THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ENGLISH FOOTBALL LEAGUE

EFL MAGAZINE

ISSUE FIVE // WINTER 2021

INSIDE



BEN BRERETON DIAZ
From Stoke to Santiago, via Blackburn Rovers

GARY NEVILLE

LIFE AS AN OWNER

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[EFL COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR]



WELCOME...

...to the latest edition of the EFL Magazine.

Welcome to the Winter 2021 edition of the EFL Magazine, which brings the curtain down on what has been another unique year for the League and its 72 Member Clubs, a highlight of which being the full return of supporters to stadiums across England and Wales.

Despite the ongoing challenges faced as a result of the pandemic, those associated with EFL Clubs – from playing staff to programme sellers – have continued to act with both professionalism and resilience, and it is that which we have looked to capture in the stories told throughout this magazine.

This incredible work was, of course, quite rightly recognised in November as part of the annual Sports Business Awards, at which the League was awarded 'Best Sports Governing Body Initiative' for the collective response to COVID-19 from each and every EFL Club and their Club Community Organisations.

Our latest edition includes in-depth content and features that are not available on other EFL channels, and cover a range of issues from anti-discrimination and environmental sustainability to the individual player and Club stories which make the EFL the exciting and world-renowned League it is today.

Inside, you will find Liam Scully's thoughts on the future of football's growing community efforts, after stepping into the role of EFL Trust Chair in September. Having replaced John Nixon, who positively impacted thousands of lives in serving the Trust network for more than a decade, Liam joins at what is undoubtedly a crucial time, and with the benefit of a wealth of experience in both the football and community sectors.

On the pitch, Stoke-born striker Ben Brereton Diaz tells the remarkable story of his rise to prominence both here in England and abroad, as well as flying the flag for the EFL in South America by facing the likes of Lionel Messi and Neymar with the Chilean national team. We also speak to Crystal Palace midfielder Conor Gallagher, whose career started in the EFL Trophy and took him to the top-flight – and more recently the senior England squad – via successful spells with Charlton Athletic and Swansea City in the Sky Bet Championship.



Finally, EFL Chief Executive Trevor Birch outlines the League's vision for both the EFL and English game as a whole in light of the Fan-Led Review, looking at some of the key challenges and opportunities facing football in 2022 and beyond.

Please enjoy the stories that we have captured here.

MARK ROWAN
EFL Communications Director

150 YEARS



Graeme Murty



John Madejski and Steve Coppell



John Frain and Ray Warburton



125 YEARS



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JOBI McANUFF

AFTER AMASSING ALMOST 600 EFL APPEARANCES FOR NINE CLUBS OVER A 20-YEAR PLAYING CAREER, JOBI McANUFF DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO HANG UP HIS BOOTS IN THE SUMMER.

THE VETERAN MIDFIELDER COULDN'T STAY AWAY FOR LONG, HOWEVER, AND IS NOW ENJOYING THE LEAGUE'S FIVE COMPETITIONS FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE, WORKING AS AN EFL PUNDIT FOR QUEST AND SKY SPORTS...

As someone who was fortunate to play at all levels of the game, I can't overstate the importance of fans. I experienced playing, coaching and managing in empty stadiums and it was difficult to bring the usual level of intensity.

This season, the quality has increased across the EFL and games are much better spectacles with fans, so it's fantastic to have them back. They're a major ingredient in what makes the EFL so exciting.

We've seen throughout the pandemic that Football Clubs have been a lifeline for communities across the country, and that works both ways. For a lot of Clubs up and down the country, they're kept afloat by the fans that purchase tickets, the matchday programme, food and merchandise.

I know that many supporters across the country bought season tickets last year, knowing they probably wouldn't be able to go to any of the games. Fans are the lifeblood of our sport and I know the Clubs do all they can to repay that faith.

The quality all the way down the pyramid is incredible. You've got huge Clubs in League One and some big attendances in League Two and that's what makes football in England so special.

