

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

Bournemouth's Championship Winning Season



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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Foreword by Jeff Mostyn	11
Pre-season	14
Tommy Elphick	23
August	35
Matt Ritchie	47
September	52
Simon Francis.	66
October	81
Marc Pugh	96
November	105
Andrew Surman.	120
December	133
Brett Pitman	149
January	159
Charlie Daniels	176
February.	184
Yann Kermorgant	202
March.	211
Harry Arter	231
April	241
Steve Cook.	272
May	283
Where Are They Now?	293
The stats.	304

Pre-season

ON SATURDAY, 13 May 1989 the final whistle blew at Dean Court to call time on AFC Bournemouth's season with a 0-0 draw against south coast rivals Plymouth Argyle. The result secured 12th place in the Second Division for Harry Redknapp's team, at the time the club's highest finish since entering the Football League in 1923. This was hardly the stuff of footballing dreams, and with the Hillsborough disaster still fresh in the memory it barely registered a ripple with the footballing public beyond Dean Court. Nevertheless, it was a club record that would stand for another 25 years.

The two decades that followed this achievement were a period in Bournemouth's history that featured significantly more turmoil than glory. Close shaves with liquidation, points deductions, transfer embargos and what amounted to a tiresome circus in the boardroom finally brought the club to seemingly its lowest ebb in the 2008/09 season. Starting the campaign on minus 17 points, supporters watched on in horror as the Cherries found themselves second from bottom of the Football League before a ball was even kicked.

With no money to spend, it was not a surprise to anyone that the team began the season poorly under manager Jimmy Quinn. As a powerful and productive frontman in his one season playing for the club in the early 1990s, Quinn, whose appointment as manager was largely welcomed by Bournemouth fans, had been a popular figure at Dean Court. A run of poor performances and bad results under his stewardship soon put paid to that. Rumours began to

spread of dressing-room unrest, and when star player Darren Anderton chose to call time on his career rather than continue playing under Quinn in early December, the lack of harmony appeared to be more than mere gossip.

Successive 2-0 defeats to Brentford and Barnet in the week after Christmas saw Quinn edge closer to the Dean Court exit. With just five wins from the opening 23 matches of the League Two season, his departure was confirmed following changes in the ownership structure of the club on New Year's Eve. Eddie Howe, a 31-year-old former player with no management experience, was installed as caretaker-manager. Despite losing his first two matches in charge, Howe was offered the position on a full-time basis. It was a last-ditch attempt by the board of directors to drag the club out of the relegation mire.

With Bournemouth ten points from safety, Howe's appointment was not greeted with universal approval. Supporters questioned the wisdom of handing the role to a complete novice and accused the board of going for the cheapest option. Many were also puzzled by Howe's retention of Jason Tindall, who had acted as assistant manager to Quinn. Tindall had played almost 200 matches for the Cherries, many as a partner for Howe in the centre of the Bournemouth defence. Despite his long service to the club, he had seen his stock plummet among supporters in the months that preceded Quinn's exit.

The doubters had plenty of time to eat their words in the five years that followed, as Howe and Tindall engineered a staggering turnaround in the club's fortunes. After avoiding what would in all likelihood have proved to be a fateful relegation into non-league football in 2009, promotion from Leagues Two and One were achieved in the following three seasons. Even more remarkably, this rise through the divisions was accomplished despite Howe spending 20 months of that period doing what some fans now refer to as 'work experience' as manager of Burnley.

Returning to the Championship for the first time since 1990, and for just the second time in their 114-year history, the Cherries got off to a mixed start. Successive victories over the Athletics of Charlton and Wigan at Dean Court sat alongside a 6-0 defeat at Watford and 5-1 reverse at Huddersfield in the first four fixtures of the season.

Form remained patchy for the majority of the opening half of the campaign until a 2-1 victory over Reading at the Madejski Stadium in December ushered in a considerable improvement in results. Bournemouth recorded landmark victories over the likes of Sheffield Wednesday, Nottingham Forest and Leeds United to finish in tenth place in the second tier, eclipsing the 12th position achieved by Harry Redknapp's team 25 years previously. In similar fashion to the reaction in 1989, very little fanfare greeted this accomplishment beyond the club's small supporter base.

