

"NO TIME"
"SHORTSHEA"
"CONTRACT"
"THE READING"
"WAY?"
"NO"
"EXPERIENCE"
"SPORTING DIRECT"
"SACKED JOSE"
"JUST"
"A COACH"
"BANTER ERA"
"EASY"
"HIRED INTERVIEW"
"POWERPOINT HIMSELF"
"YEARS PLANS"
"TEACHING EXPERIENCE"

THE WEIGHT OF READING
ON HIS SHOULDERS

THE DIGESTIVE

OCTOBER, 2019

#2



Editor Notes

Alex Everson



The Digestive is back for a second issue to pore over the reaction from the big news with the manager change which has been somewhat of a controversial move to say the least in the past week. It's been a long 6 weeks in the life of a Reading fan. Comes Out, Bowen In (Or Out, depending on your preference).

This issue we also get to take a look back at better days under McDermott in 2012, with the transition to the Adkins era also covered. A profiling of Steve Death, one of the greatest goalkeepers to be in goal for Reading ever. A look back over the last month and how the stats stack up in terms of different game states for the Royals is also covered, alongside reviews and previews of the first team fixtures which can be all be found in this issue.

We are always looking for contributors to give us their thoughts about Reading, past and present. If you ever wanted to put pen to paper (or text to word documents as it is now) - this is your outlet to do it. Let us know what you want to see in here by either tweeting, finding us on Instagram or Facebook, @ElmParkRoyals, or fill in our form on the website (elmparkroyals.com) and we'll get back to you!

A thank you shout out to our writers below, and an extra thank you to Liam Beazley for the great work on the cover. Appreciated from all at Elm Park Royals!

Thank you for downloading Issue 2 of The Digestive, let's hope next time we speak, things haven't moved on quite so quickly.

Until next time,

Alex Everson

Thanks to our contributors in this issue

Ben Morley
Dave Stevens
Erik Orrgarde
Liam Beazley
Matt Williamson
Oliver Scott





Pointless (Almost)

Alex Everson



September hey? Well that wasn't quite what any Reading fan was hoping for really was it.

It's been a turbulent month as a Reading fan, and that doesn't even account for going to games. Since issue 1, we've picked up 1 point in 5 league games, and been knocked out of the Carabao Cup. Oh, and also Jose Gomes was sacked, and we appointed Mark Bowen.

Got all that?

There was a lot of hope when Reading travelled up north in mid September to Middlesbrough. Despite the previous loss at home to Charlton, many thought this was a game that Reading could get something out of. For the first half, Reading didn't look outplayed despite giving the Boro attack some moments of joy, it was Reading who were creating more chances, and did force Darren Randolph into a number of routine stops throughout the first half.



The half came to an end with Meite being flattened in the centre circle with what appeared to be an elbow to the face by Adam Clayton –did he get a booking or sent off you ask? *No, he did not.*

The start of the second half almost harked back to the Paul Clement era, with the ball in the Reading net before most had even found their way back to their seats. Thankfully, Assombalonga found himself called offside, and the goal was chalked off. Reading continued to threaten but still struggled to create the golden chance. Unfortunately, it was Boro who managed to get the opener with a free kick given away on the left side of defence which crept all the way in and gave Marvin Johnson the only goal on the hour mark. Reading pushed, and the game became very open, a fairly common theme from this season so far. With a double sub, we saw Joao and Puskas come on with 25 minutes to go – leaving Boye, Meite, Puskas and Joao playing all upfront together. However Reading never managed to find their way past Randolph, who made a number of fine saves, and it was a second loss in a row for Reading. A long way up north for our longest trip of the season – for not a lot!

A week later, we hosted Blackburn Rovers. This game saw the return of Jordan Obita back to the starting line up, however, he was not the main talking point after the game, as again the Reading defence collapsed in quicker fashion than Friar's Walk scaffolding. Only seven minutes on the clock had passed when Adam Armstrong found himself gifted the entire space of Berkshire on the edge of the box. Despite there being 9 (Yes, 9!) Reading players in/around the penalty box, none of them managed to get to him in the hours that seemed to pass while he picked out a shot that hit the top corner.

The rest of the first half didn't get much better, with Reading looking extremely sloppy on the ball, losing possession multiple times very cheaply. This may have been the worst half of football we've seen this season from Reading (So far).





Pointless (Almost)

Alex Everson



Continuing the theme of early goals after a kick off, Blackburn scored after 3 minutes of the second half. Another deflected goal conceded as Dack had his shot come off McIntyre and roll past Rafael in goal.



Thankfully, Reading didn't just roll over and attempted to get back into the game. Swift scoring a well placed effort from the edge of the box. However, a consolation is what it proved to be. A late chance was headed wide by Puskas (A running theme this month!), and a 3rd loss on the spin for the Royals.

A midweek trip to the Black Country followed to play Wolves in the 3rd round of Carabao Cup. This game really is memorable for 2 things, and will be long forgotten about in the months to come except for these 2 things I imagine.

The first being another howler from Joao Virginia, conceding a goal from a shot hit straight at him which bounces up off him from and into the net from 25 yards. Not sure he'll be watching that one again - and it seems we'll be unlikely to be watching him again. The second, and far more memorable moment of the match came after a second half in which followed the pattern of the previous 3 league games, where Reading had gone behind, and then pushed to try and get themselves back level.

John Swift, who had been on the field for much of the second half found himself with the ball at his feet at the byline in the 99th minute before attempting a rabona style cross.

**A Rabona. Seriously Swift?
Wait, it worked? Ok. Fair play.**

Not only did he attempt it, but it actually worked without him falling flat on his face, which I am stunned about. Not even sure my legs would be able to manage that movement. It worked so well, it fell onto Boye's head for the equaliser, his debut goal for the club with practically the last kick of the game.