If you look back 10 years, there'd be a perception of what an EFL game would look like, with long balls, not playing through the lines and rigid formations. Nowadays, players can express themselves more and that comes from a lot of young, forward-thinking Coaches who are implementing attractive brands of attacking football.

Whether it's Russell Martin at Swansea, Ryan Lowe at Plymouth, Leam Richardson at Wigan, Liam Manning at MK Dons, Rob Edwards at Forest Green, Matt Taylor at Exeter, the list goes on. Across the three Leagues, the EFL is full of exciting British Managers who have been given the opportunity to cut their teeth and learn the game and are producing at a high level.

I think in terms of competition, League One is the strongest it's ever been. It's absolutely stacked with really big Clubs, like Sunderland, Sheffield Wednesday, Ipswich, Portsmouth, Bolton and Charlton, yet you're still seeing teams such as Plymouth, Wigan, Wycombe and Rotherham compete at the top.

That's the beauty of the EFL for me; the reputation and stature of a Club does not matter. You have to earn every point. Just because you're a bigger Club, it doesn't mean you're going to just turn up and win every week and that's what makes the EFL so great to watch.

I also can't speak highly enough of League Two. It's always been a tough division, but particularly this year. Normally, you might have a couple of teams that you feel can run away with it, but I think it's going to be really tight all through the season.

I went through the process of getting back into the EFL with Leyton Orient and we've seen in recent years that if you can make that step up from the National League, you can really acquit yourself well.

Sutton United have probably been the story of the season so far. I don't think anyone really expected them to be so high up the table and they've done an incredible job. Hartlepool have done really well, too, then you've got Barrow and Harrogate that have come up and stayed up, so it's nice to see that Clubs can get promoted and be competitive.

The Championship continues to provide talking points week after week. You're only ever one good run of results away from getting out of trouble if you're down the bottom, getting into the Play-Off mix if you're mid-table or cementing your place at the top.

The goalscoring of Aleksandar Mitrovic has been incredible. Ivan Toney only broke the Championship record last season with 31 and Mitrovic had already reached 20 by November! He didn't play as many games as you might expect last year, so I think Marco Silva deserves credit for building a team with so much firepower around him.

Scott Parker has also done a fantastic job at Bournemouth. They had to deal with losing some key players and he had a really young squad to start the season, but the likes of Jordan Zemura and Jaidon Anthony have come into the side and been brilliant and then adding the experience of Gary Cahill has taken them to the next level.

I think those two, along with West Brom, are clear favourites for promotion, but it's a really difficult league to predict and it's all about trying to find consistency. Anybody can beat anybody in that league, it's as simple as that.

Elsewhere, the EFL continues to be a great breeding ground for young players to develop into internationals. I love to see when lads take a step out of Academy football and go into the real world of the EFL and really get a sample of what it's like to be a footballer.

The Cup competitions are also crucial. The Papa John's Trophy is designed to help younger players come through. The most important thing for a young player's development is to play competitive games, with or against experienced players, and from that point of view, it's a competition I'm very supportive of.

The Carabao Cup has also been interesting this season and it remains an important competition in providing Clubs an opportunity to win a major trophy. You have to respect what Manchester City have done over the past four years, but it's good to see a new Club getting their hands on the trophy after such a long period of domination.

Across all Leagues and Cups, I'm excited for plenty of twists and turns. I'm expecting more drama, more spectacular goals and it's certainly an incredible set of competitions that I'm enjoying covering immensely.

EFL QUEST

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THAT'S ZEMURA!

FROM RELATIVE UNKNOWN TO ONE OF THE FIRST NAMES ON THE TEAMSHEET, JORDAN ZEMURA HAS ENJOYED A RAPID RISE FOR SCOTT PARKER'S HIGH-FLYING AFC BOURNEMOUTH THIS SEASON.

The Zimbabwean international discusses how he overcame adversity to develop into one of the brightest talents in the Sky Bet Championship, as well as shedding light on his interests and ambitions off the pitch.

