

Life after Roy

A 'New Gaffer Phrasebook' could become a bestseller should anyone care to publish it. The proverbial 'revolving door' of management means you'd have a steady stream of newly-appointed managers rustling through the pages, trying to find something to proudly proclaim in their first press conference. A tagline of intentions could read: "Are you a new manager at a football club in Britain? Don't know what to say to win the fans over? Look no further!" Featuring clichéd gems such as "bring in a few new lads" and "get back to winning ways". But what do you say when the manager before you wasn't a failure? What statement do you open with that could win over a set of fans that saw their team narrowly miss out on European glory at the end of last season?

The majority of new managers at clubs will be bold and brave in their predictions and statements, aiming to go one better than the poor sap that jumped or was pushed out of the role just weeks beforehand. For Mark Hughes however, this wasn't the case. Hughes had joined Fulham as manager, a position previously occupied by Roy Hodgson, who, after narrowly avoiding relegation in 2008, went on to have glorious back-to-back seasons with the London club.

"I think the fact we haven't got [the Europa League] this year is a bonus. If we can get into the top 10 this year, that'll be good progress."

- Mark Hughes

In his inaugural press conference, Hughes pulled off a masterstroke; a line that surely wouldn't make it into the final draft of the aforementioned phrasebook. Hughes focused on the one downfall of Fulham's previous season, the absence of European football qualification, as a positive. By doing so, he brushed off any pressure by being the first to set a more than achievable target for his first season. Fulham, a team branded with an underdog tag, who some would argue overachieved, but still reached a European final, only worthy of a finish somewhere in the top ten? Had Hodgson stayed for another full season with the squad, would pundits and journalists be questioning why they weren't aiming higher?

"Mark is an extremely bright football man and, having played across Europe and the world, he knows tactics, formations, how to form a team as well as how to break down opposition sides, inside out."

- David Meek

Others may argue that comparing Hughes' first season at Fulham to Hodgson's last would be unjust, but the two managers are not totally dissimilar; both have had international management spells, both are tactically smart, with acute man-management and motivational skills, whilst both had success with small budgets by getting small-yet-spirited clubs into European competitions. Fulham fans would be wise to look at what Hughes achieved at Blackburn rather than what he couldn't achieve at Manchester City.

Using Fulham's last managerial reign as a guideline, Hughes will know he will be given plenty of time in the job; having a two-year contract will automatically see him get more than the 18 months he had at the City of Manchester stadium. He has set a target that, given the squad that he has inherited, coupled with the option of improving it, would be considered an underachievement should it not be met.

Aside from a slight goalkeeping headache, Hughes will be grateful that the foundations that built the success of the last two seasons at Craven Cottage remain relatively untouched; Zamora looks content to stay, Andrew Johnson should be back to full fitness soon after only starring in 13 games last season, Gera and Duff, both now 31, are key experience in the midfield, but the key for Hughes' first season is the form of Brede Hangeland and Aaron Hughes.

Last week BBC commentator Martin Fisher announced during his Match of the Day commentary on Birmingham vs Blackburn that Roger Johnson and Scott Dann were “*two of the best centre-halves in the Premier League*”. Not wanting to take anything away from the Birmingham pair, as they have started the season brightly, on the back of a solid last season with great form at home, however in my opinion there are pairings such as Hangeland and Hughes that are much more deserved of that title.

If league positions were anything to go by, then picking a centre-half pairing playing for a team that finished lower than Birmingham’s ninth may seem a little harsh, but Fulham’s 12th finish was alongside a brilliant run in Europe. Overall, Hangeland played in 52 games, Hughes 56, beaten only by soon-to-be-departing goalkeeper Mark Schwartz’s 60. The partnership that the two have formed over the last two years has cemented Fulham from a club close to relegation, to one not even considered for it.

The season has started reasonably steadily; a competitive draw with Bolton matched by an impressive performance against Manchester United sees Fulham with two points from two games. Upcoming matches paint a brighter horizon: Blackpool (a), Wolves (h), Blackburn (a) and Everton (h). Hughes I’m sure will instil belief that 10 points from a possible 12 is more than achievable.

“[Hughes and his backroom staff] put so much work in; organisation, hours looking at videos, preparing notes about the opposition and ensuring every players knows their job and the strengths and weaknesses of their opposition number”

- John Hartson

Hughes, alongside his stalwart backroom staff of Bowen, Niedzwiecki and Hitchcock have joined the right club at the right time and with patience, belief, spirit and that aspect that every club needs: luck, they could surprise many doubters in the long-term.