

City Triumph, But Europe Remains the Big Challenge



Blue Moon rising: Manchester City celebrate their second title in three seasons.

The table doesn't lie. Manchester City, with 86 points, deservedly won the Premier League title, having scored 102 goals, and remarkably winning 17 of their 19 home matches.

Liverpool, after a stunning run of form, came within two points of a title that would have been the unlikeliest since Aston Villa's all of 33 years ago (Blackburn Rovers had bags of cash in 1995, lest we forget).

But, in the end, City's greater squad depth, brought about by the Mansour millions, ensured a second championship in three years. If the Financial Fair Play system takes on the administrative credence most fair-minded football supporters would like to see, then the days of Europe's elite clubs hoovering up all the best talent will be somewhat stymied.

Of course, the clubs with the greatest finances will almost always end up topping their respective tables and battling it out for the Champions League (which makes Atletico Madrid's season all the more remarkable), but the playing field would be a tad more level.

But of course, the notion of the top clubs buying all the best players is nothing new.

Twenty years ago, Silvio Berlusconi bankrolled Milan's acquisitions of stars such as Jean-Pierre Papin, Zvonimir Boban, Dejan Savicevic while also having Gullit, Rijkaard and Van Basten on their books.

And with a stunning Italian spine provided by Franco Baresi, Mauro Tassotti, Alessandro Costacurta, Paolo Maldini, Carlo Ancelotti, Demetrio Albertini and Roberto Donadoni, Milan reached three successive Champions League finals.

In fact, the Saachi/Capello era at the San Siro saw the 'Rossoneri' reach five European Cup deciders in seven seasons, before Juventus re-emerged as the Italian game's prime power.

But despite the Berlusconi millions, that deservedly feted Milan squad ought to have won more titles than those that came their way, so anyone suggesting that City might be on the brink of some empire building here may have to think again.

The very least Manchester City should be achieving, given the massive financial outlay they've benefited from in recent years, is topping the Premier League table.

The Mansours, who bought the club in 2008, have already invested well in excess of Stg£1 billion, and to date have brought (or bought, the cynical would argue) two Premier League titles, the FA Cup and the League Cup City triumph, but Europe remains the big challenge to the blue half of Manchester.

And, despite the delight they'll have taken in last Sunday's coronation win over West Ham, I'd suspect if one asked the owners what they'd have helped the club to win almost six years into their reign, they'd have expected even more than that by now.

England has now been conquered twice over, and there's already talk of an earth-shattering £200-millionplus bid to bring Lionel Messi to the Etihad Stadium this summer; could Barcelona genuinely turn that down?

Signing Messi (let's face it, Cristiano Ronaldo would hardly wear sky blue whatever cash might be offered to him) would be a bona fide game changer in terms of City's European ambitions.

And let's face it, they've yet to set the Champions League genuinely alight, but it's to Europe that the new champions will now surely set their future sights.