WORDS // JACK WYLIE

Each year, the EFL's competitions provide a platform for young players to announce themselves on the professional stage. This season has seen the emergence of promising defender Jordan Zemura, who has excelled for promotion-chasing AFC Bournemouth.

Prior to the 2021/22 campaign, the talented prospect had only featured five times at senior level, with two Carabao Cup outings against Crystal Palace and Manchester City being the highlight.

Slotting in at left-back following the summer departure of Diego Rico, Zemura has established himself as an influential figure in Bournemouth's backline, contributing to 10 clean sheets in 16 appearances, including seven successive shutouts away from home.

"I hadn't started a League game before this season, so it's been a bit of a whirlwind," he admits. "Last year, the Carabao Cup was a great experience for me, especially playing against Man City at the Etihad and sharing the pitch with some of their top players.

"That gave me my first true taste of being a professional footballer and my mindset heading into this season was that I wanted more. I didn't want to be on the fringes, I wanted to be playing and showing everyone what I can do.

PLAYER INTERVIEW | **JORDAN ZEMURA**

"With the new Manager and staff coming in, it was a perfect opportunity for me to lay down a marker. It can be hard for a new Manager to come in and trust younger players, but if you look at the gaffer's track record, it's not something that he hesitates about.

"I had a conversation when he arrived about having the chance to earn a spot in the team and that really inspired me to grasp the opportunity with both hands. When you have that sort of belief and faith put in you, you don't play with any fears or worries because you feel like you belong."

Under the guidance of Manager Scott Parker, Zemura made an instant impact for the Cherries. Building on an impressive opening-day performance against promotion rivals West Bromwich Albion, the budding star went on to lead the supporter vote for Club Player of the Month in August and has twice been named in the EFL Team of the Week, which is determined by player ratings provided by WhoScored.

"It's always nice to be recognised but I don't ever let myself get carried away with stuff like that," Zemura proclaims. "My mindset is always to be focused on moving onto the next game and trying to put in another good performance for the team.

"There are a few of us that are young and it can be quite daunting stepping into the first-team group, but the experienced players have guided us along the way and I feel at home now in the dressing room.

"The word I would use to describe the Championship is relentless. When you're having to play Saturday, Tuesday, Saturday, there is a natural wear and tear, not just on your body but also your mind.

"Some games can end up being tougher than you might expect because it's so physically and mentally demanding, so you've got to maintain the hunger for every game. Working hard as a collective and setting high standards for each other is something that has been instilled in us from the start of pre-season."

Zemura's attributes are not just limited to the defensive side of the game either. Determined to push forward as a creative spark along the left flank, he has chipped in with three goals at the time of writing, earning two Club Goal of the Month awards in the process.





"The modern day full-back isn't just judged on one aspect of the game," he says. "You can receive recognition for being a good defensive player, but if you're not the best going forward then people will highlight it as a weakness.

"Likewise, if you're really good going forward but a liability defensively, you're called out for that, so I try to balance my game as best as I can. My main priority is getting clean sheets, being solid at the back and setting the platform for the attacking players to go and win the game, but I also know my capabilities going forward and I enjoy being an attacking threat.

"I used to play higher up when I was younger, so running at players and trying to have end product is something I've worked on vigorously for many years. To have already contributed with a few goals at this level just pushes me on to produce more.

"I'm determined to unlock new facets to my game, and I've received a lot of support from the Manager, the Coaches and also the Sport Science staff. If I can keep running up and down the wing for 90 minutes, there's only so long the opposition can cope with that level of intensity. It feels like my superpower!"

Although he now appears to be destined for success, it hasn't always been a seamless journey for the 22-year-old. Released by Charlton Athletic in 2019 after spending eight years in their Academy, Zemura endured a brief period out of the game altogether, temporarily working as a glass fitter.

"I was only out of football for a few weeks, but it gave me a taste of the real world and it was another incentive for me to work hard and find another Club," he reminisces. "My family helped a lot during that time – my mum was on LinkedIn trying to contact Clubs and then I found the opportunity to come to Bournemouth on trial.