We had taken a Premier League side to penalties, the stuff of dreams. We of course lost on penalties, with both Swift and Boye managing to miss their penalties which seemed almost inevitable after the moments before, but we can gloss over that certainly.

Another cup run over for the year.

No rest as a Reading fan, as 3 days later, we were back on the road again, this time travelling across the Severn Bridge. Swansea City the hosts, and I'm not sure any Reading fan has got any particularly good memories of us playing Swansea.





Pointless (Almost)

Alex Everson



That didn't change against them in the first half, as we conceded almost straight from kick off again, with Borja Baston scoring an almost unmarked header just 3 minutes into the game. I could repeat everything from above about how Reading pushed to try and get an equaliser, but I'm fairly certain people would think I would just be copying and pasting from the previous paragraphs.

However, this time, there actually was an equaliser! Another goal coming in the 90th minute, this time from the unexpected source of Andy Yiadom. The right back popped up with a great well placed effort into the bottom corner in injury time to essentially steal a point for Reading. Their first point gained in a month. This game again came with the Puskas miss (as was customary this month), this time knocking the ball over from a corner, around 6 yards out. However, no matter, team confidence sky high, we had stopped the rot!

And then we played Fulham. In what was one of the more depressing nights of matches at home to Fulham – Reading got schooled. John Swift managing to get himself sent off for not one, but two very clumsy tackles within the first 20 minutes put Reading even further on the back foot than they already were. Goals from Cairney, and Mitrovic x 2 were enough to put Fulham 3-0 up at half time. This was actually the first game I attended this season – it was nice to be back.

The second half was played at a snails pace almost with Fulham cruising, adding a fourth through Tom Cairney. Meite managed to score what could be goal of the season (Can your goal of the season come in a 4-1 loss? I'm not sure) in the 89th minute, but I'm not sure how many were left in the ground by this point left to see it. Reading roundly booed off after their 4th loss at home in 5 league games this season.

Rounding off this set of fixtures was another trip west. This time to Bristol City. Reading have enjoyed some great trips to Bristol City in the past decade or so (One even spoke about in this very fanzine by Matt Williamson!).

However this was not one of those times. Some very poor defending (copy and paste from the rest of this article there, meant Diedhiou was pretty much unmarked, with a carbon copy of the goal Borja Baston scored. 12 minutes in and Reading were 1-0 down. Meite having a good one on one chance saved towards the end of the first half – and another Puskas miss, this time him struggling to compose his feet 6 yards out, meant Reading had failed to score again, and had taken their 5th loss in 6 games.



Following the Swansea game, rumours were quick to circulate about the future of Jose Gomes – not all that surprising when you looked at us sitting in 22nd spot after 11 games – and an overall win % of just 24%.

The Dai's made the executioners call 4 days after the Bristol City game, however the writing seemed to have been on the wall for a few weeks by that point, with Gomes leaving John O Shea to man manage the in game on field action during the Bristol City match. The appointment of Mark Bowen happened just under a week later.

Overall, a pretty horrible month for Reading. 4 losses, and a draw in the league. A loss on penalties in the cup, and a manager sacked. Thankfully, there's still a long way to go to try and save the season, let us just hope it doesn't get any worse before it gets better.





"The initial set of names to replace Gomes was a confusing mix of experience, style and background."

After a run of poor results, and plenty of rumours flying around, the club announced that Jose Gomes had left his position as manager of Reading Football Club in the wake of defeat to Bristol City, with the International Break looming.

Setting aside the opposing factions of the fan base who seemed to settle either strongly against the decision to end his tenure or vociferously in support of sending him packing, the initial set of names supposedly in the frame to replace the Portuguese was a confusing mix of experience, styles and background. From the outside looking in, the list of names being suggested, it did not appear there was much in the way of continuity planning coming from within the club.

Naturally, any rumoured names were the result of betting markets and supposed ITK tweets- so whether or not the club were seriously considering any of those touted is anyone's guess. But had there been any truth to the alleged shortlist of managers like Mark Hughes, Chris Hughton, Cesare Prandelli, Eusebio Di Francesco and Gareth Ainsworth, to name just a few. One of the first questions we had was to ask "what direction are the owners looking to take the team?"

Each of these candidates are known for styles different enough from Gomes to make an appointment questionable given Gomes style influencing our current squad, and different enough from each other that considering all of them seemed strange given the different approaches each would mean.

As time wore on and no greater clues emerged as to who might be in the hot seat for the visit of Preston North End, further confusion abounded when the club then announced that Sporting Director Mark Bowen - the man apparently tasked with the manager search - had been appointed until the end of the season ,not as a caretaker but full time...

The more that comes out each day around the decision and Bowen's own role in the search that ended in his assuming the top job leaves the club with a fair amount of egg on their face.

Whether Bowen himself was telling the truth when he said that he didn't make the choice and had in fact drawn up a shortlist and was either preparing to talk to candidates or had already had some conversations with candidates when the owners offered him the role or not, the National media reaction and the social media response amongst fans to the development demonstrated that the PR was terribly managed.

Bowen of course was not helped by two prior statements - that all matters pertaining to football fell on his shoulders; and his previous comments that having been an assistant many times, a managerial role of his own has been an ambition.





Mark Bowen Reaction

Dave Stevens



Being a part of the existing setup that was struggling, and being known to the players who clearly have some kind of problem with the way things are being run or with the way they are being motivated or set up, further leaves open questions as to his suitability.



