

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT? Another rollercoaster season at the Riverside. After an erratic start, Middlesbrough found themselves third in the Premiership, prompting praise from Sir Alex himself and press talk of possible European qualification, even if Steve McClaren wrote off their chances as early as December after they were deservedly beaten away to West Bromwich Albion.

Middlesbrough were the Premiership's biggest pre-season spenders and the new signings all grabbed their share of the headlines over the long winter months. The Gang Of Four (George Boateng, Geremi, Juninho and Massimo Maccarone) were primed to take centre stage in the opening game of the season, but McClaren's tactics had to be rethought at short notice after Juninho's pre-season knee injury. It was to be another seven months before the Brazilian made a first-team appearance.

The rollercoaster continued its downward course as Middlesbrough lost eight consecutive away games in a three-month period, failing to get on the scoresheet in any of them. The rumblings of discontent threatened to spill over when, the week after the last of these defeats, they capitulated 5-2 at the Riverside against Aston Villa. By this time, they were looking over their shoulder at the trapdoor. Salvation quickly followed with a long-awaited away goal and point — at Anfield of all places — quickly followed by a 3-1 win away to Sunderland. Middlesbrough and McClaren were off the hook and the rollercoaster started a tentative climb. However, their woeful record on their travels ruined a potentially glorious season and it is the lack of ambition when away from Teesside that needs to be addressed.

The draw at Anfield was indeed a turning point. Middlesbrough went on a run of eight matches unbeaten and the long-awaited return of Juninho gave the club and fans a massive boost. Such was the anticipation that 19,450 turned up the week before to watch him in a reserve game and he immediately showed what might have been achieved had he been available from the beginning of the season. Even though the Brazilian's pace is not what it was, his mere presence on the field transmits a tangible feel-good factor among fans. This in itself must carry a knock-on effect to the spirit of his team-mates.

With what looked like a not-too-difficult series of opponents to end the season, Middlesbrough were again being touted as contenders for their first European campaign. Not for the first time, though, McClaren showed great maturity and wisdom in refusing to get involved in such talk.

Of the transfer window signings (Michael Ricketts, Malcolm



Victory over Liverpool showed that Middlesbrough could mix it with the best

Christie and Chris Riggott), only Ricketts failed to impress. Apparently unfit, off the pace and virtually invisible from the outset, he only seemed to play with any fire when he came on against Bolton Wanderers, his former team, in the last game of the season, but his first goal for the club was of scant consolation.

And yet, notwithstanding their performances in most of the final six games of the season, Middlesbrough do have a lot to shout about. The defensive partnership of Ugo Ehiogu and Gareth Southgate brings back memories for older fans of the equally solid pairing in the 1970s of Stuart Boam and Willie Maddren, while Jonathan Greening, for so long the target of fan abuse, is maturing into a fine player and Geremi, on loan from Real Madrid, brought some pace and power to midfield.

Some may say that the most disappointing player was Maccarone, but this was due to the fact that the £8.15 million signing started so well that he raised expectations too high. At 23, he still has much to learn about playing through English winters and the pace of the Premiership.

Despite some notable victories and outstanding performances against top-five finishers such as Manchester United, Newcastle United and Liverpool, Middlesbrough lacked bite and ambition against some of their co-habitees of mid-table. Even though they ended the season with a number of substandard displays, any fan will tell you that mid-table in the Premiership is quite an achievement for this club.

McClaren and his assistant, Bill Beswick, have built a solid platform to take the club to the next phase of development. This can be measured by the fact that, for the second season in succession, Middlesbrough have not been involved in a relegation dogfight. That alone is a sign of significant progress for this ambitious club.