

IT IS SAID THAT GLOBAL WARMING is such a slow process that it is impossible to notice its effects unless one studies the statistics over a long period. This is also the only way of measuring the progress of Middlesbrough Football Club over the past 100 years and more. Season by season, nothing much seems to happen and then suddenly, with the capturing of the Carling Cup in February, all of the players assembled by Steve McClaren appeared to vindicate his judgment in putting together what is — on paper at least — a talented squad.

This was a truly historic season for the Boro. Winning the Carling Cup aside, it was also the third season in succession that the club had not been involved in the fight against relegation, thereby further establishing them in the mid-table comfort zone of the Premiership.

It did not start all that well, though; losing five of the first nine games left the team third from bottom of the table. The first home game of the season, against a rampant Arsenal, saw Middlesbrough on the wrong end of a 4-0 thrashing. Luckily, the newspapers were more concerned with a farcical incident in which a home fan had been thrown out of the ground for having the temerity to fall asleep during this dreadful display. This writer was always under the impression that the club stewards are there to stop idiotic behaviour, not to provide examples of it.

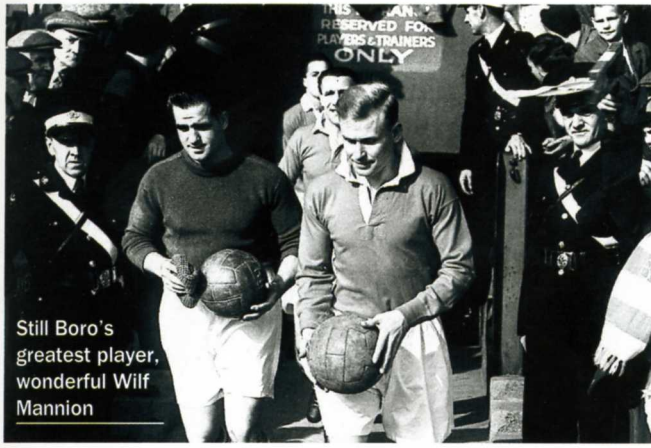
These early losses were made worse by the fact that Middlesbrough deserved to win two of those matches. After forfeiting the lead at home against a demoralised Leeds United, Middlesbrough capitulated 3-2, and after a 2-1 home defeat against Chelsea, even Damien Duff was forced to admit: "I wouldn't say we deserved it and in the end we were lucky."

Middlesbrough's season traditionally falls apart as the close of the year approaches, but this season that particular curse was lifted. From the end of October, the team embarked upon an eight-match unbeaten league run and in between won three Carling Cup games to earn themselves a two-legged semi-final against Arsenal.

In the previous season, their dreadful away record of only three wins was held up as a principal factor in the team finishing so woefully short of challenging for one of the European places. Even though the balance has been redressed somewhat this time, with five away wins, Middlesbrough are still a long way short of having the right combination of players to compete with the top ten in the Premiership.

In years gone by, this would have been an acceptable state of affairs for a club such as Boro, who have spent 12 of the past 30 years outside of the top division. However, when it is noted that clubs of a

HONOURS BOARD



Still Boro's greatest player, wonderful Wilf Mannion

FA CUP

Runners-up 1997

LEAGUE CUP

Winners 2004

Runners-up 1997, 1998

Record attendance 53,536

(v Newcastle United, first division, December 27, 1949) **Current capacity** 35,120

Record victory 9-0 (v Brighton & Hove Albion, second division, August 23, 1958)

Record defeat 0-9 (v Blackburn Rovers, second division, November 6, 1954)

similarly unspectacular recent past — such as Birmingham City, Fulham and Bolton Wanderers — finished the season above them, then questions surely have to be asked.

The highlight of Middlesbrough's league campaign came in February with a fantastic 3-2 win over Manchester United at Old Trafford. Coming soon after winning both legs of the Carling Cup semi-final against Arsenal (understrength though they were), it instilled confidence in the fans that great things could be achieved this season and a couple of weeks later the club did indeed lift its first trophy. But, save for a thrilling 5-3 win against Birmingham in March, the fans would have done well to savour the winning of the Carling Cup and quit while they were ahead rather than returning to Teesside.

Middlesbrough's season was effectively over from the moment that the final whistle blew in Cardiff. From their remaining 13 games, when the team should have been on a high, they took 17 points from a possible 39, including defeats to Wolverhampton Wanderers and a final-day humiliation away to Portsmouth.

Granted, the home win against Birmingham and a 0-0 draw, which felt like a win, against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge did maintain the feel-good factor, but it was the killer instinct that was lacking to capitalise on the success against Bolton at the Millennium Stadium.

Even though this was the club's most successful season they have still, in some respects, underachieved. If the club cannot finish in the top half of the table with players such as Mendieta, Boudewijn



Christie and Job celebrate after the latter's early goal proved enough to beat Everton and provide an early-season victory at the Riverside

Zenden, Gareth Southgate, Ugo Ehiogu and Juninho in the team, it either demonstrates how strong the Premiership now is, or it means that McClaren and his management team need to spend a long time puzzling over why the league campaign finished with such a whimper.

Some of the key contributors to the cause through the season — and who played a huge part in winning the trophy — were not even Middlesbrough players. Mendieta, Danny Mills and Zenden played the entire season on loan. They could go down in history as being key members of the club's first trophy-winning team without ever becoming permanent Boro players, a bizarre circumstance. Perhaps fans can draw some comfort that in future times, quiz compilers will be asking who were the only team to beat Arsenal twice during their unbeaten league season.

If Middlesbrough do continue their progress in line with the speed of global warming, it may well be another 128 years before they emulate this season. But no matter; this was a year in which the shackles of those decades of mediocrity were thrown to the depths of the Tees — and the people of Teesside will be happy to dine out on that for a few years yet to come.