"At Charlton, I think I was maybe a bit sure of myself but coming here from London has humbled me. It's not a big area, but it's a hardworking place and I've enjoyed becoming part of the community. It's made me a better person.

"When I was released, one of my Coaches there at the time said to me, 'this might be the best 'no' you've had in your life.' I was at Charlton from 12-years-old and it was all I'd ever known, so it was devastating to leave but everything that they taught me has helped me to progress.

"Coming to Bournemouth, I challenged myself and really thought about how badly I want this. That desperation to do well has driven me to where I'm at now. Every setback or rejection, I come back with that mindset. Even after anything positive, I think, 'okay, now I need to do it again'. That's how I attack every day."

Zemura's development on the pitch domestically has led to international recognition, representing Zimbabwe on a handful of occasions since gaining his first cap in November 2020, when he faced Riyad Mahrez's Algeria in an Africa Cup of Nations Qualifier.

"I'm honoured to play for Zimbabwe," says Zemura. "My family, including my mum and dad, are from Zimbabwe, so being able to play for the national team fills me with immense joy and pride.

"Representing them takes me to the next level of football. The nation is football crazy and they're so supportive. I just love the joy it brings to my mum and dad and when I go back there, my grandparents are so happy to watch me.

"I've played in a few tough games and helped us qualify for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations. It's a major tournament that I've watched growing up on TV. Some of the great African players have played in it over the years, so to participate would mean the world to me."

Despite his burning desire to achieve great things in the game, Zemura is aware of being more than just a footballer, too. Academically gifted, with a particular interest in English and History, he was once in the running for an esteemed scholarship that could've led him towards the top universities in the country.

"I think it was in Year Nine, four of us were put forward to visit this very prestigious school in an attempt to attain a scholarship there, where you go during half-term and it gives you an opportunity to go to universities like Oxford and Cambridge," he adds.

"Unfortunately, I didn't end up getting accepted, but I did do really well in school, getting 10 GCSEs, and then I was studying a degree in Sport Science and Physical Education at Canterbury University while I was still at Charlton.

"When you're involved in football, the pressure can take its toll at times. It's good to switch off and take your mind off the game for a couple of hours so that you stay refreshed and raring to go for the next day.





"I also think that from a tactical perspective, it's obviously good to be able to understand what the Manager wants and then apply that onto the pitch. If you're accustomed to taking in information and gaining an understanding of that, then you're developing an important skill and it makes you a valuable asset to the team.

"Moving to Bournemouth has put my studies on pause, but it's definitely something I'm keen to restart and finish off because there's nothing better than furthering your education. My mum and dad have both got degrees, so it'd be nice to share that achievement."

On and off the pitch, the future looks bright for Bournemouth's multi-talented youngster. Although an ankle knock halted his soaring progress at the end of October, Zemura is gunning for end of season glory at Club level, while he is already considering his legacy away from the game, with intentions to give back to his hometown.

"I'M DETERMINED TO UNLOCK NEW FACETS TO MY GAME, AND I'VE RECEIVED A LOT OF SUPPORT FROM THE MANAGER, THE COACHES AND ALSO THE SPORT SCIENCE STAFF"

"My ambition from the start of the season has always been to gain promotion and get the Club back into the Premier League," he reveals. "I'm not focused on any personal accolades, I just want to help the team win and then if anything comes my way, it's a bonus.

"I'm also really keen to make a difference back home. I come from a small community called Isle of Sheppey and still have friends that live there. I want to go back and help out with certain aspects of the place, because it's important to use your platform to help other people."

From a career that almost never started to one that's ceiling seems to have no bounds, Jordan Zemura is a case in point that hard work does pay off.

PARTNERSHIP TIMELINE

The EFL's Official Charity Partnership with Mind will conclude at the end of this season after four successful years of collaboration, which has seen the EFL and its Clubs help raise awareness of mental health across the game, improve the approach to mental health in the EFL and raise vital funds for Mind's life-saving services.





