when his header is blocked by Dias and VAR deems it to have been a handball – there'll be plenty more where that came from this season – before he then heads home to put the game out of our reach. There's still time to claim a consolation, and when Adrián parries a shot into Haaland's path, the striker has the perfect chance to open his City account. However, from just six yards out, he balloons the ball over the crossbar to wild cheers of derision from the Liverpool fans. Haaland reacts

with a wry smile, as if to say, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be having the last word over you guys’, but for now he just has to suck it up – not just as the bones are picked out of the match by the pundits but also over the next week, as the social media trolls go into overdrive.

When the final whistle blows, the reaction of the Liverpool players is quite extraordinary, and their fans follow suit. I can scarcely believe my eyes. It’s as if they’d won the Champions League. Maybe it’s a release of the frustration left over from the end of last season, when the two big prizes eluded them at the last. The cliché of the day will be that ‘they’ve put down a marker’ for the season to come. For City, their fans and especially Erling Haaland, it’s a season that can hardly come quickly enough. The Sky Sports feed claims that Liverpool had claimed the early bragging rights – well, no one likes to brag more than Liverpool fans – as though anyone is going to remember this game for more than a week, the time it will take for the Premier League to get under way.

At least there’s an element of perspective from some of the pundits, with Jamie Carragher lamenting that ‘the Haaland banter compilations will be everywhere this week, just like Núñez last week [after he missed a couple of sitters in a friendly, for God’s sake]. From muppets who’ve never kicked a ball in their lives,’ while Roy Keane, after observing quite rightly that Liverpool were the better team, said, ‘But there is a week to go yet. City looked slow out of the blocks last year but it’s about how you finish, and City are good at that.’ And no one knows that more than Liverpool, making it all the more surprising that they should respond to their win in such excessive fashion. Or maybe they already had a sense that this would be as good as their season would get.

So after having to endure a week of intense social-media mockery, Haaland lined up at the London Stadium with something to prove. Another week of training left City in far better shape as they dominated from the outset without quite being able to make the breakthrough. Then ten minutes before half-time, Gündoğan slid a clever ball through to Haaland, allowing him to demonstrate one of his great assets. His acceleration over ten yards deceived Areola, who'd slid to smother the ball but instead took out the striker as he nicked it around him. It was an obvious penalty, and Haaland grabbed the ball in a manner which brooked no argument from any of his colleagues. Having taken the time to compose himself, he sprinted forward and side-footed his shot all along the ground, a couple of inches inside Areola's right-hand post. He sat cross-legged in his celebrated 'Zen' pose before receiving the congratulations of all his team-mates.

It was a clinical, confidently dispatched spot-kick but it was the striker's demeanour prior to its execution which really impressed his manager. 'The way he took the ball to take the penalty, I said, "Oh I like it!" I think if one of his team-mates were to take this ball, he would have punched him in the face. That is a good sign. You've got to be self-confident, ambitious and have a ruthless mentality.'

Midway through the second half comes the moment City fans have been waiting for. As De Bruyne receives the ball from Rodri, Haaland makes a run and Kev's pass is weighted perfectly. No one has a chance to get even close to catching him. All he has to do is slide the ball past Areola, but it's the way he chooses to do it which is both fascinating and impressive. As he approaches the ball it would be natural to take another touch to set himself up, but he instead alters his path to run outside the ball, allowing him to open up

his body and strike for goal with his first touch. Areola is beaten easily as Haaland runs on to receive the adulation from exultant City fans. It's a master craftsman's finish – where most would have taken two touches, Haaland took care to ensure he needed only one, minimising the scope for something to go wrong. It will soon become apparent that this is what he does. 'The ball was in the back of the net before you could say "most devastating partnership in European football";' observed Matt Dickinson in *The Times*.

If the goal demonstrated an obvious way in which City could utilise Haaland's qualities, it equally sent a crystal-clear signal to future opponents on what they had to do to combat them. With De Bruyne's capacity for delivering incisive through balls allied to the striker's unnatural speed and composure in front of goal, only the bravest or most foolhardy would attempt to defend with a high line. Even those who normally did so would surely adapt their tactics when facing City.

Afterwards, David Moyes said that his team's struggles had been less about Haaland and more to do with João Cancelo and Kyle Walker pushing into midfield, forcing his wider players to come inside only to then see City quickly spread the play out to Foden and Grealish. 'They changed from last year. We did really well against them last year. Walker and Cancelo played either side of Rodri, they played with no full-backs. We hadn't prepped for that because we hadn't really seen it.' And Grealish, although his performance hadn't been spectacular, was name-checked by Pep afterwards for his part in the second goal, taking the ball in the left-back position and sucking opponents in, 'The goal belongs to Jack, keep the ball, attract opponents, slide a ball to Rodri.' In other words, exactly what he'd been bought to do.

For now though, it was all about Haaland, who if nothing else had banished the reaction to the previous week's mishap to the archives of oblivion. Instead, he was met with a welter of compliments and predictions about how he was about to take the Premier League by storm. Alan Shearer predicted a 40-goal haul, Roy Keane between 30 and 40, Paul Merson a more modest 25.

Guardiola was pleased with the big improvement from the Liverpool game and summed up the witless knee-jerk reactions of pundits, reporters and social media misfits perfectly. 'One week ago Erling could not adapt to the Premier League, now he's alongside Thierry Henry, Alan Shearer and Cristiano Ronaldo.' But he was already on to a theme which would be returned to almost *ad nauseam* throughout the season, 'We would like to add something to his game to be a little better ... not just a guy who scores goals.'

But just a guy who scores goals will do perfectly well for now.