

## OUR VISITORS TODAY

WHEN Blackburn Rovers visited Stamford Bridge on December 27 last year they won 2-0, after we had defeated them 3-0 at Ewood Park two days earlier. While we are naturally hopeful that today's game with the Lancashire club will provide us with maximum points, there is no doubt that whatever reward is gained will come only after much effort, for the Rovers have been playing with marked consistency all season, and particularly in recent weeks.

Prior to last Saturday's home fixture with Manchester United they had recorded three successive victories, two of them away from home and had lost only four of their 14 engagements.

Their record is even better than it looks for they have been most unfortunate with injuries of late. Both their regular full-backs, **Ken Taylor** and **David Whelan**, have been out of action, while England international right winger **Bryan Douglas** recently underwent a cartilage operation and Welsh international inside-left **Roy Vernon** has been in hospital for the removal of his appendix.

The Rovers are in a handy position from which to make a strong challenge for the First Division leadership in the coming weeks, and the way they are playing it is by no means improbable that they will have a say in the destination of the championship this term.

Whenever his regular first team players have not been available the Blackburn manager, **Mr. Dally Duncan**, has not hesitated to give youth its chance. For instance, 17-years-old **Michael England** was included at right-half recently when **Ron Clayton** was injured.

Others of the younger element who have done well in the senior side are right-back **John Bray**, who has exceeded even the most optimistic hopes as stand-in for Taylor; left-back **Fred Pickering**, and right winger **Jack Airey**. Pickering, who is only 18, had two outings in the rearguard last month before Whelan's return after injury, and had the satisfaction of finishing on the winning side each time. Airey, at present on National Service at nearby Preston, took over from Douglas for the visit to Leeds a fortnight ago and, like Pickering, helped his side to win.

**Ronnie Clayton's** inspiration has been of immense value to the team, though the success, as a whole, has been attributable to the efforts of every player called upon, young or experienced alike.

Completing the middle line with Clayton are centre-half **Matt Woods** and Eire international **Mick McGrath**, while **Harry Leyland** has been very reliable in goal.

Before last Saturday's game Blackburn had conceded only 20 goals in 14 engagements, and eleven of those had come in four matches. At the same time they had scored 27 themselves, a total which, while not particularly impressive, at least showed some consistency in the front line, which had failed to find the net in only one match.

Last season the attack was led chiefly by **Tom Johnston**, who returned to Leyton Orient in February. He was succeeded by giant **Derek Dougan**, whom the Rovers signed from Portsmouth the following month.

Dougan did not quite live up to expectations last term, but this winter, following the removal of his tonsils during the close season, he has been playing extremely well and has regained his place in the Irish national side. He reckons the operation corrected former difficulty in breathing. He has taken some of the weight off the rest of the attack, which is not particularly well blessed physically, and while opposing defences have been keeping a wary eye on him, the other members of the line have benefited from the gaps left elsewhere.

The leading scorer, after the game at Leeds on October 24, was inside-right **Peter Dobing** with ten goals in 14 matches, exactly the same return as he had at a comparable stage last winter, at the end of which he had netted 24 times in 40 outings.

Dougan and Vernon have also scored consistently, though there has been less penetration than usual on the extreme wings. Douglas scored only one goal, and that from a penalty, in his ten appearances before his injury, and **Alastair MacLeod's** return after 14 games had been played was only two goals.

A few weeks ago Douglas had two games at inside-left and another at inside-right. They were not really in the nature of experiments, for he was originally an inside-forward before settling down in the No. 7 berth and going on to reach England international rank there.

In addition to the youngsters already mentioned, others who have done well when brought into the senior side have been **Roy Isherwood**, who has done duty

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