FEBRUARY 2018

Mind announced as EFL's new Official Charity Partner with 'On Your Side' partnership beginning from the start of 2018/19 season.

AUGUST 2018

Mind squiggle incorporated onto the name and number designs of all player names on shirts and replica kits – a first for English football.

OCTOBER 2018

EFL players at Kings Cross station talking to commuters about the mental health prevalence.





JULY 2019

A combined total of 50 fans, Club and EFL staff took on the 'Mind United: Trek the Peak District' challenge, trekking the Peak District through the night from 8pm to 8am.

AUGUST 2019

'Get Set To Go' EFL Club hubs were established across the country in partnership with local Minds, which has helped over 5,500 people with mental health problems get physically active.

OCTOBER 2019

Ipswich Town fans displayed a supportive banner for Accrington Stanley striker Billy Kee, who had been experiencing mental health problems at the time.







MAY 2020

Ten players and Managers from across the League became 'On Your Side' champions, opening up about their experience of mental health.

DECEMBER 2020

In an effort to urge supporters to stay connected during the Christmas and New Year period, 'Team Talk' sessions were launched, bringing fans together to talk about football.

OCTOBER 2019

'Goals Worth Talking About' campaign launched, which used street art to recreate iconic EFL goals around the country, encouraging people to talk.

NOVEMBER 2019

The partnership won Gold in the Football Business Awards (Partnership of the Year) and Silver in the Sports Business Awards (Best Sports Charity – or best use of sport by a charity).

DECEMBER 2019

'Have Your Mate's Back' campaign launched, advocating for people to ask their friends if they are OK. Players, fans and all in the football community were encouraged to wear their shirt backwards, displaying the Mind logo.









APRIL 2021

The 'On Your Side' partnership won in the Social Purpose Sponsorship category at the UK Sponsorship Awards.

MAY 2021

After COVID-19 restrictions were eased, EFL Clubs opened up their stadiums to allow their local communities to do a 'Mile For Mind'.

OCTOBER 2021

EFL and Mind team up for World Mental Health Day with Clubs and CCOs organising 'Do One Thing' activity as an act of kindness to someone deserving within their local communities.







A message from the CEO

As I reflect on my first year as EFL Chief Executive, there can be no doubt that the last 12 months have presented an unprecedented challenge for us all, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my pride at the way EFL Clubs – from Chief Executives to matchday volunteers – have worked through the pandemic. My sincere thanks go to everyone who has played their part in ensuring football has continued to lead the way, no matter how small.

Collectively, we have successfully navigated both the absence and return of supporters to stadiums in England and Wales, while playing a key role within society which should not be understated, acting as a beacon of hope to so many in communities across the nation. Clubs stood up at what was a tough time both financially and operationally, and I would again like to say thank you to both Club and EFL staff, for the way in which they have coped with the uncertainty of what has been an ever-changing situation.

Despite the many obstacles that have come to the fore as a result of COVID-19, I have thoroughly enjoyed visiting Clubs, to see first-hand some of the incredible work that is carried out both on and off the pitch. I firmly believe the EFL continues to offer some of the most exciting and unpredictable football found anywhere in the world, and that is credit to the efforts behind the scenes at all 72 Clubs.

Our job is now to safeguard those Clubs for generations to come, and I am encouraged by some of the recommendations put forward as part of the Fan-Led Review, which we hope will deliver a healthier, fairer competition for the long-term. I believe we are now on the cusp of achieving significant and lasting change for our game, and look forward to continuing to work proactively with our Clubs and football's other key stakeholders in order to do so.

As I have said previously, the pyramid is the lifeblood of the game – it has endured for over 100 years and we have to ensure its future for the next 100 years. If we can achieve what we're aiming for in terms of a sustainable operating model, I believe the EFL has a very strong future.

As ever, we will ensure lines of dialogue are kept open as we build on our various ongoing workstreams and look forward to a positive year for the League and its Clubs in 2022.

