

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

