

Story of the season 2018/19

Sligo Spurs Chairman's review of the football year

2018/19 turned out to be a historic season for Tottenham Hotspur football club, on and off the pitch, with so many storylines, stadium updates, no new signings, and a run to the Champions league final in the most unlikely of circumstances.

August

It all kicked off with an away trip to St. James' Park for the second season running, and just like before, we came away with all three points to get the league campaign off to a positive start. Dele Alli repeated his scoring feat from the season before, and Jan Vertonghen contributed the other goal, with a ball that was over the line by the barest of margins.

A week later we started our home campaign against Fulham FC, in the now familiar surroundings of Wembley stadium, which would be our home for a much longer period than expected as it turned out. Lucas Moura opened his premier league account with a sublime finish, and little did we know the impact that this player would have on the remainder of the season. Fulham hit back, but Kieran Trippier repeated his heroics from the world cup with England with a stunning free kick, and Harry Kane rounded off the scoring to continue the winning start to the season.

A midweek trip to Old Trafford was the next game to finish off the August fixtures, and for so many years this was a graveyard for not just Spurs, but most teams in the premier league, for us to come away with an emphatic 3-0 victory was something to behold! Lucas Moura got a brilliant brace, and Harry popped up again to put any thoughts of an August hoodoo fully to bed. This left us as joint top of the premier league after three games, and with maximum points.

September

September was a month of two halves – we lost all three games on a 2-1 scoreline in early to mid-September, where we were away to Watford and 'home' (in inverted commas) to Liverpool, and away to Inter in the first champions league game, with a heart-breaking late late goal conceded after we led the match for so long.

Our fortunes improved in the second half of the month though, which saw a 2-1 victory away to Brighton, and a 2-0 win away to Huddersfield both in the premier league. The Carabao cup match against Watford threw up the extraordinary situation of the club playing a home game outside of London! With Wembley unavailable, rather than giving Watford home advantage, the club decided to play the match at Stadium MK, the home of Milton Keynes Dons. This was a homecoming of sorts for Dele Alli, and we got over the line eventually via a penalty shootout to progress to the next round. As it turns out, Tottenham Hotspur played home fixtures in three different venues in the one season, a pub quiz question for years to come!

October

October saw another slew of fixtures in all competitions, starting off with a chastening 4-2 loss at the hands of a Messi-inspired Barcelona at Wembley stadium. Harry Kane continued his fine scoring form with a well taken consolation goal, but it was looking like progression in the Champions league

might already be beyond us at this stage. Erik Dier popped up in the 8th minute of the premier league game at home to Cardiff, which would see us win 6 out of our opening 8 games for the first time in our premier league history.

We recorded another 1-0 premier league victory, this time at the London Stadium, courtesy of a lovely Erik Lamela finish to seal a good win over West Ham. In the Champions league, it was another disappointing Wednesday night with a 2-2 draw away to PSV Eindhoven, but at least we registered our first point of the campaign. A Rihayd Mahrez goal at Wembley, on a pitch still covered in gridiron markings after the recent NFL game, was enough to give Man City victory in the Monday night football. Erik Lamela should have equalized after being set up by Delli Alli, but the aforementioned pitch contributed to a bobbled effort going over the bar.

We completed our October fixtures with an away trip to West Ham once again, this time in the Carabao Cup, and a fine brace from Son Heung Min and a well taken goal from Fernando Llorente saw us record an impressive 3-1 win to progress to the quarter finals.

November

After being 3-0 up away to Wolves, we held on for the win after a late scare due to Juan Foyth conceding two penalties on his premier league debut. The following Tuesday we finally got our Champions league campaign up and running with a come from behind win over PSV at Wembley for a score line of 2-1. Later in the week, Juan Foyth made great amends for his double penalty concession at Wolves to become the unlikely match winner in a 1-0 win away to Crystal Palace. A fantastic performance and victory saw us triumph over Chelsea 3-1 at Wembley, Dele Alli continuing his fine scoring form against the blues, and Heung Min Son with a brilliant individual effort. We once again left it late to keep our Champions League hopes alive after Christian Eriksen arrived late into the box to score the winner against Inter at Wembley.