WORDS // **NICK ROBERTS & PAUL HOLLIDAY**

Let's Make Clubs Sustainable

After months of consultation, Conservative MP and former Sports Minister Tracey Crouch published her Fan-Led Review of Football Governance in November. Totalling 162 pages with 47 recommendations for the Government regarding our national game, it could prove to be the pre-cursor for one of the most significant state interventions into football since the Taylor Report, with the potential to be a catalyst for positive change that can make Clubs sustainable and serve the English game for many decades to come.



ACHIEVING FINANCIAL STABILITY

In his response to Tracey Crouch's long-awaited publication, EFL Chair Rick Parry welcomed the conclusion that there 'is a strong case for some additional distributions from the Premier League to the rest of football', with the EFL long articulating its firm view that the future health of the pyramid and wider game is inherently linked to achieving financial stability above all else.

"While we may not always agree on the best approach to take, we believe that the vast majority of Clubs and supporters want the same outcome which is a sustainable and competitive pyramid in which any Club can prosper," he states. "Having been consistent in our view that professional football requires a fundamental financial reset in order to deliver sustainability across the pyramid, we are happy that this is a key recommendation in the Fan-Led Review."



It is a passionate belief that is shared by both Parry and the EFL Chief Executive Trevor Birch, who have been consistent in their message that a financial reset and an overhaul of the game's approach to financial regulation is needed to ensure that Clubs can survive and thrive whilst living within their means.

And it's an approach that is about much more than simply keeping the accountants happy. The pursuit of sustainability is imperative to ensure that any other of the Review's proposals have an impact, says Birch, who has had a busy first year at the helm since joining in January 2021:

"More than anything else, achieving financial stability for Clubs is the number one priority we are working to. As we have said publicly, reducing volatility and fostering balance throughout the English leagues will provide the foundations upon which other reforms can be built as many of the issues that will have been raised by supporters in the Fan-Led Review all have their roots in the failure of English football to operate in a financially sustainable way."

AN INTERDEPENDENT ECOSYSTEM

With the Review's publication, initial discourse has centred upon what the impact of the Premier League and its Clubs will be, as opposed to the benefits that the EFL and the rest of the pyramid will receive.

For Birch, discussion around what impact a redistribution of funds would have on the Premier League feels like a diversion from the key issue: "Calls for a reset and redistribution is not about devaluing the Premier League, but rather improving the health and viability of the 92 and whole pyramid.

"We need to stop thinking about our professional game as 20 plus 72, but rather an ecosystem of 92 that is interdependent. A huge amount of the Premier League's value comes from its relationship with the EFL as we are inextricably linked by promotion and relegation.

"Last season, Brentford became the 50th Club to play in the Premier League. Six have been in there since the start, but 44 have rotated and it is that which we must protect. For those Clubs in the EFL that have never played in the Premier League, we seek to ensure that they always have a shot, however remote, because the pyramid is a system that relies on dreams and aspiration.

"No matter how old they get, fans will always dream that their Club may one day have a seat at the top table, but the larger the financial gap between the EFL and Premier League gets, the more remote that possibility becomes."

"By the same token, if you're in the Premier League now, there is a fair chance that you will be an EFL Club in the future, certainly if you are outside the so called big six, so we absolutely do need to think as a 92 and not as separate groups because we are fluid. It is in all our interests and that's why we believe that a fundamental financial reset that pools media revenues and splits the proceeds on a 75/25 basis, ensuring that the lion's share still goes to the top tier, but sees the gap between the second tier drastically reduced to a manageable level."

In addition, the EFL continues to be vociferous in its opposition to parachute payments which it feels has a negative effect on its competition.



BRIDGING THE GAP

"If the EFL saw 25% of our pooled net revenues as was proposed in the early days of the Premier League, there would be no need for parachute payments full stop, and a dangerously distorting effect on fair competition would be eradicated," Birch adds.

Parachute payments from the Premier League have risen from £30 million in 2010/11, when they represented 5% of the aggregate turnover of EFL Clubs, to £265 million in 2018/19, by which time they constituted 25% of the EFL's income. Since their introduction, 38 out of 83 promotions to the Premier League have been from Clubs in receipt of parachutes which equates to 46% of promotions.



