

Blue Moon

The Modern Football Classic of a Season
Down Among the Dead Men

Mark Hodgkinson



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



BLUE MOON

DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN WITH MANCHESTER CITY

Mark Hodkinson



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Blue Moon is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,
Eveline Duffy (12 September 1915 to 14 December 1998).
‘How do you remember all those words, Mark?’

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Epub ISBN: 9781780572703

Version 1.0

www.mainstreampublishing.com

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First published in Great Britain in 1999 by
MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY (EDINBURGH) LTD
7 Albany Street
Edinburgh EH1 3UG

Reprinted 2000

ISBN 1 84018 207 5

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Introduction

A Summer Birdcage

Back then, I didn't properly understand how you got from here to there. The world was confused and disconnected. It was streets and streetlights, cars and buses, fields and houses, and suddenly you were there. We made it to Maine Road, somehow. City drew 1-1 with Sheffield United. It was 1971 and I was six years old. A bus ride, and we were back home. I don't remember the game, only the noise, the overcoats, the rich green of the pitch, the overwhelming magnitude of the event - that people gathered together like this and sang and cheered and created something so much bigger than themselves.

Twenty-five years later. My first match report commissioned by a national newspaper. It could have been at any ground between Derby and Newcastle, such is the approximate patch of a northern football correspondent. It was Maine Road, obviously. It rained. The sky was thick with clouds, the match was dire. City drew 1-1 with Coventry City. Alan Ball, City's manager, provided the 'line' without really trying. At the after-match press conference he almost drowned in his own peculiarly random agitation. He coloured a grey day red, and we were all rather grateful he had. The report is included in this book, since it preceded City's downfall.

Thereafter, I did not return to Maine Road until the beginning of the 1998-99 season. I had spent the previous season as *The Times* quasi writer-in-residence at Oakwell, Barnsley, from where I had filed a weekly bulletin. Barnsley, after 110 years in football's backwater, had been promoted

to the FA Carling Premiership. In short, it was a small club suddenly thrust into the big-time. Adopting reverse logic, *The Times* asked me to take on City in 1998-99, and relate the fortunes of a big club in the small-time. This famous club – with two League Championships, four FA Cup wins, two Football League Cup wins, one European Cup-winners Cup win – was at its lowest point ever, the third tier of English football.

Initially, I had reservations. A season in the life of a football club is a long haul. I had lived the Barnsley experience. They were with me always: awake, asleep, stalking thoughts and dreams. A football club from close-up is consuming, it blocks out the view and life gets bent out of shape. As well as the interviews and the writing, there are the books, programmes, newspapers and fanzines to read. When the phone rings, they – friends, colleagues – talk about the club; another opinion, another insight, another snippet of news. And then the matches, the supporters' club meetings, the letters of complaint (or praise!) about last week's column. It becomes a loop, and real life becomes a half-life with indistinct edges. But this was City, Manchester City. The club of my home city. My grandad's club. My first love, my second-favourite team.

I spoke for some time with Keith Blackmore and David Chappell at *The Times*. They sold me the project. We were in a quiet room, blinds drawn, late summer afternoon. They are good motivators, they listen and then cajole. Half-way through the meeting I became ashamed of my reticence. This was one hell of a story, and I knew they would allow me to relate it without interference, but with encouragement and support.

I wanted the column to have a cinematic or literary title, 'Down and Out in Millwall and Colchester', 'Kick Out the Blues' or something similarly wide-screen. Over the course of a few weeks, 'Blue Moon', the club's unofficial theme song, became quietly but defiantly insistent. It is the

supporters' song, and sums up everything about Manchester City. It is a lament, a torch song for the bruised, the last swig of hope for the sentimental. When City are playing well and winning, it becomes a heady, uplifting force. It breaks the heart. It is not a chant, but a sweet refrain offered to the sky and whatever lies above it. We called the column 'Blue Moon'.

Of course, it is perfectly legal to write about a football club without its express permission, though it is judicious and good form to ask first. I met the club's PR man, Chris Bird, late in July 1998. Over the season, I was to have more contact with Bird than anyone else at City – he was the official first-port-of-call. He was relatively new to the club, a protégé of the City director and ex-player, Dennis Tueart. They are alike in many ways. Drawn from traditional working-class backgrounds, they are straight-ahead, flinty characters. The drive and ambition is immediately noticeable in them both and they make no attempt to conceal it or dress it up. As we spoke in the reception area at Maine Road, Bird seemed a man suddenly flushed by power. He has a smile that can appear condescending but, as I later discovered, it is ingenuous, the real thing.

