

Jordan Davies (20 August 2015)

### **“Macclesfield Town: Four Games In” – An Article by Jordan Davies**

Granted we're only four games into the 2015-16 Vanarama National League but I'm going to take this opportunity to make some early-season comparisons between the Silkmen's newly comprised squad and the side which did so well in the previous campaign.

#### Goalkeeper:

Rhys Taylor was fantastic for Macclesfield Town over the course of his stay at the Moss Rose. Regularly excelling, he stood out as someone who could make the step up to the Football League with consummate ease. He has done now with Newport County and over the course of our pre-season it looked for all money that last season's understudy Ritchie Branagan would be the man to take over the gloves. However on the morning of the first league game away at Torquay United it was announced we had signed experienced ex-Bournemouth keeper Shwan Jalal. Jalal has played in all four of our league games and rarely puts a foot out of place. His experience is clear and he has made several impressive saves, most notably parrying Gary Jones penalty to safety in our 0-0 draw with Southport. Jalal looks like a safe pair of hands, it is a shame that Lincoln City's Jack Muldoon left a leg out on Tuesday which knocked our Iraqi goalkeeper unconscious, this will keep him out of action for a minimum of two weeks, here's hoping when he returns he is on the top of his game. If he is then we shan't miss Taylor too badly at all.

#### Defence:

If I was writing this before the Lincoln game I would be more complimentary about our defence. Just two goals conceded in three minutes is impressive going, however Lincoln managed to expose our defensive fragility to the nth degree on Tuesday night and that leaves us with problems. Andy Halls (whose red card against Southport was foolish at best) and George Pilkington remain from the Silkmen's 2014-15 back four but it is in the other two positions where we have considerably weakened. George had a number of centre-back partners last season but they were all, in the large part, commanding centre-halves. Luke Waterfall was a crucial part of our early season success last season, Liam Hogan had a brief but accomplished spell in the heart of our defence and Alex Grant was a superb loan signing at the end of the season. This campaign we have former AFC Telford United centre-back Neill Byrne, signing players from a relegated team concerns me anyway but it doesn't automatically mean they will prove a poor acquisition, Byrne was tormented from the start against Lincoln (well, not quite the start) Liam Hearn pulled away from him to score in the first half and Matt Rhead proved too powerful for him to handle in the second that led to two very simple Lincoln goals that we were simply not conceding last season. From what I've seen of Byrne's ball distribution, it also leaves a lot to be desired. I know it's early days but he is looking considerably weaker than what we had last year.

The loss of Scott Barrow was always going to hit the side hard. He was consistent all season and proof that John Askey can pick a player. His replacement looked likely to be Curtis Haynes-Brown, the former Lowestoft defender having played at left-back during pre-season until his severe injury against Congleton Town a week before the season began. Sadly this has meant Tony Diagne played the first three games at left-back, his game clearly has been inhibited by his lack of match-time at

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Lincoln City in the past year. He looks out of place at full-back and his performances are erratic, having said all that in Tony's three games we only conceded two goals. We conceded three than that in the first 26 minutes at Lincoln without him. On that occasion we had Halls at left-back and Dan Cowan at right-back. Dan is a young lad still learning in the game and from what we've seen this year and last could well develop into an excellent defender in the future, potentially being another in the line of Shaun Brisley and Elliot Hewitt but he's not there just yet. My overall assessment of the defenders is minus Barrow and Grant we are worse than last season.

Midfield:

The centre of our midfield is in my opinion our strongest area on the field. We have retained the two Paul's, Lewis and Turnbull, both of whom are integral to our game. Danny Whitaker is another player I'm happy to have resigned, there is no substitute for experience and he has it in abundance. I'm also very happy with Danny Whitehead as an acquisition, he looks capable of working hard, getting forward and back and proving a shrewd signing. Out wide we still have the likes of Chris Holroyd and Danny Rowe, again both are players I rate highly, both are capable of quick and direct running with the ball. Holroyd I feel could be better used in an attacking role sometimes, I like many will always remember his hat-trick at Edgeley Park in September 2012 with fondness. Danny Rowe I feel is underused, in my opinion he is our most creative player and I will never understand why we play Kristian Dennis (clearly an out and out striker) on the left-flank instead of him. Rowe also possesses a wand of a left-foot and I would like to see him on from the start and throughout in the upcoming fixtures. I don't think he's managed a full game yet in the four we have played. The loss of Adriano Moke is one that is affecting us and disappointed all Silkmen fans in the summer. We plucked him from part-time obscurity on Stockport's bench and gave him the confidence to become an excellent winger in the Conference. He also described John Askey as a 'father figure' before leaving for Wrexham. His pace is undeniable and, from what I've seen so far, irreplaceable. Other than Moke we are not missing any of last season's midfielders. Will Haining hardly saw the field of play, and whilst Lee Bell did chip in with some important goals at the back-end of last season, it would be unfair to suggest he would walk into our centre of midfield given that we still have Bully, Lewis, Whits and now Whitehead. One question remains from our midfield and it is 'Theo Bailey-Jones'? The answer at this stage is 'I don't know'. Other than that, we're doing alright.

Attack:

This is where we're struggling. Granted we scored three at Lincoln but we couldn't break down Torquay or Southport, two of the sides widely tipped to finish in the bottom half this campaign. Jack Sampson will work hard, that is unquestionable, he will try and hold up every ball, and lay it off to a midfielder and I appreciate that I really do, but will he get to double figures in the scoring charts this season? I doubt it. He scored two at Halifax in April which was great but that was when we had Moke blitzing down the right-wing to provide the opportunities. Moke isn't here anymore. Kristian Dennis was deemed surplus to requirements at Stockport County. That doesn't mean he's not good enough however as Moke proved last season. We know how good 'Sir John' is at picking a player and what's clear when watching Dennis is that he has a will to score goals, he will always try and make

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the run in behind and will always take a shot when it sits nicely on his left-foot. This much is good, but the fact that when deployed on the left-wing he will be charging forward attempting to breach the Lincoln back-line is a bad thing. On numerous occasions we lost possession and he was caught up-field meaning we lost shape badly. I made this comment to the man sat next to me at one point as Paul Lewis was haring all the way across to the touchline to cover for Dennis' mistake. I know he scored two goals at Lincoln but I honestly believe he was a factor in why we conceded 5. I'd rather draw 0-0 than lose 5-3. John Marsden looks like a nothing player, to be fair he's hardly had any pitch time but being considered not good enough for Southport doesn't in my opinion make him good enough for us. We were criticised last season for only scoring 60 goals in 46 games, we didn't make an offer to Matthew Barnes-Homer or Waide Fairhurst but believe me, I'd have both back in a heartbeat. Fairhurst had guile, he had a turn on the edge of the box and a rasping shot hard to stop. His goals against Chester (h) and Kidderminster (a) reeled in the views on YouTube but I remember excellent goals against Forest Green (h) and Wrexham (a) that he also earned all by himself, we miss him. Barnes-Homer is a poacher, he will score goals wherever he goes, he also fought tooth and nail I felt leading the line last season. I remember one goal against Welling at the Moss when he chased onto his own flick-on to get beyond the centre-back before delicately chipping the ball over the onrushing keeper. Our loss with Barnesy is Aldershot's gain, we will struggle to score goals this season.

I know its early days, and my critique may well be damning of some players who may turn out to be fantastic signings. This could still be a season we look back on in years to come with much fondness but at the moment I look at our squad and I see 'mid-table at best' written all over it.

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