Taking a measured approach and looking at his career thus far, there are causes to think he could make the step up- he was here as a player, and has been in in a role within the club since March so he's not new to the club completely; he assisted Hughes at clubs playing in the top flight, which means he's been around the game at the highest level; and he knows the English leagues- something many (perhaps unfairly) judged as being against Gomes in his efforts to get us to a better situation than we've been in for much of the last 5-7 years.

Many have also pointed to the length of the appointment - just to the end of the season - as an indication this is a short term situation. Reassuring to those who fear this was the result of going for "the cheap option" or that he had worked his way in to a long term lucrative deal, but again this throws up some problematic unknowns: did the owners sack Gomes with a replacement in mind who then declined to join? Did multiple options turn us down? And if our reaction to this rejection was to say the season was done anyway so let's have a stopgap, what does that say about our ambition for the remainder of this season? Is the whole season a write off?

Overall, I think it's clear to see why many have concerns, questions or consternation around this latest in a disappointingly frequent series of managerial changes at our club. Given that I can do nothing else but accept it and move on, I've resolved that I'm going to acknowledge that things remain dysfunctional behind the scenes at Reading but will apply the great Steve Coppell's rule and judge the latest incumbent in the manager's seat after he's managed 12 games (assuming he lasts that long!)





The Curtain Raiser on the Era of Positivity

Despite my sheer adoration for the beautiful game, I do not come from a footballing family. My mum's attitude towards football is indifferent at best, despite suffering through a season ticket at the Madejski for four years, and my dad is probably the only person in the North East to not be infected with the football bug.

However, in March 2013 my mum accompanied 13-year-old me on my first trip away from RG2 to N5 to watch Nigel Adkins' baptism of fire at the Emirates. As we entered one of England's most impressive stadia my jaw hit the ground at the mass of seats that surrounded the golf green of a pitch whilst looking in awe at the impressive array of silverware Arsenal had won, which encircled the middle tier. My mum's sole musing on the other hand came in the form of a very Upper West comment when she remarked: ***"Will we have to stand for the whole game?"***

As the replica of the historic Highbury clock gradually edged towards 3pm the Reading faithful gathered in anticipation of an upset despite a grand total of zero points across 80 years of fixtures against the Gunners. The previous two games against Arsenal had produced a remarkable 19 goals, including the 5-7 League Cup thriller, which remains the most bizarre game I have seen in the flesh to date, so fans were hopeful of another goal fest, just this time in Reading's favour.

As Adkins took to the touchline the thousands from Berkshire began to find their voice, he duly responded to the requests for him to wave whilst the comparisons between McCleary and Messi were chanted at full blast for all of North London to hear. It was a lively atmosphere, far better than what I was used to at the Madejski making it an easy and almost instantaneous process in falling in love with away days. I loved standing too, I felt far more involved with the game than I did sitting down drinking a Bovril. Perhaps it was because I was physically closer to the state of the players or maybe it was the pack mentality of the Reading fans, all standing together in support of the same cause, regardless I was feeling in my element.

Unfortunately, Arsene Wenger's team were simply a cut above the Royals and the 14 team gap between them really showed. Gervinho tore Reading apart with a goal and two assists as the Ivorian ensured the Royals would prop up the rear end of the table. Even a rare Hal Robson Kanu goal could not inspire a comeback with the Berkshire faithful left chanting "you're nothing special we lose every week."

"I loved standing too, I felt far more involved with the game"



My First Away Game

Oliver Scott



Adkins' Reading ended the season not with a bang but a whimper as a dull 0-0 draw sealed the Royals' fate against fellow strugglers QPR. On Adkins' return to the second tier he brought in a host of new faces including Wayne Bridge and Royston Drenthe in an attempt to gain immediate promotion back to the promised land of the Premier League and at first glance his 7th placed finish in 2013/14 did not appear too bad. That alongside the 2016/17 season is the closest the Royals have come to getting back to England's top tier. There were some positives including the goalscoring form of Adam le Fondre and the emergence of academy talents, most notably Michael Hector, although the less said about the pitch invasion against Burnley the better...

The season afterwards brought many repercussions for Adkins caused mainly by Anton Zingarevich underestimating the depth of his pockets. He was forced to sell fans favourite and talisman Adam Le Fondre to pay off a tax bill and the effects of this were profound. Reading's joint top scorers Glenn Murray and Simon Cox scored just eight goals each, the lowest tally for a Reading top goalscorer in almost 50 years.

Adkins worked under a shoestring budget bringing in talented midfielder Oliver Norwood as well as experienced head Anton Ferdinand in an attempt to steady the ship in 2014/15 and his determination to promote youth players should be admired with 10 academy graduates gaining their debuts during his tenure.

On top of this there were some positive (if you will pardon the pun) performances namely a 4-2 victory at Craven Cottage in May 2013 and a 3-1 win against QPR including a Garath McCleary wonder strike a little less than a year later. Yet for every Fulham and QPR there was a 1-1 draw to 8 man Yeovil Town or a 6-0 thrashing away to League

One Peterborough. And as 2015 drew ever closer these latter performances became all the more common. Unfortunately for the former goalkeeper "the positivity of being positive, is so positive" could only carry him so far and after an abysmal performance at St Andrews, where Reading slumped to a sorry 6-1 defeat, he was sacked, paving the way for Steve Clarke to come in as his successor.

It is unlikely that fans will look back on Adkins' 80 games in charge with anything more than indifference, he should be admired for the fact that he brought the club within a minute of the play offs at his first attempt as well as encouraging the development of younger players all whilst operating on a budget far smaller than the targets set by the owners warranted. However, the regression going into 14/15 cannot be overlooked with fans growing more and more weary of his cliché soundbites after every game. He simply was not the right fit for Reading yet it could equally be argued that none of his successors have been either.