I was sure Bird would decline to co-operate, but he phoned the next day and said the club would be happy to help in any way it could, within reason. He said he had done some 'research' on me. Barnsley had told him I was a 'good lad', which, to a journalist, is both a compliment and a criticism. Was I a good lad because of my integrity or my compliance? 'In the end, we'd rather have you pissing from the inside than the outside, if you know what I mean. At least we can have some control over you that way,' said Bird. He was often direct and candid; I liked him for it. Too often, PR people couched their language in unctuous jargon. Bird spoke like a football man – told it like it was.

Manchester City, as everyone is aware, have what is typically known as a 'colourful' history. They have, down the

years, become a stereotype of reckless profligacy and magnificent failure, usually in comical circumstances. I was determined that the columns would not dwell too much on the past, or the stereotype. The club had been held hostage by it for too long. Occasionally, I did seek out former personnel, but primarily for a slant on the club's current fortunes or, quite simply, because they were characters whose shadow still fell over the club. If anyone would like to place the 1998-99 season into a truly historical context, they should seek out Gary James's *Manchester The Greatest City*, a benchmark work by which other club histories should be measured. Likewise, the calamitous recent past is documented in Ashley Shaw's *Cups for Cock-Ups*, a breathless, if sketchy, resumé of Francis Lee's tenure as club chairman.

The season coincided with Manchester United's most successful campaign. They did the treble, winning the European Cup, FA Carling Premiership and the FA Cup. It would have been negligent not to mention United at certain points but, again, I wanted to avoid viewing the two clubs in parallel. It has become a futile comparison, since most clubs in England now trail United by some distance, such is their domination.

I have kept the news items between the columns as succinct as possible. Although City's league status was low, they remained a continual source of gossip and news. The club was based in a city with a high media presence, and stories, many of them speculative, emerged on a daily basis. They were linked with literally scores of players, and listing them all would have soon become tedious. In the columns I sometimes made reference to the most pertinent news items. Occasionally, this has led to the odd spot of repetition through the book since the 'news' is relayed as a snippet, and then commented upon in a column: please bear this in mind.

The columns published here are not strictly identical to those printed in *The Times*. In some cases, pressure of space necessitated either subtle or swingeing cuts – the versions here are unexpurgated. The additional comments underneath the pieces were written at the end of the season, after the event as it were, with the benefit of hindsight. Obviously, these are more direct because they were not – unlike the columns – laid before the club every Saturday morning in *The Times*. I hope no one at City will regard these after-words as vengeful, a sadistic dig-in-the-ribs once I had left their vicinity. I have assiduously followed the maxim of trying to write fairly, accurately and without malice.

It was magnanimous of City to open their borders to a prying journalist during such a baleful period of their history. Football clubs are changeable places: when a team is successful, the mood lightens dramatically and everyone is welcome aboard. Alternatively, when a team is struggling, they contract, draw in on themselves. In City's case, they had also been the subject of much damaging ridicule in the media. This led to intermittent bouts of paranoia and mistrust but, generally, the club was welcoming and generous. Everyone gave their time freely, and a time-limit was rarely placed on interviews. The only person to ask for payment was their former coach and manager, Malcolm Allison, who abruptly ended our telephone conversation when he learned none would be forthcoming. On the subject of City old boys, I made 17 calls to Francis Lee's office, spoke to him once and got a half-promise of an interview on the day of which he departed for Holland on business.

I did not attend every City match throughout the season. I wanted to stay at a reasonable distance, to remain as impartial as possible. I already had an emotional attachment to them and did not want to compromise my position further. Towards the end, though, rational, cool-headed thought regularly collided with partisanship.

Many people have contributed to this book. The original idea belonged to *The Times's* Sportsdesk, chiefly Keith Blackmore and David Chappell. Support was offered from other quarters at *The Times*, namely Richard Whitehead, Mark Herbert, Kevin McCarra, Peter Dixon and Gertrud Erbach. Bill Campbell of Mainstream Publishing was forthright and committed enough to commission the book within days of our initial conversation. Paula Ridings generously allowed me compassionate leave and confined the commotion made by our two young sons, George and Alec, to other parts of the house. She also provided valued sustenance in a hundred other ways. Thank you.