Those who had raised a glass in celebration of the outcome of the season were drowning their sorrows less than two weeks later. Leading goalscorer Lewis Grabban, who had struck 22 times and led the line with impressive energy throughout the campaign, departed to Norwich City for £3m in a move that had older Cherries fans recalling the exodus to Carrow Road begun by the departure of manager John Bond in the early 1970s. Grabban had agitated for a transfer to Brighton the previous January before emerging with an improved three-and-a-half-year contract. That was not enough to keep him at Dean Court when Norwich came calling at the end of the season with an offer that was rumoured to quadruple his weekly wage. The striker was unlikely to admit money was his motivation for the move to East Anglia, and instead cited career aspirations as the reason for his exit. 'Norwich's ambitions matched my ambitions to get to the Premier League,' said Grabban after signing for the Canaries. 'Bournemouth have got a good chance of getting there, but I do feel that Norwich have a lot of Premier League experience and also experience of getting

to the Premier League, so maybe they might edge it on that. The opportunity to go to a club of that size was one I didn't want to turn down.'

By way of recompense, Howe, with the backing of Russian owner Maxim Demin, set about strengthening his squad in the transfer market. Dan Gosling, a 24-year-old midfielder who had once netted the winner in the Merseyside derby, arrived from Newcastle on a free transfer in mid-May. Out-of-contract winger Junior Stanislas made the switch from Burnley to the south coast a month later. Within a week of signing Stanislas, Howe splashed all of Lewis Grabban's transfer fee on Callum Wilson, a young striker who had just scored 21 goals in League One for Coventry City.

It was the kind of careful tinkering with the squad that Eddie Howe had become known for and, despite Grabban's departure, he had fostered a strong sense of loyalty among his players, many of whom stuck around for several years and played the best football of their careers under his tutelage. 'I have always been a firm believer that you get the right players and you don't just get numbers,' said Howe. 'Our existing squad is very strong and, to try to improve it, we need to make sure we get very good players to complement what we already have.'

Stanislas, who had played under Howe at Turf Moor, gave his fellow new recruits an idea of what to expect at Dean Court. 'Eddie is very good at getting the best out of players and will always tell you exactly what he is thinking,' said the winger. 'He will work with you individually on your game and he cares about people. For me, getting the opportunity to work with him again is good. Listening and speaking to Eddie and Jason, you can tell this club is an ambitious one and I think the goal and target would have to be getting promoted. I think anything other than that for the club and the personnel wouldn't really be good enough.'

Stanislas's words reflected the general air of positivity around Dean Court in the summer of 2014, although

talk of promotion to the Premier League was viewed as a distinctly remote possibility by all but the most optimistic of Bournemouth supporters.

There were also long faces in the supporter base when it was announced that season ticket prices would rise by an eye-watering 20 per cent. Chairman Jeff Mostyn defended the price hike, despite it leaving some fans wondering whether they could afford to retain their seat at Dean Court for the coming season. 'We are in the entertainment business and we all know a ticket for a top concert costs more than watching a support act,' he said. 'We are now a top performing side and this season's prices reflect that and still remain fantastic value.'

Mostyn's words proved prophetic, as the Cherries did indeed go on to become the 'top performing side' in the second tier. Yet his optimism was not widely shared, with bookmakers offering at best 25/1 for Bournemouth to achieve a third promotion in five seasons.

Jeff Mostyn was the public face of a boardroom that was attempting to balance the books and comply with Financial Fair Play (FFP) regulations while also ferreting around for loopholes that would allow owner Maxim Demin to make further investments into the club without incurring points deductions or fines from the Football League. Bournemouth were by no means alone among Championship clubs in employing such a strategy.

Tangible evidence of this approach was seen in 2012 when, not long after Demin took a 50 per cent stake in the club, Dean Court became the Goldsands Stadium, and Energy Consulting the club's shirt sponsor. Although both Goldsands and Energy Consulting were companies said to be owned by Demin, no record could be found that either were actively trading. These developments led to discussions among supporters regarding whether the two businesses were merely created as means through which to siphon money into AFC Bournemouth without breaking any regulations.

Operating on the very edge of Financial Fair Play was a balancing act that the club would be unable to maintain in its pursuit of promotion, a circumstance Mostyn foretold when bemoaning the inequality of the rulebook: ‘We believe it is unfair where you have clubs dropping into the Championship from the Premier League with a first-year parachute payment of £23m under the new £5.5bn television deal, while we are having to comply with existing rules made prior to the new deal by a majority of clubs who are no longer in the Sky Bet Championship,’ he said.

