

A D A M   S L O M A N



# Rise Together

Coventry City Under Mark Robins

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## How did it come to this?

UNDER TONY Mowbray, Coventry City had secured survival in League One thanks to a win away at Crawley Town, and Mowbray was clear with his intent – City had to be promoted back to the Championship.

Mowbray had been appointed in March 2015, taking the reins of a City side just one point outside of the relegation zone.

Survival went right to the wire, but with that victory over Crawley to close the 2014/15 season City were safe, and Mowbray was ready to get to work.

Ten players departed that summer as Mowbray built a team around loan stars like Adam Armstrong, Jacob Murphy and Ryan Kent, blended with the latest from City's academy production line as the likes of James Maddison and Gaël Bigirimana combined to create a team of genuine attacking threat and guile.

The club also hit the headlines in October 2015 when Mowbray brought in Joe Cole. Then struggling for games at Midlands rivals Aston Villa, the former Chelsea and England star was a huge success at City, and later credited his time at the Ricoh Arena with reigniting his passion for football

in the twilight of his career. Some supporters were sceptical though, sensing another player past their prime, using City for one last pay cheque. But Cole was different – his abilities on the pitch still apparent for all to see.

The Sky Blues topped the league or remained in the promotion places for a hefty chunk of the season, ultimately going to the summit with the 4-1 defeat of the then leaders Gillingham in November 2015. City would sweep aside the likes of Crewe Alexandra (5-0 away win) and Bury (6-0 home win) with ease, but ultimately their season would collapse as the Sky Blues won just three matches between 2 January 2016 and 12 March.

The Sky Blues would end the 2015/16 season eighth in the League One table, five points outside the play-off places, taking the highest points tally by any City side since 1980/81. Mowbray apologised to supporters but was adamant that the following season his side would do better, and they would get out of the division.

Speaking to the *Coventry Telegraph* after City beat Oldham Athletic 2-0 to conclude 2015/16 he said, ‘We are disappointed. It’s a progression on last season, finishing eighth as opposed to a last-day victory to stay up, but we set our targets high, and we’ve fallen just short. Next year eighth is the minimum that we will require – we’ve got to push on because we’ve got to get this club out of the league. I hope the supporters will stick with us next season because we’re trying to build a team that will get this club back to where it needs to be. There will be bad days but if we all stick together, we’ll get there in the end.’

Sadly, very few of the squad would get the chance to stick together as over the break Mowbray’s team would be dismantled.

## HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

Armstrong had been a sensation, scoring 20 goals on his way to earning a place in the League One team of the season. Armstrong, Murphy and Kent all returned to their parent clubs, Cole retired, while fellow midfielders Romain Vincelot and John Fleck departed on free transfers.

Once again there was a huge turnover of players. Six loan players would join in the summer, while Mowbray would make seven permanent signings, with the loans of Jodi Jones and Gaël Bigirimana becoming transfers to City from Dagenham & Redbridge and Glasgow Rangers respectively.

City began the 2016/17 campaign in disastrous fashion, failing to win any of their first ten league games and scoring just twice in the first five.

The Sky Blues would fall to defeat against Swindon Town, Bradford City, Fleetwood Town and Gillingham. On 29 September, following City's sixth draw – a 2-2 against AFC Wimbledon – Mowbray resigned.

The club said in a statement, 'Without a win in the first ten league games, Tony felt on a professional level he was no longer able to take the club forward. Coventry City would like to thank Tony for all his energy and dedication over the past 18 months. We would also like to wish Tony all the very best for the future and put on record he will always be welcome at the club. Mark Venus will take responsibility of first-team duties with immediate effect.'

Mowbray left City after 76 games in charge, recording 26 wins, 26 defeats and 24 draws.

Speaking to BBC Sport following the Wimbledon game he said, 'The table doesn't lie. It's embarrassing to go ten games without a win. I'm an honourable guy. I won't be a burden to this club. I know this club needs every penny.'

His post-match interview identified deeper issues at the club – pointing to the failure to secure players for the long term, rather than the loans that the squad had been built from just a year earlier. He added, ‘The players work extremely hard, but it’s a man’s game. They’re babies in a man’s league. I probably let them down by not getting in the big 6ft 4in centre-half we were after, who could have been a man and help us keep clean sheets. We knew what the budget was, but we didn’t get our targets. You can’t build a club off loans. They have to invest in footballers they can keep and build on.’

Long-time assistant Mark Venus took temporary charge and in his first game, he led City to a 2-0 away win at Port Vale. Though they would lose 3-0 to Charlton the following week, Venus seemed to have helped City turn a corner with back-to-back victories over Oxford and Rochdale, before a draw away at Walsall and another home win over Chesterfield.

The revival would not last long as City collapsed to six consecutive defeats. Speaking after a 3-1 reverse away at Southend, the interim boss reacted angrily to BBC Coventry and Warwickshire’s Geoff Foster when asked if the defeats hurt.

‘Let me just explain to you. Let me just say one thing. I came here to the football club on behalf of football to work on football. And if I don’t do very good on football I just walk away. I have got nothing else. I work hard every day ... work hard, 12 hours a day for this football club. I’m trying hard, trying very hard to keep it going. It isn’t doing very well. It needs help. Does it hurt? What do you think? What do you think?’

Venus, perhaps unaccustomed to the pressure of first team management, was clearly uncomfortable with the

line of questioning. 'It's the toughest part of my career. Of course, it hurts. I stand here because I'm upset so yes it hurts, very much so,' he added.