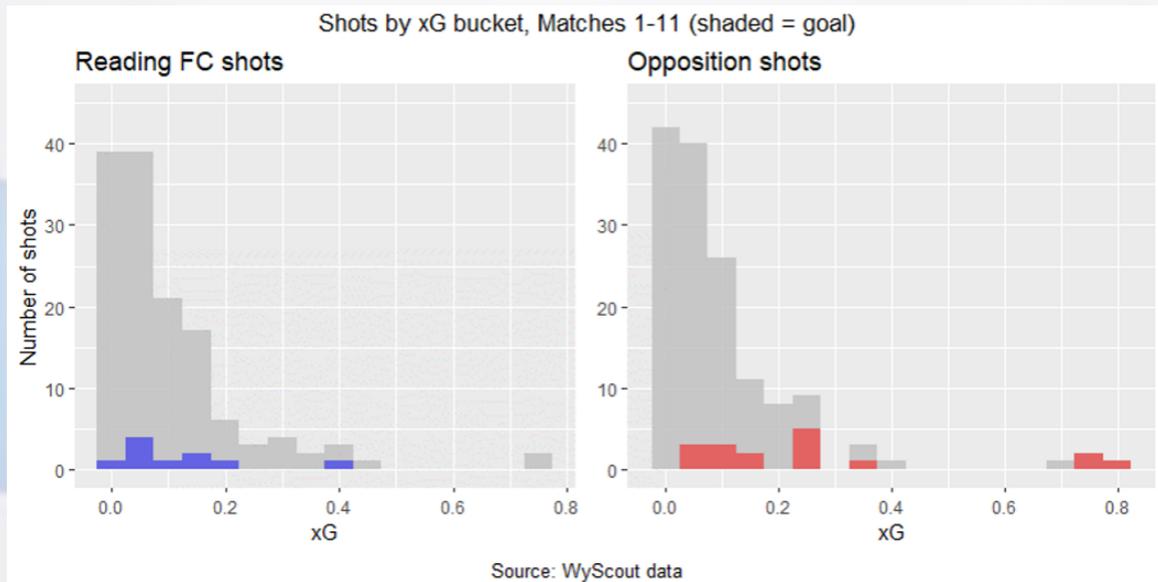


Caveats Apply

11 games into the season, things are not looking great. Its been hard work supporting the Royals in recent weeks; in the last five games we have been winning matches for precisely 0 minutes, drawing for 105 minutes and losing for the remaining 377. Indeed over the whole season we have been in a losing positions for 54% of minutes, and only winning for 10%.

Indeed when times look bleak, barrels get scraped for silver linings. One such (thin) silver lining has been our xG performance, which pins us as one of the largest underperforming teams in the league relative to the quality of chances we have made (Check out @Experimental361 on Twitter for more info on this) . One simple translation of this is that we have been bad at finishing, another is that we have been unlucky. Of those two takes, I personally lean towards the latter, and that all things equal that luck will turn (/Puşcaş will stop missing tap ins...(hopefully)), and we will not be dragged into a relegation battle.

But this isn't 'silver linings corner' so I better throw in some charts to back that up.



Despite sitting in the relegation zone, with 11 goals scored and 17 conceded, we have actually only been outshot in four games (Hull, West Brom, Swansea and Fulham) and have created more chances in three games (Charlton, Middlesbrough and Blackburn). If pure shot counts mattered, we look like a mid table team with 137 chances created and 144 conceded.

Unfortunately, they don't – the chart above breaks down each of these shots into their respective expected goal (xG) buckets – on the left side are speculative shots (the first bar shows shots that would be expected to result in a goal between 0 and 5% of the time), while the final bar represent very high quality chances that nearly always go in, but occur very infrequently. Its pretty typical for most shots to be low xG - only 10.5% of the 3265 shots in the Championship this season have resulted in a goal. We can see here that we have actually created some reasonably good chances – generating more chances than conceded at xG buckets that would reasonably result in a goal 15-20% of the time, 30-35% and 40-50%. Indeed we have conceded 9 shots more than we have made at chance quality more towards the more 'speculative' end the xG spectrum – essentially we haven't been outshot significantly on quantity, and the quality of our shots looks decent too. We can condense this into a slightly easier-to-read table:





| Chance Quality (xG) | For | | | Against | | |
|---------------------|--------|-------|-------------|---------|-------|-------------|
| | xG sum | Goals | Performance | xG sum | Goals | Performance |
| Speculative (<15%) | 5.3 | 6 | 0.7 | 5.81 | 7 | 1.19 |
| Good (15-25%) | 3.23 | 4 | 0.77 | 3.37 | 4 | 0.63 |
| Great (25-50%) | 3.78 | 1 | -2.78 | 2.77 | 3 | 0.23 |
| Likely goals (>50%) | 1.51 | 0 | -1.51 | 3.03 | 3 | -0.03 |

Here we can look a bit deeper at xG compared to actual goals – sticking with those speculative efforts, more goals than expected have gone in from the 106 shots created by us (6 goals compare to 5.3xG) but also conceded (7 goals v 5.81xG).

We have also seen more goals scored at both ends from 'good chances' - defined by me here as an xG of 15-25%, or shots that would be expected to result in a goal between one-in-4 and one-in-7 times.