Stephen Hewitt was a consistent source of information and gave invaluable assistance with the manuscript. Ann Hewitt kindly undertook a fair amount of word-processing. Other journalists, especially Mike Barnett, Mike Grime, Guy Raynor, Richard Burgess and David White (not the ex-City player) supplied phone numbers or a perspective on the City enigma, as did City-supporting friends Tony Kerr, John Wallace, and Steve Harrison – who also welcomed me into his executive box at Maine Road. Fred Eyre was always willing to offer an insight or two. Richard Lysons and Guy Patrick were a source of inspiration. John Maddocks was willing to double-check facts and figures, and Graham Williams kindly proof-read an early draft of the book.

The editors of the various City fanzines – Noel Bayley (*Bert Trautmann's Helmet*), Dave Wallace (*King of the Kippax*) and Tom Ritchie (*City 'til I Cry!*) – were all helpful and supportive. City supporters have the fanzines they deserve: informed, heartfelt and intelligent, though each with its own idiosyncratic perspective. While I undertook the project, David Cooper, Rob Kerford, Ursula Lumb, Joanne Mortimer and Sarah Aspinall took care of business.

Within the club itself, everyone was polite and courteous. Chris Bird was consistently helpful. Calls were returned promptly and he often pieced together interviews at only a

few hours notice. David Bernstein was accessible – he gave me his mobile phone number soon after meeting, for instance. Joe Royle was good company, and Willie Donachie too. In fact, all the backroom staff – Jim Cassell, Paul Power, Alex Stepney and the others – were kind and trusting with information.

Finally, the supporters. At the beginning, I was keen to challenge the stereotype of City's support. It had been portrayed as the most loyal in the country to the point of tediousness. Surely this masked some kind of conceit and vanity. I was determined to take a reactionary view and, since I was looking for it, I found the solidarity impeached by touches of arrogance, bitterness and martyrdom. They were only touches, mind.

The most perceptive comment on the subject came from Professor Cary Cooper, a City fan and psychologist, whom I interviewed at the end of the season. This erudite man had come to quite a simplistic conclusion, that City supporters were a cause of real celebration. They had remained loyal and committed, in it for the duration, when all around them was fickle and transitory. He plotted this to their working-class roots, Manchester's industrial past, the legacy of trade unionism and a cohesion born from a common adversary – United. His comments will be viewed by the sceptical as rather fanciful and romantic, but City *does* feel like a community and the supporters carry with them something that is extraordinary, something special.

Blue moon
You saw me standing alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own

Blue moon
You know just what I was there for
You heard me saying a prayer for
Someone I really could care for

And then there suddenly appeared before me
The only one my arms will hold
I heard someone whisper please adore me
And when I looked to the moon it turned to gold

Blue moon
Now I'm no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own

And then there suddenly appeared before me
The only one my arms will ever hold
I heard somebody whisper please adore me
And when I looked the moon had turned to gold

Blue moon
Now I'm no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own

Blue moon
Now I'm no longer alone
Without a dream in my heart
Without a love of my own

One

Great Expectations

BALL BRINGS PASSION TO DRAB TALE OF TWO CITIES

(match report, *The Times*, Monday, 22 January 1996)

Alan Ball, face on fire, glass of beer in shaking hand, played the press with the same dearth of finesse that his side had shown in a bleak 1-1 draw with Coventry City. 'You lot write what you want to write. You all want to say it's doom and gloom and panic, but I was really pleased with the team,' was his crabby reply to the mildest of queries. Ball's invective, delivered in his famous tinder-dry shrill, was the most passionate interlude on a wretchedly cold afternoon of non-football.

The first half was supremely desolate, with only Niall Quinn supplying some levity as he twice sent stewards scampering to retrieve a ball which should have been in Coventry's net. Georgi Kinkladze, as usual, played as if on a magic carpet but his team-mates were strictly terrestrial; in fact, some of his prods and stabs were clearly Russian to the journeymen at his heels.

The draughty stands at Maine Road rang with groans and moans at half-time, the seagulls circling overhead providing a greater spectacle. Both teams had played ambitiously enough but basic inaptitude had so often ravaged their best-laid plans.

Ball was later to claim that young Martin Phillips had 'lit up Maine Road' when he came on as a substitute but it was, in truth, more 40-watt than 100. Phillips, at least, gave them

shape, as John Salako did for Coventry when he raised sufficient valour to run for goal in earnest.

A double act which had hitherto bordered on comedy, Quinn and Uwe Rosler, suddenly found a punch-line of a goal so tidy that it served to amplify the previous disarray. Rosier impudently removed his shirt, waved it at the crowd and, like waking from a dream, soberly pulled it back on as Coventry waited to kick off.