'Everyone can see the team needs a new manager, but it needs some new players as well. Everyone needs a bit of help at the football club. It's a sad state, it's a sorry football club. We have to stop it and turn it round. The club have to stay in the league.'

He was clearly frustrated and as well as the failings on the pitch, he was facing questions off it as unsubstantiated rumours circulated among supporters that an interest Venus had in a property company would see him profit from a proposed redevelopment of City's training ground at Ryton-on-Dunsmore.

Rugby Borough Council had included the training ground in its local plan as a possible location for a housing development. Club owners SISU had confirmed a plan to move from Ryton, which they now considered to be outdated, to a new site that could serve as a base for both the first team and City's academy.

While the club and Venus himself were clear there was no conflict of interest in his role on the club's board and as its caretaker manager, Venus's reaction to the media following the Southend game demonstrated the stress he was under.

The first name in the frame for the permanent role was Gary Caldwell. He had succeeded in taking Wigan Athletic back to the Championship but had been sacked as his side struggled to adapt to life back in the second tier. The *Coventry Telegraph* reported that City had spoken to him on at least two separate occasions about the opportunity to succeed Mowbray, the defender knowing both the former



City boss and Venus from their time together at Celtic. Ultimately, Venus's efforts to woo Caldwell gained little traction and he would remain in the caretaker manager role for a little while longer.

Set against a backdrop of uncertainty regarding the club's future at the Ricoh Arena and its Ryton training ground, anger at the owners became more vocal and more focused. When City faced Sheffield United in front of the Sky Sports cameras, supporters took to the pitch carrying 'SISU OUT' banners, disrupting the game being their only means to vent their frustration.

Having admitted that the club needed a new, permanent manager, on 21 December 2016 Coventry City unveiled their third coach of the season, Russell Slade.

The high point of Slade's coaching career was at Leyton Orient, taking the O's to the League One play-off final where they were beaten by Rotherham United. Orient aside, he had endured struggles at Cardiff City, still suffering from a Premier League hangover, while a six-month spell at Charlton Athletic yielded just four wins in 16 games.

His first game as City boss would be a 4-1 defeat away at Bristol Rovers on Boxing Day, with the Sky Blues three points adrift of safety, 23rd in League One. Slade would oversee a busy January transfer window with four loans and four permanent signings coming in over the month.

Despite the additions to the squad, the lack of quality was there for all to see. The highest-profile Slade signing was Yakubu – the former Everton and Portsmouth striker joining City after an unsuccessful spell in Turkey. The 'Yak' who arrived at Ryton was not the same player who had been so successful in the Premier League. Now aged 34, Yakubu struggled for fitness and managed just

## HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

69 minutes on the pitch during his time with Coventry, suffering a torn hamstring during City's 3-1 defeat at home to Swindon Town.

Recruitment once again seemed to be an issue as Slade's signings had little impact and in his 16 games as Coventry boss, he won just three. During his brief tenure, he would lead City on a five-game losing streak.

Slade's time at Coventry gave supporters little cause for celebration, with the side collecting just seven points from a possible 39 between December 2016 and March 2017.

As fortunes on the field continued to falter, changes were afoot at a commercial level as Dave Boddy joined the club, initially as commercial director.

This role turned into something of a hot seat at City, with Boddy's predecessor Adam Brearley spending less than six months with the club. With a career in the sport, Boddy had previously worked for the Football Conference and served as chairman of non-league Worcester City as well as becoming Newport County's first chief executive as the Welsh side made a return to the Football League for the first time in 25 years.

With City's league form meaning that relegation was all but certain, the Sky Blues had been able to raise themselves in the much-maligned Football League Trophy, also known as the Checktrade Trophy.

Changes to the competition in 2016 saw Premier League academy sides added, as well as a new group stage. Supporters, it must be said, were not keen on the new format and the resulting attendances (or lack thereof) bore that out.

As few as 2,000 City fans attended Coventry's home group games but the Sky Blues were undefeated, going on

to beat academy sides from both Brighton & Hove Albion and Swansea City before hosting Wycombe Wanderers at the Ricoh Arena.

**Tuesday, 7 February 2017**

**EFL Trophy semi-final**

**Ricoh Arena**

Coventry City 2 (Beavon 11; Thomas 19)

Wycombe Wanderers 1 (Akinfenwa 55)

Starting XI: Charles-Cook, Haynes, Turnbull, Harries, Reid, Reilly, Rose, G. Thomas, Dion Kelly-Evans, Tudgay, Beavon.

While attendances in the group stages of the EFL Trophy had been dismal, the lure of a potential trip to Wembley was a lot harder to ignore for the success-starved City support.

Over 11,000 would suffer a cold February night in an effort to see the Sky Blues get to Wembley for the first time since 1987. They'd been close before, during Mark Robins' first tenure in 2013. Crewe Alexandra had denied them, winning 3-2 over two legs.

The route to Wembley would be much simpler in 2017 – win their semi-final and the iconic arch would be waiting.

It would be City's best-attended game of the season and the players seemingly responded to the support. City found themselves 2-0 up inside 20 minutes, thanks to goals from Stuart Beavon and George Thomas. Wycombe would get one back on 55 minutes, leaving fans to endure a nervous finale, but against all odds, miraculously, Coventry were on their way to Wembley for the first time in 30 years.

It would not, however, be Russell Slade leading them out.