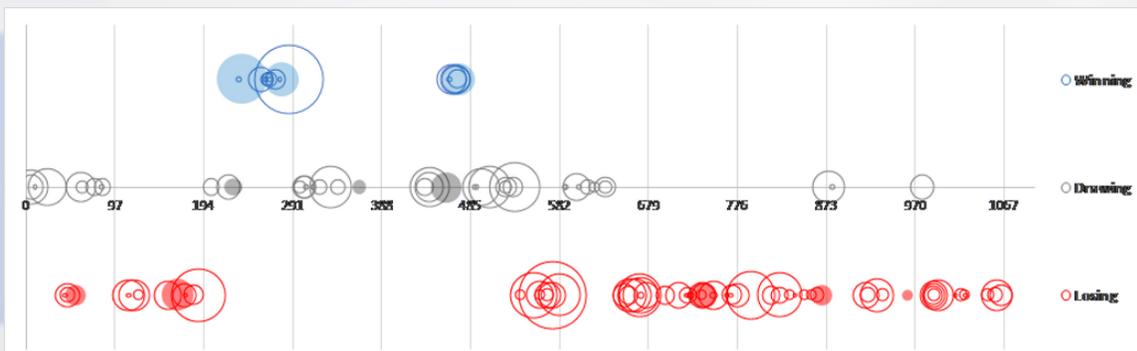
However, differences really stand out once we get to 'great' chances. Of the 13 shots we have created at xGs of 0.25 or higher, we have only actually scored one goal – well below the 5.3 that could have been reasonably expected. By contrast we are conceding about on par; our opponents' 13 higher quality chances add up to an expected 5.8xG, in line with the 6 goals we have actually conceded. Add this all up and you get some league tables produced based of xG than pin us much higher than our actual league position.

Is xG reliable?

But this doesn't tell the whole picture – xG is an imperfect measure and one of the significant caveats relates to 'gamestate' literally the current scoreline in the match. Teams who have built a lead will generally change their style of play and are happy to sit back (potentially generating fewer but better quality chances while limiting opposition to more speculative efforts).

Quite a bit of work has been done exploring how gamestate affects things like frequency and quality of attacks, examples of this work can be found through searching xG Gamestate Analysis online. I've already mentioned that we have been playing from a losing position for the majority of the season, so our xG numbers are likely to be influenced by this. Essentially, it's impossible to say what our xG totals would look like if we hadn't frequently conceded the first goal of the games we have played.

For the sake of another chart, here are all the chances we have generated over the course of the 11 games so far this season by 'absolute' winning/drawing/losing gamestate... it's... a lot of red.





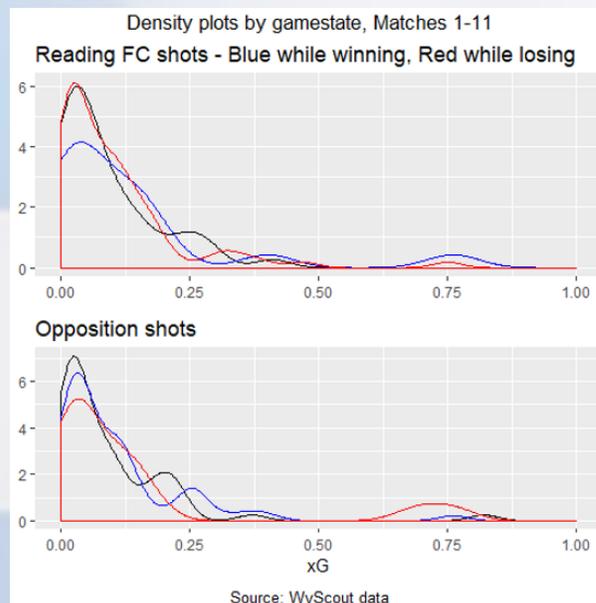
If I insist on trying to take a positive here, there are some quite big chances there being created in losing positions (large red circles - circle size is driven by xG). **If we keep creating chances of this quality we will start scoring more goals.**

Another way to think about this is to see the rates at which we generate chances by gamestate. From losing positions we have actually generated 1.1xG per 1.0xG conceded – that’s pretty solid, although again it includes opposition who have no need to change their gameplan thanks to their early lead and sometimes multiple goal cushions – Sheffield Wednesday (briefly) Hull, Charlton, Blackburn and Fulham have all held two goal leads against us so far.

Nevertheless it is some more tentative evidence that we are able to create good enough chances (in aggregate) to get back into games from losing positions. Where things appear slightly worse are the rate at which we generate chances when drawing games – here we only generate 0.7xG per 1.0xG conceded. If that stays constant then over the long run we should expect to continue to concede from drawing positions, albeit perhaps not quite every game as it currently feels... But this figures does include the nine chances that were converted by the opposition.

If we strip these out (plus our three goals scored when drawing), we generate 0.98xG per 1.0xG conceded – much healthier and again some further evidence of a genuine underperformance caused by bad finishing / bad luck. For completeness, when have managed to edge in front of our opponents we have generated 0.92 xG per 1.0xG conceded, but I don’t want to explore this too much as it’s quite a small sample.

One final chart for this edition breaks down all 137 chances created, and 144 conceded by xG bucket and gamestate.



This is really pushing how much useful content we can gather from our xG dataset, and is a little bit more challenging to interpret – the area under each line (density plot) always adds up to 1, but we already know we are comparing different numbers of shots.

For example, the blue line in the upper chart shows the distribution of only 17 shots taken while winning, while the red line shows 76 shots taken from losing positions, so the area isn’t really comparable. Instead we must focus on the shape of the distributions – here we can say when in the lead (blue line, upper panel) our average chance quality is slightly higher (fewer speculative chances) than when we are chasing games (red line), while our distribution of chances is broadly similar when losing (red line) and drawing (black line).

For our oppositions, the opposite seems to be true, when they are winning (blue line, bottom panel) chances have been generated at a very similar rate to when they are drawing (black line) – counterproductively, once they are losing our opponents have taken fewer shots (proportionately) from bad positions.