Coventry's Dion Dublin, who had revealed in the programme that he shaved his head twice a day, pierced the home side's new poise when he put his burnished dome to a consummate cross from Hall. It was barely deserved. Coventry had been dogged, Dublin and Burrows especially, but torpid outside their own half of the field.

Afterwards, Ron Atkinson, their manager, was wonderfully agreeable. A smile, a wink to the press posse, another chew of the gum. 'We've had four points out of City this season, and they could be big, big points at the finish. We played intelligently, we sealed off the little spaces.' He was candid enough to admit that avoiding defeat had been the objective.

Ball, meanwhile, maintained his petulance. Did he think Nigel Clough would improve the team? 'He won't make any difference,' he answered sarcastically. Then why did he sign him? Ball looked skywards, lips pursed. 'That's one of the most ridiculous questions of all time. He's top quality, he's a good player, what do you expect me to say?'

Manchester City were better than their manager's public relations, and a good deal less edgy. Sometimes their play is a pastiche of 'total football', but some guile to complement the graft could make a wealth of difference. Ball will be discreetly making plans for Nigel.

MANCHESTER CITY (4-4-2): E. Immel, N. Summerbee, K. Curie, K. Symons, I. Brightwell, S. Lomas (sub: M. Phillips, 51

min.), G. Flitcroft, G. Kinkladze, M. Brown, U. Rosier, N. Quinn.

Sunday, 5 May 1996

On the last day of the 1995-96 season, City found themselves level with Southampton and Coventry City on 37 points with only one relegation place still unresolved in the Premiership.

City, playing against a distinctly indifferent Liverpool, found themselves 2-0 down before retrieving the game with goals by Uwe Rosier (a penalty) and Kit Symons. Rumours spread that Coventry were losing against Leeds United and City, apparently under the orders of Alan Ball, began time-wasting tactics. The rumours were erroneous and Coventry defeated Leeds at Highfield Road to send City into Division One.

Sunday, 4 May 1998

Once more, City went into the final day of the season caught up in a frantic relegation battle. Reading had already been relegated and the other two spots were between City, Bury, Port Vale, Portsmouth and Stoke City.

Despite beating Stoke 5-2 with goals by Shaun Goater (two), Paul Dickov, Lee Bradbury and Kevin Horlock, they were still relegated. Portsmouth and Port Vale recorded victories at Bradford City and Huddersfield Town respectively. Portsmouth were managed by the ex-City manager Alan Ball.

City supporters at Stoke turned their second relegation in three years into a defiant party, chanting, 'Are you watching, Macclesfield?' 'I'm devastated. It's going to hurt for a very long time but we'll secure promotion next season for the fans,' said Jamie Pollock. 'This time next year we'll be singing and dancing.'

Tuesday, 6 May 1998

Joe Royle was given a contract to remain as City's manager for the next three years. Willie Donachie, the head coach, accepted a two-year extension.

Comedian and City fan, Eddie Large, said City would, 'go through the Second Division like a dose of salts'. Former City hero, Rodney Marsh, said it was 'unbelievably sad' to see the club so far down the League.

Friday, 15 May 1998

As expected, Georgi Kinkladze, the supporters' hero, finally left City and joined Ajax for £5.5 million.

Wednesday, 27 May 1998

Manchester bookmakers Fred Done made City 6-4 to win the Second Division title. They were the shortest odds ever offered for a Football League side at the start of a new season.

Paul Hince, chief sports writer on the *Manchester Evening News* and a former City player (seven appearances in the 1960s), promised to walk down Deansgate in Manchester city centre wearing just his boxer shorts if City did not gain promotion.

Monday, 1 June 1998

City, the official club magazine, lightened the mood by listing 'reasons to be cheerful' about relegation. Among them were 'fun weekends at a variety of coastal resorts like Blackpool and Bournemouth'; 'red-hot Lancashire derbies against grand old names of English football like Burnley and Preston North End'; and 'the chance to snuggle up together in the "cosy" stands that we'll be visiting on our away trips'.

Friday, 5 June 1998

City-supporting viewers of Sky TV's Bravo Channel were delighted when an episode of *Italian Stripping Housewives*

was punctuated by a performance of 'Blue Moon', sung by the show's presenter.

