

# 'Needlessly over-complicated'

By Norman Hubbard

It was entirely apt that Mido departed Tottenham Hotspur with a complaint that selection had become political. A week is a long time in politics, as Harold Wilson once pointed out, and it is no shorter in football, as Martin Jol can attest.

It took three days for Spurs to lurch into supposed crisis and four more for them to emerge from it with the biggest win of the fledgling Premier League season with their demolition of Derby.

It was a week that highlighted Tottenham's strengths and weaknesses, notably strategic failings in the transfer market, but above all it showed their increased expectations. Because back-to-back fifth-placed finishes means that a continuation of their incremental progress requires Champions League football; a £40 million outlay with Mido's sale excepted, a negligible contribution to the coffers from departed players, means they are already spending like the elite. Indeed, North London provides an instructive comparison when Arsene Wenger's reluctance to buy is set alongside Spurs' compunction to keep on spending.

But while the fixture list can serve to distort the league table in the early days of the season, the presence of Tottenham at the foot contributed to a sense of despondency. While the mischievous branded Derby's trip to White Hart Lane a relegation six-pointer, it brought Tottenham's summer under scrutiny, and their recruitment plans in particular.

Because, while elevated expenditure has been a feature of the year, Tottenham acquired a solitary first-choice

and that, in 18-year-old Gareth Bale, is the youngest of the major buys, even if

there is a suggestion that Ledley King's persistent injury problems will ensure Younes Kaboul is a regular.

Moreover, while their companions in the ranks of the biggest spenders all acquired wingers, in the shape of Nani, Martin Petrov, Ryan Babel and Yossi Benayoun, there remains a vacancy on the left flank at White Hart Lane, where two right-footed players were paired on Saturday. On the



pitch, Tottenham's direction is set to the right whenever Aaron Lennon is available; off it, is it really correct?

Though injuries help account for the successive defeats, they are far from the sole cause. Makeshift defences can lack the class of their supposed superiors, but that does not account

for the woeful lack of marking when Joleon Lescott opened the scoring for Everton. Anthony Gardner, the culprit then, is apparently available but the identities of those deemed surplus to requirements is revealing, including as it does some of Tottenham's recent arrivals. Ricardo Rocha is supposedly among them, along with some of the surfeit of midfielders who, despite a seemingly unending list, contain neither a left-footer nor a natural alternative to Lennon.

The latest addition to the legion, Kevin Prince Boateng, it has been suggested, may emerge as a first choice in the long term. The same argument can be applied to Kaboul, Adel Taarabt and Darren Bent.

Yet the model of buying potential, employed for several seasons, is far from foolproof.

Successes include Michael Dawson, Tom Huddlestone and Lennon, yet there are two factors that can be set against it: the recruitment of too many players who, however promising, were not of the required standard, such as the departed Calum Davenport and Andy Reid, plus Wayne Routledge, who remains; and by pursuing that policy, ignoring the needs of the team when proven quality may have propelled them into the top four.

If Bale was a necessity on the summer's shopping list, along with a central defender and a left winger, a £16 million striker was not.

Given that Dimitar Berbatov, Robbie Keane and Jermain Defoe contributed a combined 64 goals last season and Bent mustered a further 15 for relegated Charlton, a simplistic interpretation would be that the foursome would provide a guarantee of 80 this time.

After three games, their collective tally stands at one, and it was symbolic that Defoe and Bent's stiffest task against Derby was dislodging the other to turn the ball over the line, something the newcomer managed to do.

It illustrated the extent to which Tottenham have needlessly over-complicated by recruiting Bent and keeping Defoe. Last season, the striking scenario was simpler: Berbatov played, with either Keane or Defoe in harness.

Given the incompatibility of Keane and Defoe, the former favouring the role of impish sidekick and the latter excelling at show-stopping cameos, but neither accustomed to being the leading man in the attack, the sole need for reinforcements was when the Bulgarian was sidelined.

But the sight of Berbatov and Bent against Everton suggested another alliance that is a partnership in name only, while Keane's presence on the right touchline was a waste of his gifts. Defoe, expert poacher as he is, appears likely to be confined to the bench for much of the campaign, which is an undeniable waste.

And is stockpiling talent really evidence of a cohesive plan? A focus on team-building rather than an accumulation of players is surely beneficial.

Once a gifted youngster has been identified, Spurs need not necessarily buy him if they have sufficient options in his position. And when a player of the calibre of Defoe is marginalised, it may be more productive, both for manager's decision-making and the club's finances, to sell him.

Instead, the opening week of the campaign has served to identify issues that could undermine Tottenham's season, the speculation surrounding Jol prominent among them. Questionable defending is another, along with the difficulties of maintaining and occupying four coveted strikers.

At least, with Jermaine Jenas and Steed Malbranque displaying against Derby that the midfield can offer creativity even in Lennon's absence, the week may have had a happy ending for Tottenham, but it is far from guaranteed that the season will.