So, what to take away? There does seem to be some genuine underperformance in our actual results, and we seem to be generating chances at a good rate – certainly from losing positions. However, bad luck/ bad finishing has been very costly to us in recent weeks, even if a hefty gamestate caveat applies to our overall numbers.





Steve Death Profile

Dave Stevens



Throughout the years, Reading have been blessed with many a great goalkeeper. Regardless of the era you followed the club most fervently, I'd wager you can name at least one superb 'keeper to have stood between the sticks at Elm Park or the Madejski stadium.

Whether it's Shaka Hislop who springs to mind, or USA himself, Marcus Hahnemann, perhaps Adam Federici, Ali Al-Habsi or everyone's favourite loan goalie, Emi Martinez - you're thinking of someone, I bet.

Long before any of these great men graced our pitch, one of Reading's best ever goalkeepers - some say the greatest we've ever had - held a record on his own. Steve Death, diminutive physically at just 5' 7", but gargantuan in skill, effort and application, **went 1,074 minutes of league play without conceding a goal** across the 78/79 and 79/80 seasons.

Bear in mind that these were the days of far less protection for goalkeepers and much more challenging conditions, Edwin Van Der Sar may have taken the record in January '09 but I'd wager he had a slightly easier path to success!

Before we continue, a quick note - despite the spelling, and the fact it's really, really cool - the man's surname was pronounced as "dee-ath", kind of like the young Lawson D'Ath.

We had brought Death in on loan initially, from the club he began his career at - West Ham. There were doubts at both clubs around his suitability as a goalkeeper given his height, but soon he proved himself first choice Number 1, with one press report describing him as "an insignificantly built bundle of daredevil energy" which might just be my favourite player description of all time.

*"Reading
have
been
blessed
with
many a
great
keeper"*





Steve Death Profile

Dave Stevens



"At International level, he went head to head with Peter Shilton in the youth ranks"

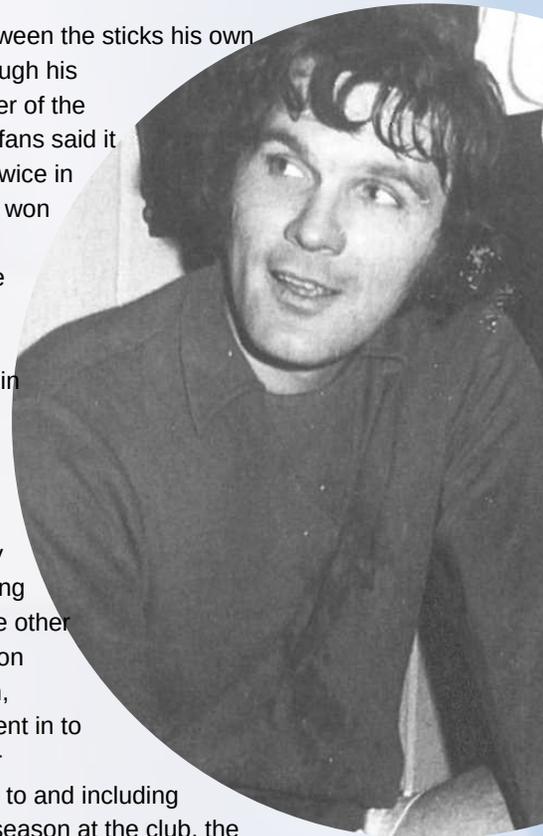
In that first season for the club, he ended up as Player of the Season - and unsurprisingly the club made the deal permanent, paying £20,000 for him (about £307,000 in today's money), a relatively substantial sum for the club at the time but ultimately, we got our money's worth - both from his performances and from the length of his time with the club: he made more than 500 appearances for Reading over a 12 year stay

Death had grown up playing youth football amongst - and in competition with - some excellent keepers. Bobby Ferguson was the number 1 at the Hammers, restricting Death to just one league appearance (a 1-1 draw, so he never lost a game for them...) along with Peter Grotier, another top keeper.

At international level, he went head to head with Peter Shilton in the youth ranks. We all know how that particular goalkeeper's career went, so Steve was amongst some of the best of the era. Despite his recognized promise - Harry Redknapp recalls his quality from seeing him at West Ham in his book - there were still doubts over his suitability for his position given his stature when he arrived at Elm Park.

Few might have expected to see him make the spot between the sticks his own for so long, but he truly earned that Number 1 shirt through his performances on the pitch. When Ali Al-Habsi won Player of the Season awards back to back in 15/16 and 16/17, many fans said it was a bad sign that our keeper was winning the award twice in a row - no such concerns in the 70s however - as Steve won the award four times, once back to back (69/70, 72/73, 73/74 and 76/77. He remains the highest recipient of the award in club history.

At the time of signing, Death found himself at a club sat in Division Three. This was the division Reading had been in for a considerable amount of time - having been relegated from Division Two at the end of the 1930/31 season, to what was then the geographically split third division - Reading went in to Division Three South - they found it tough to get back up to Division Two (unsurprising as there was only one promotion place each season, the other coming from Division Three North). When the two Division Threes merged after the conclusion of the 57/58 season, Reading's 5th placed finish that season ensured they went in to the unified Division Three and not the new Division Four (like those in the bottom half did). There they stayed up to and including Death's first season in Berkshire. Sadly, in his second season at the club, the new keeper suffered relegation to the aforementioned Division Four.





Steve Death Profile

Dave Stevens



Despite an 8th placed finish in his first season, Reading plunged down the table in 70/71, ending in 21st placed and dropping a level. A tough first season in the 4th tier followed, before a consistent spell of top 7 finishes suggested things were on the up for the Royals. In 75/76, a third place finish meant promotion back to the 3rd tier - more than a decade before the introduction of the playoff system, the top 4 went up automatically.

