



KICKING OFF AGAIN

Football's Greatest Season



Brian Halford

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Football League Division One Everton 0 Brentford 2 (HT: 0-1) Scorers – Brentford: Wilkins, McAloon Attendance: 55,338

*'Brentford, with their liberal sprinkling of bald heads,
were as lively as a bunch of spring lambs.'*

ON SATURDAY, 31 August 1946, readers of the *Liverpool Daily Post* had a strange story to digest along with their heavily rationing-affected breakfasts. The paper's front page carried the headline, 'ODDEST STORY OF THE WAR – SOLDIER WHO DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS OVER'.

The soldier in question was Private Clarence Paxton. The 30-year-old Canadian had appeared before a court martial at Tweedsmuir Repatriation Camp in Thursley, Surrey. He faced a charge of absence without leave for 393 days.

Private Paxton's story was indeed odd. The Second World War had concluded on 2 September 1945, but the defendant told the court that he had not found that out until 18 January 1946. It was on that wintry day, he claimed, that, residing in the remote Italian mountain village of Vinchiaturio, he suddenly recovered the memory which he had lost ten months earlier.

Curiously, for someone whose memory deserted him for almost a year, Paxton could pinpoint the very moment that it went.

'He said his unit was moving out of the Italian village at 4am on 12 March 1945,' reported the *Daily Post*. 'He'd been out drinking with

some British soldiers the previous night and woke up at five to four, rushed out to join the convoy, grabbed hold of the tailboard of a lorry and from that moment his mind went blank until 18 January 1946.'

When Paxton's memory suddenly returned (what occurred on 18 January to restore it was not reported) and he was informed that the war had ended some months earlier, he 'could not believe it', the court heard.

Paxton's story was supported by Major R.J.F. Cawthorpe, a neuropsychiatrist, who was convinced after administering to the soldier a quantity of sodium amytal, a truth drug. 'In my opinion,' Cawthorpe testified, 'when he tried to get in the lorry, Paxton was filled with terror and fright and had suffered from genuine hysterical amnesia.'

Paxton was acquitted. It was a good result for him and no doubt intrigued the readers of the *Daily Post*, though on that particular Saturday morning it's safe to say the vast majority of them were more interested in another kind of result. The sort generated by blokes in shorts on a grassy oblong rather than chaps in suits in a windowless courtroom.

On 31 August 1946, after seven years in abeyance following Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 3 September 1939, the Football League returned. After seven seasons of regional and makeshift competition, travelling restrictions, teams full of guests and matches truncated by air raids, the nation welcomed back 'proper' football. It began with the full fixture list that had already been fulfilled once as the Football League stuck with the schedule from the 1939/40 season which was abandoned after three games. The attention of Merseyside's footy fans was, therefore, divided between Bramall Lane, where Liverpool visited Sheffield United, Prenton Park, where Tranmere Rovers faced bogey side Rotherham United, The Racecourse, where New Brighton visited Wrexham, and Goodison Park, home of the reigning champions. Could Everton open their long-delayed title defence with a win at home to Brentford?

The Toffees had been champs for seven years, having been crowned in the spring of 1939, four months before war broke out. It was not the first time that the Blues of Merseyside had retained the title due to global conflict; they were the champions in 1914. Everton winning the First Division did not augur well for world peace.

In August 1946, 11 months on from the end of the war, life in the UK was still massively dictated by the conflict and its consequences. Many basic components of daily life often taken for granted – safety, food and drink, clothing, transport, leisure – were reduced or compromised. Life remained complex and difficult so every tiny step back towards normality was a lift for national morale. The return of the Football League was a huge step.

‘Facing what is likely to be the greatest season in its 60-year history, English league football opens its first full-scale, back-to-normal campaign,’ reported the *Daily Post*. ‘On Merseyside the chief attraction is at Goodison Park where Everton receive Brentford.’

The joy at football’s return was widespread but not unanimous. Rather than joining the excitement at the potential ‘greatest season’, the Churches Committee on Gambling took a portentous tone. The committee chose the eve of the long-awaited day to point out that more than £25m had been spent on football pools during the 1945/46 season. That the pastime offered an avenue of pleasure to a bruised, bombed and bereaved nation cut no ice with the committee.

‘Everything points to the conclusion that the country is heading for the biggest pools deluge ever known,’ it moaned. ‘In spite of postwar restrictions and national requirements, the shameful prewar records are likely to be broken this season.’

The grave warning evidently fell on a lot of deaf ears, judging by the following Monday’s *London Daily News*. ‘Heavy rain in places could not damp the ardour of football enthusiasts for the opening on Saturday when nearly a million people turned up at the 43 league games [one of the scheduled 44 did not take place – more in Chapter 28],’ the paper reported. The biggest crowd was 61,464 for Chelsea v Bolton Wanderers at Stamford Bridge. Five others also exceeded 50,000: Aston Villa v Middlesbrough, Sunderland v Derby County, Tottenham Hotspur v Birmingham City, Wolverhampton Wanderers v Arsenal and Everton v Brentford, where 55,338 gathered at Goodison.