Friday, 17 July 1998

Jamie Pollock revealed that he had lost a stone in weight over the summer months. 'The manager had told me I should lose some weight and I feel a lot better for it.' Pollock was among the full squad which began pre-season training with a stint at HMS Raleigh, the Royal Navy's training base in Cornwall, where they also played games against Torpoint Athletic and Newquay.

Tuesday, 21 July 1998

Dennis Tueart, a City director and former player, revealed several cutbacks for the 1998-99 season, among them fewer overnight stops for away games. 'It's a question of ensuring fans' money is spent properly and not wasted. For instance, we have worked out the games where we don't need to stay in a hotel the night before.'

Tuesday, 28 July 1998

The official launch of City's new away kit was postponed when suppliers, Kappa, delivered just a quarter of the ordered adult shirts and no junior sizes. 'We are extremely angry and frustrated by Kappa's failure,' said Mike Turner, the club's chief executive.

Friday, 31 July 1998

City striker Shaun Goater told the press: 'This will be my best ever season. I have set myself a target of 25 goals. I am putting my head on the block, but nobody should be in any doubt of my intentions.'

Tuesday, 4 August 1998

Joe Royle announced that 19-year-old Nicky Weaver would start the season as City's first-choice keeper, making his

début in Saturday's game against Blackpool at Maine Road. 'I'm confident he won't let anyone down,' said Royle.

Several former City players were included in a list of '100 Soccer Legends' announced by the Football League to celebrate its centenary season. Denis Law, Colin Bell, Bert Trautmann, Peter Doherty, Frank Swift, Trevor Francis and Billy Meredith were listed. Many were surprised by the omission of Francis Lee and Mike Summerbee.

Thursday, 6 August 1998

Mike Turner revealed that the club had sold 13,771 season tickets and more than 28,000 match tickets for Blackpool's visit.

City began the season with just two new signings, Danny Tiatto from FC Baden of Switzerland (£300,000) and Danny Allsopp (£10,000) from Port Melbourne Sharks. Tiatto's father had played in Italy's Serie 'A'.

Friday, 7 August 1998

A new City fanzine, *City 'til I Cry!*, marked its first issue with the editorial: 'Our hopes and ambitions for the season are trivial and undemanding: 100 points, 100 goals and win the Auto Windscreen Shield before a fullhouse at Wembley. The voices of reason might call for consolidation, stability and realism. Well, bollocks to that!' It also placed City's relegation into context: 'Women say there's nothing more painful than childbirth - they've obviously never seen their team get relegated.'

Bert Trautmann's Helmet, meanwhile, pondered: 'Even City couldn't balls this season up, could they? No, don't answer that!'

ALL TOGETHER NOW, IT'S TIME TO START SINGING THE BLUES

(The Times, Saturday, 8 August 1998)

Number eleven would have been more practical. Two thin pieces of cloth in parallel would have spared my mother a whole evening at the sewing machine, and most of the next morning too. In truth, it was not even open to discussion: it had to be number eight. Colin Bell wore number eight and he was the most important man on earth.

This shirt business had dragged on for some time. Back then, football clubs and merchandising were just nodding acquaintances. Clubs fretted that anything more than the obligatory enamel badge, plastic pennant and woolly scarf amounted to memorabilia overload. Replica shirts were almost non-existent. Eventually, a sky-blue Manchester City shirt was located, neatly pressed in a wooden drawer at a shop in Moston Lane, north Manchester.

The shopkeeper ran his fingers across it lovingly, as if it held the healing properties of the Golden Fleece. A City shirt really meant something in those days. A rough number eight was cut out of a piece of cloth. Sewing it on to the shirt took hours and, though I daren't admit it at the time, I was disappointed with the finished item. The number leaned and the two circles were twisted and pulled. Colin Bell's number eight was neat and orderly, mine was drunk and disorderly.

Manchester City were my grandad's club. They were made for each other. United, as he saw it, were brash and full of themselves, while City were perpetual underdogs. He had a pathological dislike of United's Bobby Charlton, though they shared the same haircut. On windy days, he would grumble that the breeze was 'disturbing his Bobby Charlton' as strands broke loose at will. 'All he can bloody do is kick it and run after it,' he said of this footballing great. He liked dribblers, players who could fool opponents with a trick of the instep or a shimmy of the hips.

City had these in abundance, he claimed, and they were usually small men with out-size hearts. We went on long walks, across railway tracks, over wasteland. City this, City

that; players he had seen down the years. He would skip past a discarded shopping trolley, dummy and oil can. All the time: 'Don't be like everyone else. Don't do the obvious. Don't support United.'