Unfortunately, there was an immediate return the following season after a poor 21st placed finish (again) and another couple of seasons in the 4th tier for Steve and his fellow Royals. The 78/79 season was much more successful, however, as he experienced promotion with the club for the second time - and this time, as Champions. That league-winning season was an especially good one for Death:

He won a PFA Divisional Award, completed an unlikely-to-be-beaten club record 156 consecutive first-team appearances during the course of the season, kept 26 (TWENTY-SIX) clean sheets and of course, played the majority of the minutes that contributed to the football league record for consecutive minutes without conceding a goal.

The following season, 1979/80, his long service to the club was recognized with a testimonial match against a young England side - managed by Ron Greenwood, who had been West Ham's manager during Death's time at that club.

**"26
(TWENTY
-SIX)
Clean
sheets in
a
season!"**

The following season, 1979/80, his long service to the club was recognized with a testimonial match against a young England side - managed by Ron Greenwood, who had been West Ham's manager during Death's time at that club.

Sadly, this remarkable player passed away far too young - a mere 54 years old when he finally succumbed after a long battle with cancer. He had moved out of the area after finishing his playing career, but was later found back in Berkshire as the greenkeeper at Mapledurham Golf Club until 2003.

The 16th anniversary of his death comes later this month - the 26th of October. Club historian David Downs described Death at the time of his passing as the club's greatest ever goalkeeper - quite an endorsement.





West Country Wins

Matthew Williamson



"2011/2012, the last time we ended a season truly happy"

The 2011/12 season is not one anybody is going to forget in a hurry. The last time we ended a season truly happy. Obviously there are key moments throughout the season that need to go your way to win a title, but one of those for us was a midweek game at Ashton Gate, where Reading managed to salvage an inconceivable win.

The summer had seen club captain Matt Mills depart for Sven-Göran Eriksson's Leicester City, top scorer and POTS Shane Long headed to West Brom, and club legend Ivar Ingimarsson ended up being released after only playing a handful of games the previous year. Mikele Leigertwood made his loan permanent, but was the only meaningful addition until late August when Kaspars Gorkss, and Adam Le Fondre followed.

With the upheaval, and the play-off loss, a slow start was probably to be expected. Mathieu Manset single-handedly salvaged a point against Millwall in the first game of the season. Followed up with a surprisingly dominant 2-0 win away at promotion favourites Leicester City.

Things fell apart fairly quickly after that as Dave Kitson consigned Reading to their first defeat of the season, to a Portsmouth side who would be relegated after a points deduction. Barnsley then visited Berkshire, but came away with three points after the home side only managed to score one of the three penalties awarded to them. League One Charlton dumped them out of the league cup, before a difficult trip to Hull saw Reading lose out by one goal for the fourth straight game. That streak was soon broken when Watford slotted two past Federici without response in soon-to-be cult favourite Adam Le Fondre's first game for the club. After seven games Reading found themselves firmly in the relegation zone, and out of the cup.

The team finally managed to stop the rot with two matches against teams that would prop up the table come the end of the season. First up Doncaster were dispatched 2-0, before drawing away at The Ricoh Arena.

The game at Bristol City gets lost a little bit in the story of the season. Obviously the famous win at Southampton is the overriding memory that people have on the road, closely followed by the win at Upton Park. It wasn't even the most dramatic - that accolade has to go to scoring twice in stoppage time to come from behind against Ipswich. ***It was, however, crucial.***

3-2 has been a surprisingly common scoreline in meetings between the two teams, but nobody would have foreseen it after seventy minutes.

Albert Adomah terrorised the backline, having a goal ruled out for offside before opening the scoring in the 22nd minute. Nicky Manard rifled a shot off the crossbar soon after. Time and again the back four were attracted to Brett Pitman, and taken out of the game with a simple pass in behind.





West Country Wins

Matthew Williamson



Early in the second half Adomah decided it was his turn to assist, he attracted two defenders but neither managed to stop the ball across the box. Gorkss seemed to forget he needed to track Pitman's run, and the striker placed the ball over Federici. I'll never forget him heading over to the away fans, before spreading his arms wide. Although I seem to have forgotten his reaction at the end of the game. In fact, he could have had two when he struck a deflected cross from 20 yards against the bar.

Hal Robson-Kanu, back in the days when he was a fresh face and had genuine promise, came on or Simon Church, back in the days when he was a fresh face and had genuine promise, and Noel Hunt - who had started the game on the right wing due to Kebe's injury - was pushed up front. The change in formation helped, but so did David James flapping at a Jay Tabb cross. The ball fell straight to new captain Jobi McAnuff; it was harder to miss. The man in the Bristol City goal could probably claim an assist for the second too. HRK's shot bounced just in front of him, but was struck without pace. James, however, could only parry and a Reading shirt - this time worn by ALF - was again on hand to steer home.



As cult heroes go, Manset's names should be remembered alongside the likes of Robin Friday at this football club. He came on for the final five minutes with the side chasing the win. In the fourth minute of stoppage time Reading win a throw in on the right. It goes into Le Fondre on the corner of the box who swivels and passes to McAnuff out on the right wing.

His low cross finds Manset on the edge of the six yard box - level with the near post. All it takes is one, glorious backheel into the opposite corner. For once James had no chance. There were, as I believe the kids are starting to say, *limbs in the away end*.