Fair or not, when pre-season training began, the Cherries found themselves with enough in the bank to fund a training camp cum bonding trip to Bad Waltersdorf in Austria. It was a far cry from the cross-country runs around Kings Park and friendlies against local non-league teams of Eddie Howe’s playing days, a development of which the Bournemouth manager approved, ‘It will be a real change of focus where we can hone in on the work – the tactical side, the technical side and the physical side,’ he said. ‘You get a chance to really get to know the players, you get the chance for the new players to mix with the old ones and try and form a new team that is going to take you into the season.’

Among the hard work, captain Tommy Elphick found time to keep a light-hearted diary about the excursion, with the majority of his repartee aimed at Ryan Fraser’s youthful naivety and room-mate Adam Smith’s homesickness. Elphick also reported back on the initiation songs sung by new members of the squad: ‘Callum Wilson set the tempo with a little Motown number, which went down really well with the lads.

‘It spurred on Dan Gosling, who did an RnB number, which, mixed with his Devon accent, sounded a bit like the Wurzels!’ he wrote. ‘Junior Stanislas was still a little shy and had to be coaxed on to the floor. His choice of song wasn’t the best. He did “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” and it made Smudger [Adam Smith] feel a lot better.’

While this may not have been comedy gold, it indicated a positive mood in the Cherries' camp going into their first pre-season match with FC Copenhagen in nearby Graz. Goals from Matt Ritchie and trialist Rakish Bingham saw Bournemouth emerge with a 2-2 draw at the Vulkanland Arena, a venue no bigger than the Kings Park Athletics Stadium adjacent to Dean Court.

On their return to the UK, Howe's squad were soon in action once again. A 4-0 victory over Football Conference newcomers Eastleigh at the Silverlake Stadium was secured with goals from Brett Pitman, Simon Francis, Marc Pugh and Shaun MacDonald. A few days later, Yann Kermorgant netted four times in an 11-0 thrashing of Dorchester Town at the Cherries' former temporary home of the Avenue Stadium.

July ended with two friendlies against south coast rivals Southampton and Portsmouth. Winger Lloyd Isgrove's first-half goal saw Southampton claim victory at Dean Court, but Bournemouth overcame Portsmouth 3-2 at Fratton Park after goals from Tokelo Rantie, Brett Pitman and Harry Arter saw Eddie Howe's team go 3-0 up before half-time.

Pitman was on target again in a 3-1 triumph over Swansea City at Dean Court on 1 August, a victory praised by Eddie Howe as 'some of our best football of pre-season'. The final friendly before the season proper kicked off was a 4-1 win at Oxford United, a match notable for a hat-trick from new striker Callum Wilson.

With the preliminaries out of the way, Howe expressed his satisfaction with the progress of his squad. 'I think it has been a successful pre-season,' he said. 'The players came back fit, which gave us a real head start in terms of the work we could get into them. I think we have impressed in the games and have scored a lot of goals and looked tight at the back.'

All eyes then turned to the opening Championship fixture at Huddersfield Town. Bournemouth had lost 5-1 in West Yorkshire on their return to the Championship just over a year earlier and the squad were in no mood for a repeat of

that scoreline. Defender Steve Cook summed up the mood in the dressing room: 'That defeat is still very fresh in our minds and it's something that we want to put right. It was a massive learning curve for us at the time and I think maybe those defeats gave us that extra incentive to get better. I think we've come so far since then. We've learned a lot about the league and ourselves and I think we've improved no end. Hopefully we will give our travelling supporters something to cheer about on Saturday.'

With a year in the Championship under his belt at Dean Court, the Bournemouth manager was equally bullish about his team's chances of competing in the division:

If we can keep the same principles as to how we go about our business – hard work and collective teamwork – then I think we have a good chance to be very successful. We can still be perceived as underdogs in probably 60 to 70 per cent of the games but we don't view ourselves that way. We view ourselves as a professional outfit with a squad with one of the best attitudes in the Championship. We have a very good dressing room, full of really strong characters and very good professionals. In that sense, I have what I want in terms of a dressing room, which is all pulling in the right direction and all craving success.

Of the trip to Huddersfield, Howe was equally confident, despite the heavy defeat a year previously:

That game is long gone, but we will certainly use that experience and I think it stayed with us. We are both different teams now and I don't think that game will have any bearing on this one. It would be nice to go there and give a good display to show we have moved on as a team and, hopefully, we can do that. It would be a tough game and no matter where we were this week, it was

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always going to be a very difficult game. It is the first day of the season, everyone wants to win and everyone is keen to get off to a good start, as we did last year.