

1973-74 AND ALL THAT

A SUCCESSFUL TEAM at any club is always compared, favourably or otherwise, to the previous "great" team or the one before that and so on. The last team at Wealdstone to win anything of note was the 1973-74 side which won the Southern League Division One South title - they of course were compared to the Amateur Cup winning side of 1965-66. Today's team, proud winners of the Southern League Championship and Cup are a first class side but they too will be compared to the last great side until the next "Super Stones" comes along. If our current 8 year cycle (1965-66, 1973-74, 1981-82) continues this will be in 1989-90 - but I would imagine Allen Batsford has some different ideas regarding this.

With last seasons games still fresh in our memory, let me recap on the 1973-74 season. After a couple of friendly wins the League campaign started in earnest with a visit to Salisbury - Bill Byrne and John Barnes scoring the goals to give us a 2-1 victory. The attractive Minehead visited Lower Mead and 2 goals from George Duck were enough in another 2-1 win, three days later we saw a Duck hat-trick in the Southern League Cup game versus Bletchley (4-1). A tricky game on the slope at Bexley followed but we came away with another victory (2-0), and then we saw another 4-1 victory against Bletchley in the 2nd Leg of the SL Cup. By now Duck had scored 10 goals.

And so into September..... our FA Cup campaign started with a comfortable 2-0 win over Marlow - goals from Duck and Henderson. This success couldn't last we thought, and we were right, our bubble burst with defeats against Canterbury (0-3), Chesham in the FA Cup (2-4 after a replay), Ramsgate (2-3) and Tottenham Hotspurs in the London Challenge Cup (0-4). Sandwiched between these losses was a creditable 4-1 win against Barnet with Duck getting another hat-trick and Eddie Presland scoring a remarkable 40 yarder (or was it 50?). The month ended with us back on the rails after a 2-1 home win against Salisbury, another two points were won the following Saturday when goals from Duck and Fairclough did the trick in our match at Dorchester. The visit of Hatfield Town in the FA Trophy posed no problems (4-0), but Premier Division Wimbledon were a different proposition in the SL Cup - we were held at home 1-1. The last two League games of the month saw 'Stones running into form with a 3-0 win against Bath (Duck 2, Byrne) and a point in a 0-0 draw at Bideford. Duck now had 24 goals.

November started with an exciting 2-0 win against a Poole side then in second position. The SL Cup saga against Wimbledon continued with a 2-2 draw at Plough Lane, the 2nd replay at Lower Mead ended in a 3-3 draw - the Dons eventually ran out 3-0 winners in the 4th meeting. In between these matches we continued our Trophy run disposing of Dunstable 3-0, and crashed 1-5 at home to lowly Andover. This farcical game was played in atrocious conditions and a stunned 'Stones saw Andover score from literally every chance they had.

Wealdstones' off the field problems mounted in December with the Harrow Observer not appearing because of a lengthy strike (so what's new?) and the nationwide energy crisis causing chaos. With the absence of floodlights, kick-offs got earlier by the week, and the mid-week FA Trophy visit of Boston was watched by only 218 people. Compensation was seen in the form of a 6-1 scoreline - that man Duck getting 4 while Bill Byrne notched a couple. An unbeaten League run of 7 games was started with a 1-1 draw against Waterlooville; victories then followed against Metropolitan Police (3-0), Minehead (4-3), Gravesend (2-1), Hastings (2-1), and Ashford (4-1). Lastly, a draw versus Bognor Regis Town (0-0) - because of the 3 day week this match was played on a Sunday as the Bognor players could not make the scheduled Saturday date. This run had taken us to the top of the table as we entered the New Year and so a confident 'Stones side travelled to Wimbledon (again!) in the FA Trophy 1st Round. This confidence was rewarded with a narrow 1-0 victory thanks to an Eddie Presland special. A slight hic-cup in the League saw us lose at home to Ramsgate but pick up a valuable point at Waterlooville. At the end of January George Duck had scored 40 goals.

February started with one of the most amazing matches ever seen at Wealdstone. Hastings Utd were the visitors for the 2nd Round of the FA Trophy and our run continued. We were awarded three consecutive penalties (all blatantly obvious), all of which were converted by Duck: Hastings' players Jones and Barry were booked for dissent and eventually Jefferson was sent off after disputing the third penalty. Led by their player-manager Hastings stormed off the field and it was only after five minutes or more of angry discussion that they returned. They were rewarded with the sight of Duck

heading the fourth goal and then Henderson adding the fifth with a cheeky back-heel volley from the edge of the area. The visitors managed to pull a couple back towards the end to leave the final score 5-2. Interestingly enough we went to Hastings the following week for a League game, the result a 0-0 draw. Following our home draw in the FA Trophy 3rd Round, the Daily Express were tipping us as favorites to lift the cup! The visit of South Shields was an anti-climax and Stones', with a depleted forward line, struggled, wasted their big chance and it finished 1-1, Henderson getting our goal. The following Saturday we made the 550 mile round trip up North only to see some dubious refereeing decisions help Shields to a 2-1 win after extra time. Our dream was over. Our Manager Syd Prosser announced his resignation in order to join Chelmsford City as manager-coach: Chelmsford were at that time one of the 'big guns' in the Southern League and were pressing for election to the Football League. Mr Prosser had done a terrific job at Lower Mead in his two years as Manager and we were all sorry to see him go - who knows, but without him we might not have developed into the Non-League force that we did. We could have languished in the lower reaches of the Southern League indefinitely??

The remainder of March saw Wealdstone gain a series of wins to maintain our promotion drive. First we overcame Bideford 3-1 and then in a vital match at Poole, who were then League leaders, we came away with a fine 3-2 victory - our goalscorers being Duck, Henderson and Presland. A Tuesday afternoon match at Crawley followed (how many people saw that game for goodness sake?). The result was a 3-0 win for Stones' who completed a leisurely double over the Sussex side the following Saturday, this time the score reading 4-1. We then went to Basingstoke needing two points to go top of the League; we got them with an excellent 2-0 victory, Bill Byrne bagging both our goals. The month ended with a rare defeat - 0-2 at Bath, this being our last defeat of the season. Duck had now scored 50 goals.

Under new Manager Eddie Presland, who took over the reins at the end of March, Wealdstone smoothly moved into top gear. We played six matches in 13 days and won them all! Canterbury were beaten 3-1 at home and our trips to Andover and Bognor saw 3-0 and 2-1 successes. On Good Friday we went to Ashford and this time it was our 'keeper Roy Mackenzie who was the hero with a last minute penalty save. We returned with both points after a 1-0 scoreline. A 2-0 home win against Dorchester meant we travelled to Gravesend on Easter Monday knowing that two points would clinch the title. What a game that was - the two goals remain etched in my memory as does the electric atmosphere created by the scores of away fans. We were Champions and how we celebrated! For the record, our goals were scored by Byrne and Henderson.

Our last home games were watched by crowds of over 2,000 and we were treated to wins against Basingstoke (2-0), and Bexley (3-0), and lastly, a 3-3 draw against Trowbridge in the last game of the season. In between these games we won at the Metropolitan Police (4-0) and drew at Trowbridge (1-1).

With the Championship over, interest was maintained not only in seeing how big a gap we could establish at the top of the league but also in George Duck's goalscoring exploits. His goal at the Metropolitan Police was his 100th for the Club in what was only his second season; this goal also left him one short of the all-time Club goalscoring record of 58, set up many years before. George broke the record in style scoring a hat-trick against Bexley.
