**Birmingham Blues (over 63's) Championship Winning Season 2021 - 2022. The Complete Journey.**

There was a relatively short gap between the finish of the 20/21 and start of the 21/22 seasons. Birmingham Blues players were eager to erase the memory of losing the title to Boldmere St.M on the very last day of the previous campaign. What irked them most was that the title was there for the taking, but an uncharacteristic sloppy display had undone the entire season's hard work. Paul Feeney did a marvellous job in motivating the squad and to a man they were ready to go again!

*Paul said, “This season started for me, following the final game of last season as I was watching Boldmere being presented with the League winners shield. I remember thinking then, 'that's going to be ours next year, we'll be picking that up."*

His Blues team were handed a tricky first fixture against Coleshill Strollers. Simon Krstic replaced the injured Clive Macey for this match. This turned out to be a rather niggly affair, with several flashpoints that the referee did well to manage. Birmingham were in total control but only led by one goal as the game reached the mid-way point of the second half. This slender advantage was wiped out when Coleshill equalized with their first meaningful shot on target.Inspite of increasing levels of indiscipline spoiling the contest, Birmingham persevered and managed to snatch a dramatic late winner to get their season off to a winning start.

The squad were given a reality check. This season was going to be tough; opposition teams were sure to raise their game against them. Players would need to perform consistently well and show the same conviction from the first whistle to the last in every game.

The next game against Hartshill would serve to prove this assessment of what was in store for the Blues. After quickly establishing a two goal lead (this included Simon's first goal in a Blue shirt) they failed to capitalise on their superiority and were unable to add to their tally.

*This will have been a cause of concern for the group as they were all too aware that challengers were able to field free scoring players that would be capable of providing the fire power to boost their respective team’s goal differences.*

Further into October local rivals, Solihull Moors were despatched with relative ease and there was a growing confidence and assurance that defensively the team was very strong.

The side's ability to keep possession of the football was also developing and an attacking style, based on the quick release of the ball to the forward players, was becoming more evident. The attacking side of their game was beginning to show more potency.

It was also becoming clear that there was a marked improvement in the general standard of teams competing in this league. No longer were there just a small group of 'standout sides'; there was now a cluster of clubs that, on their day, would be a match for any other team regardless of their previous stature.

This was all too evident in a tight, scoreless draw played out against a much improved Shard End team. At the end of this game Birmingham Blues would look at the result as a point gained rather than two lost. Sadly, the squad was dealt a hammer blow when new striker, Simon Krstic, had to leave the field in what turned out to be a snapped Achilles tendon. The timing of this injury was cruel on Simon as he was establishing himself as a trusted goal scorer and also making a telling contribution to the progress the team were making.

This season Birmingham Walking Football Club had two teams competing in the over 63's league. The first clash in mid-November was eagerly anticipated. The fixtures saw Blues striker, Clive Macey return to the fold after his long layoff. Again, in this contest the Blues failed to make their territorial advantage count and they only held a slender 1-0 lead *(provided by Mark Evans with a "peach of a goal, side footing the ball into the top corner of the net")* as the game approached the last few minutes. An exciting climax saw Birmingham Whites gifted an equaliser from the penalty spot .Roger Purchase recalled what happened next,

'*We were pegged back and level at 1-1 in the last minute of the game. The ball was deep in our own half, Martin Barber took a free kick adjacent to our penalty area, This started a passing movement which included most, if not all of our team progressing up the pitch for Clive Macey to slot the ball home. To play that quality of football at that point in the game was fantastic.'*

At the end of this game the 'bragging rights' firmly belonged to the Blues!

Next up was Bedworth and District. A close encounter provided Blues with another three points. The quality of play was impressive from both teams. Further evidence of the rise in the quality of football being played in the league was confirmed. Goals from Clive, Roy Williams and Paul Feeney were just enough to edge out the determined Bedworth side as the 3 - 2 score line was a fair reflection of the closeness of an excellent contest.

There would be no runaway league winners this season, if anything, teams were beginning to concertina together, changing position with regularity.

Christmas was fast approaching and there was a real chill in the air when Blues took on Rushall Olympics. This was a game, perhaps more than any other, that Blues could target to improve their goal scoring ratio and thus enhance their goal difference column. But a subdued performance that lacked conviction meant that a disappointing 2-0 (Clive Macey scoring both) score line was all they had to show for their efforts.

*From now on every goal and point had to be earned by maintaining a consistently high level of performance enhanced with more than a degree of flair and fluency. This had not been the case in this match. However, on reflection, a win is a win, and three points is all that can be achieved on any given day.*

It has to be said that the team entered the festive period in a very good position; still unbeaten and with an incredibly powerful defensive shield to protect them. There was much to celebrate and to look forward to.

The New Year began with two key fixtures against probably the Blues most powerful rivals -MSA (Burntwood) and Boldmere St M. Amazingly, given the quality of the goal scorers on show, both games ended in scoreless draws. Blues had the better of each encounter and Steve Dixon was denied in the match against Boldmere when his thunderous shot came back off the crossbar.