Had we lost, we would have been sitting in 20th, only eight points from nine games, going into a match with second-placed, unbeaten Middlesbrough. We've seen how poor results can snowball all too frequently in the last few years; instead we ourselves managed to stay unbeaten for eight games. We only won three, but it provided the platform to progress. We still lost seven more games that season, but crucially **a win followed each and every one of them**.

Probably most importantly was that Noel Hunt stopped playing on the wing, and over the next few games the line up solidified. Obviously the addition of Jason Roberts in January was crucial, but Reading were already moving up the table. In the last two months of 2011 we picked up 21 points from 30.

One of the losses during that period was to Cardiff, who also saw that we started 2012 on the back foot with a depressing 3-1 loss away from home. Three weeks later Hull also did the double over us, leaving us outside the play-offs, before Bristol arrived for the reverse fixture. We won that game, characteristically, 1-0 - with Roberts scoring on debut. Wins in fourteen of the next sixteen games followed and Reading were crowned champions on that famous night in April.

I miss 2012.





November Preview

Erik Orrgarde



We return to league action after the October international break and it's all change at Reading FC. After a disastrous spell for the Royals, Jose Gomes was given his marching orders and it's now up to Mark Bowen to lead the charge and push the team up the table. The action picks up again in Oct/Nov with 5 fixtures, 3 of which are at home and the only midweek game vs QPR is just a short hop into West London which is better than "yet another club in Yorkshire" away. It's hard to say which fixtures are tricky as with our current form, all games seem difficult but I would suggest that the games look slightly friendlier on paper than they did in September.



We get started with a visit of Alex Neil's Preston on Saturday 19th Oct. A recent fixture that sticks out in memory is the 1-0 back in 2016 to start Jaap Stam's era at the Madejski with 3 points. I seem to remember thinking: "We're on to something here" when John Swift fired home a Garath McCleary corner but then again, I've thought this a few times in the last year and have been proved wrong. It feels like a long time ago we had Van Den Berg, Rakels and Beerens in the team, perhaps that's a good thing – let's hope the current crop can change our fortunes and let this game be the one that kick starts our season into gear.

The following Tuesday we visit **my least favourite ground in the football league** (out of the 54 I've visited) Loftus Road to face QPR. The fake hoops are doing far too well for my liking and so I really hope we can escape from this shoebox with anything other than a defeat.

My favourite visit to Loftus Road came in 2005. I'd recently purchased an Ivar Ingimarsson home shirt (because all the cool kids did!) and he proceeded to score the winner in a 2-1 win for Reading. My actual memories of the game are a bit hazy as I'd spent the hours pre-game in the local away pub. I do have a strong memory of Sir John Madejski himself walking down the street, and me running up to shake his hand – much to my girlfriend's (at the time) embarrassment. It didn't last and maybe that was a good thing too!

On the 26th of October we visit Nottingham Forest in what is looking to be a tough fixture. Former Royals loanee Lewis Grabban is almost guaranteed a goal, isn't he?

I have mixed memories of visiting the City Ground.

- The bad: an absolute hammering by Stuart Pearce's side in 2014 with another former Reading player Michail Antonio scoring twice.
- The good: Nottingham is the only city in the UK with a Hooters (which if like me you're a sexist pig who likes cheap fried food and boobies is a good thing)

"Lewis Grabban is almost guaranteed a goal isn't he?"

Plus of course THAT FREEKICK by Ian Harte and a stunning 4-3 victory in 2011. Celebrating the 91st minute winner by Simon Church is something I will treasure for as long as I'll support Reading. He might have been average at best, but he did score some great goals for us, remember the lob at Leeds away? I was there!





November Preview

Erik Orrgarde



Saturday 2nd November is the day before my birthday and **yes, I do accept gifts** although I'd much rather have a gift of 3 pts at home against the Neil Harris-less Millwall. 2 former un-fancied centre backs Alex "the stepover" Pearce and Jake Cooper couldn't come back to haunt us, could they?

Millwall are shrewd operators at this level but with their manager leaving we should consider ourselves favourites for this game. One of my stronger memories of Millwall at home would be the 5-1 drubbing in 2005, including a Bobby Convey solo effort running the length of the pitch to slot home. I sometimes feel that 5-1 drubbing was the typical "106 team" performance. Phenomenal from start to finish and the Millwall side at the time did not stand a chance! It feels like the 2019 Millwall might find themselves in a slightly different game this time around.

The final game of this 5-match stretch is Luton Town at home. Depending on the 4 games preceding this one, it could well turn out to be a relegation 6-pointer. Graeme Jones' team will fancy their chances if we can't pick up many points between now and then. I had a quick look at Luton's squad and one name that stands out is Callum McManaman (**whatever happened to him?!**) who scored the only goal of the game in a 1-0 defeat for us to Blackpool in 2011. Back then, people thought the Everton loanee would go on to bigger and better things but that doesn't seem to have been the case.



Back to Luton – in the 05/06 season we beat Luton 3-0 at home and just look at the post match comments from their manager Mike Newell at the time. Keep in mind this was 3rd December!!!

Luton manager Mike Newell:

"Anyone who put money on Reading at the start of the season can cash in their chips now, because they are up. Sheffield United beat Sheffield Wednesday today, and I'd say they were up too."I've seen virtually every team in this league - and they are the two best."

What would you give for those comments to be said about a Reading team today?! I'd probably give up a limb. Ok, maybe not a limb but certainly one of the middle toes on one of my feet.

Overall these 5 games are going to make or break our season. If we could win the home games here it could steady our season. If we lose the majority then Mark Bowen will certainly feel some pressure very early in his tenure.

I hope we can turn it around against some decent opposition. 2 pts in the 2 away games would probably be seen as a success but we have to make home advantage count!

Onwards and upwards, come on URZ!