December

The annual congested Christmas schedule had Spurs down for NINE fixtures in the month of December! It was overall a very good month, even though it was bookended with defeats to Arsenal and Wolves. After losing 4-2 at the Emirates stadium, we went on to beat Southampton, Leicester, and Burnley, and whopping victories over Everton and Bournemouth to put ourselves right in the title race along with Man City and Liverpool. This was halted in its tracks however with that Wolves defeat at Wembley by 3 goals to 1, after Harry Kane had put us ahead in the first half with another fantastic effort. In amongst all of this premier league action, we got a now famous away point against Barcelona, which, combined with Inter's failure to beat PSV sent us through to the knockout stages of the Champions league for the second year running. We had Lucas Moura to thank for the equalizer in the Nou Camp, more from him later...

We also had the quarter final of the League cup to play in December, which was another trip to the Emirates. This time we exacted a nice bit of revenge for the league defeat by dispatching the gunners on a score of 2 goals to nil, with Dele Alli scoring an altogether sumptuous goal, collecting a long pass from Harry, and lifting it over Peter Cech for a wonderful winner.

January

The fixtures kept coming thick and fast as we moved into 2019 – but still no sign of us moving into where we all wanted to be at this stage, the new stadium back at White Hart Lane. On Tuesday the 1st of January, Spurs travelled to South Wales and recorded a good away win over Cardiff to get us back on track in the premier league after the collapse against Wolves the previous Saturday.

So on the first day of 2019 we sat on 48 points in the premier league, only two points behind Man City, but nine behind seemingly runaway leaders Liverpool on 57 points, though they played a game more. We had won 16 of our 21 matches thus far, with 5 losses and zero draws.

Next up just a few days later on Friday the 4th of January, we went to Merseyside to face Tranmere Rovers in the third round of the FA cup, where we recorded a record-breaking scoreline of 7-0!! Fernando Llorente continued his amazing goals to games ratio by bagging a hattrick in only his second start of the season. Harry Kane moved level with legendary Welsh wing wizard Cliff Jones on the all-time scorers list with his 159th goal for the club.

Spurs were back in action again the following Tuesday with the first leg of the Carabao cup, where we defeated Chelsea one nil at Wembley, Harry Kane moving into 4th position outright in the scoring charts. We faltered in the league though the following Sunday, where after battering Man Utd for 90 mins, they came away with all three points on a 1-0 scoreline.

Spurs were finally getting some daylight between games, with the next fixture not for a full week! On Sunday January 20th, we had an excellent come from behind victory over Fulham at Craven Cottage, Harry Winks popping up with a fantastically determined header after a great cross provided by the most unlikely figures, George Kevin N'Koudous!

We lost out to Chelsea in a cup competition once again, when they knocked us out on penalties in the league cup second leg at Stamford bridge. We then lost away to Crystal Palace in the premier league, but rounded out the month with a much needed victory over Watford at Wembley. Our squad was becoming very depleted, with the lack of signings showing, but Fernando Llorente was proving to be a great asset in reserve, by coming up with a late late winner via a brilliant header to claim all three points!

February

We had three great wins, but then two bad defeats in the month of February. In the premier league Spurs had home wins over Newcastle and Leicester City, and kicked off the Champions league knockout stages with an emphatic victory over Borussia Dortmund in the last 16 first leg at Wembley. Heung Min Son and Jan Vertongen with great volleyed finishes, and Fernando Llorente scored once again to round out a great evening for Spurs. In the premier league however, we faltered away to Burnley and Chelsea, with the defeats clocking up in the league, but still no draws as of yet.

March

That first draw would come in the north London derby at Wembley on Saturday the 2nd of March. It finished 1-1 but Arsenal had a great opportunity to complete the double over us with a late penalty, but Hugo Lloris made a great save and proved to be the Spurs hero.

In the return leg of the Champions league fixture against Dortmund, after an early first half onslaught, we held out until half time, and then Harry Kane popped up with a brilliant finish to put the tie to bed. The famous yellow wall of the Dortmund stadium was kept subdued on this occasion, and we were wondering would we see our own White wall in the shape of our new south stand any time soon!

Anyway, we were heading to the CL quarter finals for the first time since the brilliant Harry Redknapp campaign in 2011. But alarmingly, there would be two more defeats to finish out March, with Southampton beating us 2-1 at St. Mary's even though we had been ahead in the match, and

Liverpool on the same scoreline at Anfield, though the performance was much better against the title chasers, and a draw would have been a fairer result.

April

April would throw up a fixture list similar to the December congestion, with just one less game this time, but 8 matches in the month would take its toll, and nearly see us throwing away our position in the CL places. The big news however was that we were finally moving into the new stadium, which all came about pretty unexpectedly in the end, with a fixture against Crystal Palace the first to be played there in the league.

