**Blackburn Rovers 0 Nottingham Forest 1: Forest strike late to earn first victory under new manager Chris Hughton**

**Nottingham Forest collected their first three points of the 2020-21 season, with a deflected Joe Lolley strike kickstarting the nascent Chris Hughton regime in a 1-0 victory.**

From the listlessness and turgor of an empty Ewood Park emerged a potential turning point for Nottingham Forest, aided by a healthy, and long-awaited, change of luck. With the hapless Blackburn goalkeeper Thomas Kaminski wrong-footed by a deflected Joe Lolley shot, Forest supporters can be forgiven for hoping this drastic shift in fortunes will be maintained under new manager Hughton.

When Sammy Ameobi’s powerful half-volley struck the woodwork in the 88th minute, it appeared Forest’s winless stretch in competitive fixtures would extend to twelve games. Such a streak has already crashed one Championship campaign, and with owner Evangelos Marinakis unwilling to risk a second consecutive failure, former head coach Sabri Lamouchi was replaced by the experienced Chris Hughton.

Hughton’s imprint on the team is already starting to become clear, re-uniting with Belgian winger Anthony Knockaert, utilised so effectively during Brighton’s 2016-17 promotion season. Outspread and adroit wingers are characteristic of a Chris Hughton outfit, reflected in his return of talisman Joe Lolley to the starting eleven, with Knockaert deemed unprepared to début.

Such a decision proved especially wise when Lolley allayed Forest’s harrowing vein of form with a late, and indeed unexpected, goal. The introduction of a well-organised and compact defence is another signature Hughton trait; Scott McKenna and Tobias Figueiredo replaced the so-far unconvincing duo of Tyler Blackett and Loïc Mbe Soh, with a relatively high degree of success.

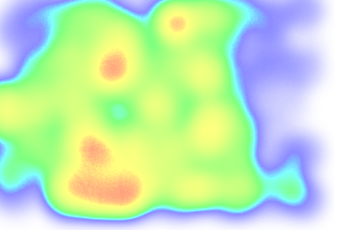
The two central defenders combined to win ten aerial duels between them, in stark contrast from the aerial battering delivered by Bristol City’s Chris Martin in last week’s 2-1 home defeat. One note of caution – McKenna recorded a pass success of 52%, with all four defenders completing fewer passes completed than their positional counterparts versus Bristol City.

This frequent turn-over, correlated to a significant increase in the number of long balls played, ensured Forest retained only 39% possession – Hughton appears to be implementing a more direct style. This method of play perhaps contributed to the meandering and slow-paced nature of Saturday’s affair, somewhat mirroring Forest’s start to the season.

The first twenty minutes produced little goalmouth action, with fleeting glimpses of a Blackburn goal from first Daniel Ayala, then Bradley Johnson. Hughton managed both players during an unsuccessful stint at Norwich which concluded in relegation, however members of his present side showed equal wastefulness, with Lolley pulling an ambitious left-footed strike wide on the half-hour – a warning to the Blackburn defence, however.

Former Forest striker Ben Brereton, occupying a less natural left-wing role, came the closest to breaking the deadlock before the interval; Brice Samba was able to collect comfortably. Since a reported £7m move to Lancashire, the ex-Academy graduate has found goals hard to come by, finding the target just twice in twenty-eight appearances. The tireless forward appears to still retain the faith of manager Tony Mowbray, and at just twenty-one the potential remains for Brereton to become a goalscoring force in the second tier.

Mowbray referred to the first half “as poor as we've [Blackburn] been this year but, as I said, it was a team thrown together really”, in reference to enforced selection changes primarily caused by Covid-19. Both the ballast and the balance were thus abruptly removed from a Blackburn side previously unbeaten in three, with the enforced absences of Joe Rothwell and Lewis Holtby proving significant.

In their place entered Corry Evans and John Buckley – two players whose positions at the club appear under threat following the deadline-day loan acquisitions of Tom Trybull and Harvey Elliott. Whilst solid, neither player was able to sizeably intensity the game’s tempo, to create clear goalscoring chances when awarded ample ball possession.

Forest were therefore able to counterattack freely, with little fear of defensive consequences, demonstrated through Forest’s heat-map where wingers can be seen occupying high, wide offensive positions. A dutiful and professional performance from Cyrus Christie in particular liberated Joe Lolley to attack almost at will - through one such counterattack in the 63rd minute, Blackburn conceded a corner, from which Figueiredo almost gave Forest a one-goal lead.

The game appeared to be drifting towards a tepid conclusion, with Hughton openly admitting he did not expect a breakthrough. However, the introduction of Lyle Taylor in the 76th minute sparked an extended series of attacks from Forest, with Kaminski saving well from a dipping Taylor strike, before Sammy Ameobi struck the post late on.

Such misfortune would have perpetuated the negative narrative surrounding The City Ground – divisions in the Forest fanbase have been laid bare in recent weeks, with supporters mystified how to arrest such a disturbing slide. However, it can surely be assumed that all Forest enjoy two ideas – Joe Lolley goals from outside of the box, and schadenfreude at the expense of Derby County. Both combined to ensure a first victory for Chris Hughton, with ex-Ram Bradley Johnson deflecting a Lolley strike into his own goal during stoppage time. A rare moment of unification for Forest fans – only time will tell how long it lasts.