In terms of the table neither side made any positive step forward or lost any ground. Importantly for Birmingham, however, the status quo being maintained was relatively good news. Blues were in pole position; their arch rival's first chance to close in on them was lost.

At the turn of the year another Covid variant caused significant disruption to the League. Important momentum was lost as fixtures were cancelled due to the rising number of infections. Birmingham Blues' February fixture against Coleshill fell victim to this and was postponed.

*When the action returned, the Birmingham team broke free from the shackles and recorded a convincing 5 - 0 win against Hartshill Strollers. The barrage of goals came from Clive (2), Roger Purchase with his first of the season, Roy and Glenn Alexander. The score line provided a welcome boost to their goal difference as it was becoming ever clearer that a very tight finish could be expected to the season as the second round of matches were now underway.*

Early March saw another victory when the return fixture with Solihull Moors produced an identical score line to the first meeting. A valuable triumph was no more than the Blues deserved. Mark scored a brace of goals in this local derby.

Later in March, Shard End provided yet another stern test. A slender 1-0 victory was achieved as the Blues were indebted to their goalkeeper Bart O'Shea who repelled over half a dozen scoring opportunities from their dominant opponents. This was a hard fought victory, the importance of which was not lost on the entire squad and caretaker player/boss Roger Purchase.

*Blues survived an early scare against their same club rivals Birmingham Whites but eventually ran out 5-1 winners in an early April encounter that had to be suspended for several minutes because of a torrential rain storm. Players and referee alike had to scurry to the protection of the stands before resuming the action when conditions improved. Roger completed his tenure at the helm as Clive slammed in 4 goals and Mark also added to his season's tally.*

In spite of these big score lines, Birmingham Blues still could not shake off the chasing pack, and at this stage Coleshill, MSA (Burntwood) and Boldmere St M were all strongly in contention for the league title. Blues could not afford any slip ups; it was that close! Every match day saw these teams picking up important points. There was no sign of any of them losing their nerve as the battles continued.

*The remaining fixture list decreed that Birmingham Blues still had to face all three of their closest challengers. The tension was mounting*.

There was as a sense of relief rather than disappointment when the side was held to a 1-1 draw by the impressive Boldmere and District team. The draw was achieved by virtue of an extremely fortunate own goal in the closing stages of the game. The unbeaten run was maintained - just!!

A 3-2 victory, with goals from Mark and Paul Feeney (2), in the return match with Rushall Olympics was far more comfortable than the score line suggests. This win served to keep the pressure on those teams with aspirations to be crowned champions.

The trio of make or break games began with the rearranged fixture with Coleshill. This was probably the team's best performance of the year; the two goal winning score line somewhat flatters Coleshill as the margin of victory could have been much greater. Their quick pass and move style was immaculately executed and Coleshill simply had no answer to Birmingham's dominance. This powerful demonstration served further notice that Birmingham Blues were entering the business end of the season in very confident fashion.

*Setting dates for the final two games was problematic. The protracted nature of this meant that the team's preparation was rather disjointed.*

However, Birmingham Blues clash with MSA (Burntwood) was well worth waiting for. Blues had to try to neutralise the danger posed by a fluent team that had earned their reputation as a ruthless attacking force. A positive result was essential to maintain the team’s ambition of lifting the shield on the final day.

For much of the first half the game plan was well implemented with Birmingham taking an early lead (Steve Dixon) before losing it and then, almost instantly, regaining their advantage (Mark Evans). As the game progressed Blues came under increasing pressure and their goalkeeper Ross excelled with a string of fine saves to keep Burntwood out. However, he could do little to prevent the almost inevitable equalizer.

It was one of the season’s highlights that turned the tide in Birmingham's favour. Roger Purchase struck an unstoppable pile driver from distance to beat Burntwood's keeper all ends up. It was a brilliant goal, a contender for this or any goal of the season competition!

*His team mate and friend Pete Giddings joked afterwards, “Highlight for me was Roger’s 30 yard (distance unverified) screamer to win v Burntwood. This was a shock for me as I had spent much of the season watching, and hoping, the trees behind the goal were not sentient as they had taken a hell of a pounding from his wayward efforts previously".*

This exciting match saw Birmingham hold on to win the game meaning that MSA (Burntwood's) hopes of winning the league had ended.

It was now down to just two teams to contest for the league title.

*The equation was simple - Boldmere St. M. had to win this game - any other result would leave them unable to retain their league title. Birmingham Blues required a point to be crowned Champions.*

What unfolded was pure theatre; walking football at its very best - if not for the quality of the football played, but certainly for the excitement and drama that ensued.

The record book will show that the spoils were shared with Boldmere's late equaliser cancelling out Clive Macey's second half strike. But this does not capture the intensity of the contest. The raw courage of the men in Blue - to a man they gave everything for the cause, made each block and interception count, closed down every threat to their goal and tirelessly covered every bit of the pitch for each other. It was a titanic effort that was justly rewarded with them gaining the point that made Birmingham Blues worthy league champions.