Among work-mates and neighbours of a United persuasion, he felt there was no greater statement than holding aloft the blue flag. It was never nasty, though; his heart was big enough to embrace 'the other lot', as he called them. George Best was a good 'un; Nobby Stiles ('He went to school just over there,' he would say, pointing towards Collyhurst) was a battler; but Bobby Charlton, dear me, shake of the head: kick and bloody run; OK, he had a decent shot on him.

He took me to my first ever game, a 1-1 draw against Sheffield United at Maine Road. I wanted to leave after 15 minutes because my ears hurt from the sheer volume. Afterwards we went home on the bus and the windows steamed up. A lad of about 12 said he was going to sleep and asked my grandad to wake him up about two miles into the journey. He forgot, and that urchin in an anorak probably ended up at a bus depot in Bury or Oldham.

When I was 10 we moved away from Manchester. So, like a childhood friendship, I drifted apart from City. We went our separate ways. At first I watched their deterioration with concern, but my new club, Rochdale FC, to whom my loyalty has remained steadfast for 25 years, became an obsession. There was precious little emotional fuel left to generate more than a passing interest in another club.

City have been woefully mismanaged for nearly two decades. Only the fans have remained constant, as players, managers and directors have passed through, heavy on promises, light on achievement. A fellow reporter, one who has to visit Maine Road on a regular basis, summarised the malaise at Moss Side. 'It's a cross between the Polit Bureau, *Fawlty Towers*, *Hi-De-Hi* and *One Foot in the Grave*,' he laughed, before coming over all serious and all but

suggesting that the ground emanated a deadly blue mist. 'Don't go near there,' was his final counsel. The wind howled and curtains trembled.

Blackpool are the visitors today as City begin their campaign in Division Two of the Nationwide League. City supporters accepted a good while ago that their club is a Picasso painting (during his blue period); upside down, back to front, anyway you like, so they find nothing unusual or surreal about a league game against Blackpool. Perhaps when Macclesfield, Walsall, Gillingham, etc. pull on to the club car park, they might have a real sense of out-there-ness.

They go into the season with a new chairman, David Bernstein, who has promised to restore stability, though there has been the habitual backroom personnel changes through the summer. 'Stability is a crucial aspect in our future success,' he said this week. He then added, imprudently: 'I cannot envisage circumstances where the relationship between Joe [Royle] and Willie [Donachie] will break down.'

City fans might suggest a few circumstances, though they would rather not. They are looking to a future of resounding wins and a team that passes and dribbles and tackles. They want their club to rediscover its nobility among the journeymen of the third best division of English football or, put another way, the second worst.

Fortunately, Colin Bell is on hand. After a messy, bundled exit under Franny Lee's reign as chairman, he has been reinstated in an 'ambassadorial role'. He no longer wears number eight; the sportsmanship, tact and dedication he personified, do not need a number. They can move through the corridors and dressing rooms of a football ground in a suit and tie, sweater and slacks; dignity does not need dressing up.

Saturday, 8 August 1998

Manchester City 3 Blackpool 0

Goals from Shaun Goater, Lee Bradbury and defender Kakhaber Tskhadadze inspired City to a comfortable win in front of 32,134 supporters. The attendance was the largest in England's Third Division for 20 years.

Tuesday, 11 August 1998

Notts County 0 Manchester City 2

(Worthington Cup First Round, First Leg)

Second-half goals by Tskhadadze and Danny Allsopp gave City the advantage for the return leg at Maine Road.

Thursday, 13 August 1998

Police warned City officials that the club's new away strip, a fluorescent yellow/green colour, might clash with those worn by stewards and emergency services.

Joe Royle gave permission for transfer-listed Nigel Clough to train with Birmingham City as he searched for a new club.

The latest squad count revealed 39 players, compared with 54 when Royle arrived six months earlier. David Bernstein said the rationalisation would continue.

Friday, 14 August 1998

Fulham 3 Manchester City 0

A poor performance by City was made even worse by the early departure of the in-form Tskhadadze. The Georgia captain twisted his knee and damaged ligaments after landing awkwardly in a challenge with Fulham captain Chris Coleman. 'It felt like an explosion in my leg,' said Tskhadadze. His wife, Tiniko, and 10-year-old son, Bacho, were in tears after seeing the incident back home in Manchester on Sky TV.

An estimated 3,500 City supporters saw goals from Peter Beardsley and German striker Dirk Lehmann (two) secure Fulham's victory.