So on Wednesday April 3rd, Heung Min Son became the first player to score a competitive goal at the Tottenham Hotspur stadium, writing his name into the history books. Christian Eriksen secured the win with another strike 10 mins from time, to give us the perfect opening match, and finally, we were back home in N17, in what can only be described as a futuristic, beautifully constructed, amazing feat of modern engineering and design.

And we wouldn't have long to wait for another huge occasion there, because we faced Manchester City in the quarter final of the Champions league just six days later. We performed brilliantly to secure a one nil victory and already have a special European night at the new stadium. The only blot on the landscape was the terrible injury to Harry Kane, which would rule him out for the rest of the season – well, almost. The following Saturday we were there again, with Lucas Moura securing a brilliant hat trick in a 4-0 win over Huddersfield town, writing his own name into the history books, but, this is not the hat trick he was going to be remembered for..

In the return leg of the Champions league quarter final, in what can only be described as a completely bonkers match, Man City beat us 4-3 on the night, with Spurs progressing to the CL semi final on away goals! The VAR decision in injury time to rule out what would have been City's winner will go down as one of the most dramatic nights in CL history. But unbelievably, this would not be the most dramatic of our CL matches yet!

We had to return to premier league action just a couple of days later, and back to the Etihad stadium, for what would be a surreal occasion after all that had gone on a few days earlier. Spurs actually created the better chances with what could only be called half a team at this stage, but City held on for a one nil victory to keep their relentless head to head battle with Liverpool going. The following Tuesday we beat Brighton and Hove Albion for what proved to be a very important victory in the league, with Christian Eriksen doing what he does best, scoring a late late belter after Brighton had done just about everything to come away with a point.

We then suffered our first defeat at our new home, conceding our first goal, against of all teams, West Ham in their annual cup final. It was a poor performance and a sickening defeat, but I remember coming away from the match thinking let them have that one, we have bigger fish to fry.

On Tuesday April 30th, we put in another poor performance on what should have been one of the biggest nights in the club's history. Ajax came to town and cut through us very easily to score and leave with a one nil first leg victory, and in reality, they should have had more.

May

If ever a season looked to be falling apart, it was in our next premier league match, away to Bournemouth. With a patched up team, and needing only one win to guarantee our place in the top four, we found ourselves on the end of TWO red cards, Son and Foyth both going off in crazy

incidents either side of half time. And then to compound things, Borunemouth scored the winner in injury time after it seemed we had done enough with our 9 men. The second leg of the Champions league was against Ajax at the Amsterdam arena the following Wednesday. Had we any hope of making a historic champions league final for the first time in our history?

Well it wasn't looking that way, and if anything, it was looking like we were going to get the biggest humiliation the club had ever seen, after falling behind to two more Ajax goals, and 3-0 on aggregate. I don't need to describe what happened next, but the aforementioned Lucas Moura wrote himself into the Spurs and Champions League history books with the most spirited, unbelievable, skilful, beautiful, and majestic hat trick that anyone will ever see in their whole lives. The sight of the ball going over the line for his third goal as the clock ticked down to the end of the five minutes of injury time was like a slow motion dream, and almost like an alternate reality, which I will never forget, and anybody who witnessed our celebrations in Connollys for that goal and the final whistle might not forget it either!

We had one more match to play in May, which was at home to Everton in our final premier league game of the season, and in keeping with our recent premier league performances, we threw away an early lead through Erik Dier, with Everton going two one up in the second half. Thankfully, our saviour once again was the great Dane, Christian Eriksen with a sublime free kick to claim the one point that we needed for 4th place. We should really have finished this campaign in third position, but could also have ended up in sixth with the way we started losing so many games near the end. Thankfully, and amazingly so, neither Man United or Arsenal could take advantage, with both of them having similar collapses towards the end of the season, leaving themselves in the dreaded Europa league places.

June

For the first time ever, we have the month of June to cover here! And this is of course because of our first ever participation in the European Cup/Champions league final. The less said about the final the better, with the game being almost over in the first minute after a dubious handball decision giving Liverpool a very early lead from the penalty spot. This incident seemed to put a dampener on the match both for Spurs fans, and for any neutrals too, as the game played out in fits and starts. Liverpool sealed the win with a late second goal, but when the disappointment subsided after a couple of days, the realisation was that this was the ultimate roller coaster of a season, and hopefully will provide the platform for Spurs to build a glorious future.

John Heraghty