**The Champions Squad - A Band of Brothers.**

A persistent and recurring theme throughout this campaign was the number of long term injuries suffered by members of the squad. This meant that there always seemed to be a key player missing, or unavailable for selection for almost every game.

It required players to fill the gaps by sometimes playing out of position or it heaped pressure on individuals to instantly step up to the level required. To everybody's enormous credit this seemed to be achieved seamlessly, and this was reflected in the consistency of the results achieved on each match day.

The squad is a tight knit group and their togetherness always shone through. The team ethos was one of encouragement, support for each other, and acceptance that no-one can be perfect all of the time. On the rare occasions that an individual error caused a setback there was always a rallying call of ''come on , put it behind you....let's move on.''

Peter Giddings perhaps summed this up beautifully when he said,

*"I definitely feel the team is a great example of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. We don’t have the superstars that some of the others possess, but the unity and sense of purpose has enabled us to be competitive in all the fixtures we played and ultimately led to us becoming league champions".*

Mark Evans also reflected on this aspect,

*“ I should call it squad spirit rather than team spirit really because that has been the key difference I have noted when compared to opponents. In addition to having 9/10 players available to rotate each game we even seemed to have injured squad members turning up to support on a regular basis. Unheard of - but much appreciated by all!”*

This group benefited from having several strong leaders; team mates that could be trusted, were dependable and never shirked their responsibilities. This was the glue that held it all together. No big egos - just honest, committed and loyal team mates.

The team's success was built, as so often happens, on a solid defence.

Martin Barber and Roger Purchase were outstanding. Their reading of the game, their closing down of space, the countless number of vital blocks and interceptions were the bedrock of the team. The way they effectively moved the ball out from the back so often turned defence into attack - this aspect being central to the teams overall strategy for each game.

The versatile Peter Giddings made a telling contribution as a quietly assertive defender and as a left sided midfielder. His ability to move into space and strike from that position posed a constant threat to the opposition.

Steve Dixon provided strength in midfield . His vision and determination made him such an asset to the group. He was always comfortable on the ball and used his passing range to great effect. Steve's thunderous shooting ability provided the team with a formidable weapon.

Roy Williams manned the right of midfield making himself readily available to receive the ball. He used his trademark deft touch to create the space that he exploited expertly. Roy scored two goals and also provided the assists for a cluster of other important goals.

The ever dangerous Mark Evans' partnership with the prolific Clive Macey provided the firepower that ultimately got the job done. They formed a deadly (in football terms) partnership that was a match for any defence. The way they worked together, the clever interplay, and their undoubted finishing ability was admired and valued by every member of the squad.

The part played by Simon Krstic in the early part of the season was significant. His season was curtailed when he was diagnosed with an Achillies tendon snap. He reflected,

*"I was informed that a full recovery would be nine months to a year. Based on this I would miss the rest of the season........but I continued to turn up for the remainder of the games supporting a great bunch of guys!"*

The winners medal he received was so richly deserved.

Nino was a dynamo in midfield; another player that was always in space to receive a pass and then move the ball on with pace. So many times his teammates heard the call, "I'll have it....play it short". This pass and move style of play was pivotal as opponents were often outmanoeuvred and the team were driven forward with intent. His boundless energy was an inspiration to us all.

Goalkeeper Bart O'Shea's main task was to maintain maximum concentration throughout so many games that his team mates dominated for very, very long periods. He played behind a defensive shield that opponents found so difficult to penetrate. When called upon, he was equal to the task. Credit also goes to Ross who stepped in for the final few games. Between them, only eleven goals (two penalties) were conceded in the entire season.

Special mention to Paul Feeney for his commitment to the team; and for his determination from the outset that his side would be crowned champions.Inspite of an injury riddled season, he made a very important contribution on the field as a central midfielder and striker. He had a commanding influence on the team. He played in the way he wanted his team to play - holding the ball, using short passes and taking time to make good decisions. He also packed a punch with his shooting and finishing ability, scoring some very important goals.

Credit too for the level of communication he provided through Whats App; the private words of encouragement and the many hours he spent dealing with the organisational aspect of his role and,of course, picking and playing in the team.

This is what Paul said about his role as the manager,

*"For me, first and foremost, it was most important to have a team of 'mates,' with everybody getting along. No superstars, no 'special' players. Some people 'outside' of the squad, said that my managerial policy of only having 10 players and rotating them equally, with equal game time was madness and wouldn't work. But it has worked well, and has led to an equality and harmony within the squad that I haven’t seen present in other teams".*

Roger also made an interesting observation regarding his temporary spell in charge of the team,

*"I must say it was also difficult to concentrate on my own game when managing; despite able assistance from Pete & Simon's touch line support."*

Clearly football management at any level is never easy and the role as player/ manager has added complexities.

The entire squad want to acknowledge the players that stepped in to the set up for various games during this marathon season namely, Keith, Alan, Gary and Glenn.