Since it last hosted a Football League match, Brentford’s visit on 26 August 1939, Goodison Park had been battered by bombing. Its proximity to Liverpool’s docks put it literally in the firing line and while club employees living locally organised a rota of watchers, scanning

the skies for enemy aircraft, they could do little but seek shelter when the bombers came. The Gwladys Street End, completed in 1938 at a cost of £50,000, was damaged. So was the Bullens Road stand. Both incidents were kept out of the press at the time to protect morale, so integral to the British way of life was football perceived to be.

While the war interrupted a strong era for the champions, it did so no less for their opening-day visitors. Brentford were at the high point of their history thanks largely to the skills, industry and contacts of the great Harry Curtis. The Bees had been muddling along in Division Three South until Curtis was appointed secretary-manager in 1926. A former Football League referee, his first impact on the Bees came in that capacity, on 11 February 1922, when he expedited a snippet of club history. Officiating in the west London club's 2-1 defeat at Newport County, he sent off defender Alf Capper, the first Brentford player to be dismissed in a league match. The travelling Bees fans who offered Curtis some ribald thoughts from the Somerton Park terraces that breezy afternoon in south Wales had no idea that, four years later, he would take charge of their team and set about transforming it from Division Three also-rans to Division One thoroughbreds.

Having quit refereeing, Curtis went into management and, after warming up with a three-year stint at Gillingham, he took over at Brentford in May 1926. They had just finished 18th in Division Three South. Nine years later they were in Division One and, in their first season there, finished fifth – the top London club. Supporters swarmed to watch the Bees, home crowds averaging over 25,000, as less than 20 years after entering the league, they mixed it with, and matched, the likes of Chelsea and Arsenal.

Brentford's momentum continued into the war: in 1942 they beat Portsmouth 2-0 in front of 69,000 at Wembley to lift the War Cup. They would be no pushover, although *Daily Post* correspondent John Peel (in this era the vast majority of sports reporters wrote under pseudonyms) predicted, 'In spite of the counter-attraction of Liverpool races, I expect a big crowd will be present to cheer their favourites on. Although the London side will offer stout resistance, the Goodison side should start off the season with a victory.'

Brentford arrived in the north-west without their captain, the former Manchester United half-back Tom Manley, whose absence bore a backdrop which showed just how far from normality the country remained.

‘Brentford’s skipper, now resting because of a pulled muscle, is one of many players worried over housing,’ reported the *Liverpool Echo*. ‘His wife and family live at Great Budworth, near Northwich. For the past six years they’ve hardly seen him because of his army service. Now he’s demobbed, the position is no better, for Tom is in digs down south and can’t get a house.’

Brentford made light of their skipper’s absence to prove John Peel wrong: they were rock solid in a 2-0 win with goals from Gerry McAloon and George Wilkins. The *Echo*’s verdict on the champions was blunt, ‘Brentford played the better football at Goodison and fully deserved the points. There was method and precision in all they did. They passed to their own men and not, as Everton so frequently did, to the opposition. The Blues suggested the end, more than the beginning of the season, so often were they licked for speed. Brentford, with their liberal sprinkling of bald heads, were as lively as a bunch of spring lambs.’

Brentford’s balding buccaneers licked the Toffees despite the wily Curtis having to react quickly with an enforced late team change, reported the *London Evening News*, ‘London not only claimed the biggest attendance, it also produced the biggest surprise result of the day, for Brentford, in beating Everton on the latter’s ground by 2-0. This, too, in spite of Brentford having to play in an emergency a young outside-left named Roberts who signed professional forms only last Thursday. He was one of the successes of the match and, before the game had run its course, Welsh FA representatives were inquiring whether Roberts was born in Wales. He was not. He is a Bristol man.’

For Maurice Roberts and the Brentford team as a whole, it was a flying start but for neither was it to be sustained. Roberts’s professional career was to consist of just ten games, starting and ending in Liverpool. Having made his debut at Goodison, he lined up against Liverpool on 26 October and when the final whistle blew at Anfield, it terminated both Brentford’s 1-0 defeat and Roberts’s career.

Brentford’s other players also failed to live up to their eye-catching start. With an ageing and much-changed squad at his disposal, Curtis,

now 56, could not replicate his managerial masterclass of the prewar era. The Bees won four of their first five games but, at the other end of the season, just one victory from their last 17 sucked them down. Eight months after winning away to the champions, Brentford were relegated to Division Two, not to return to English football's top flight for another 74 years.

Curtis left the club in February 1949 with eternal gratitude, and a cheque for £1,370 from the board. Never mind Dean Smith and Thomas Frank – Harry Curtis is 'The Guvnor' of Brentford FC.

Everton also took time to shrug off the disruption and transition of the war years. They ended the season in tenth place and were never in contention to retain their title. Their crown was relinquished, though it didn't stray far – just a ten-minute walk across Stanley Park.