Birch and the League believe that the trinity of redistribution, scrapping parachutes and adding robust cost controls equates to a roadmap that will reignite the health of the domestic game. Crucially, it will do so without making Premier League Clubs less competitive, either at home or in European competition, given that the revenue of the English top-flight will still be far in excess of the other major European Leagues.

He continues: "I must stress that this is not a 'cold war' between the EFL and the Premier League. This is about the 92 Clubs that comprise our pyramid. Our view is that a strong Premier League needs a strong competition and sustainable Clubs underneath, otherwise it is in danger of becoming a 'closed' shop, which ironically is what we all collectively fought so hard against in April with the European Super League proposals.

"The proposed approach addresses the broken economics in the second tier by halving the gap between the Championship and Premier League, alongside delivering enough additional revenue for League One and Two Clubs to expunge the current annual losses across the two divisions and thereby the traditional over-reliance of these Clubs on owner funding, which equates to over £400 million a year across the EFL. It will transform football in this country!"





CREATING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

It is the overriding message that the EFL shared with the Fan-Led Review panel, while reiterating that financial redistribution and regulation are inseparable. Without additional regulation, any extra money will continue to go out the door as quickly as it comes in, and without extra money, the additional regulation simply won't work as the majority of Clubs will be insolvent and incapable of meeting the requirements that the Review's proposed new approach to Club licensing demands.

The headline recommendation of the Review was that an Independent Regulator for English Football (IREF) be established with a proposed remit covering a broad spectrum of English football's economics.

Predating the Fan-Led Review, the EFL Executive identified a need to change its own approach to monitoring and enforcement of its financial regulations which will move away from a perceived 'adversarial' stance of 'EFL v Club' when it comes to financial breaches. A new Independent Financial Unit will monitor Profitability and Sustainability in the Championship and Salary Cost Management Protocol regulations in Leagues One and Two.

While the EFL believes it is capable of delivering a new layer of regulation itself, the arguments put forward in favour of independent regulation are acknowledged, with the League keen to engage in a constructive debate about the breadth and scope of regulation required. It is an important matter and one that the EFL CEO and believes will garner much more debate in the months ahead.

"The key matter is how Clubs are regulated, not necessarily who regulates them, though clearly this could be a coordinated approach." he says

"The game continually develops its regulatory approach and is constantly revisiting its rules to match the evolution of the game which is now big business. In recent years, we have made plenty of changes and improvements, with many more on the horizon, and while we don't necessarily feel a new regulatory body is essential, the EFL is happy to engage in a constructive debate about the scope of regulation required and how our ongoing work could dovetail with that of the proposed regulator.

"The report is comprehensive and it has been well thought through. If we are to achieve our primary objective of financial sustainability, it will become easier to have more formalised fan involvement, while the recommendations on protecting key components of heritage are not only important for the Clubs themselves but also for the communities they have served for many generations.

"Ultimately, it will be essential to agree on the boundaries and to define what falls within competition regulations and what lies with any regulator and we are happy to have that debate."

Looking forward, it is clear that there is still much road to travel, with the report's publication very much the start of the journey as opposed to the end of the line. With much discussion and debate still to come in football grounds around the country but crucially in Westminster too, Birch, the former pro player turned Executive, knows there will be more twists and turns ahead.

He concludes: "We know that this is just the beginning of a long process, but we believe the Fan-Led Review can have a positive impact on our game if harnessed by the Government in the right places.

"Our thanks go to Tracey Crouch, her review team, Clubs and fans for their input on the game that we all love and of which we are lucky to be custodians. Ultimately, we all want the same thing in a sustainable thriving pyramid. The trick is how we get there, but I'm confident that together we will find a way."

RETURN OF THE MATCH!



The 2021/22 season has seen supporters click back through the turnstiles in their numbers, and while this has been a hugely welcome sight for Clubs and the League as a whole, it has also inevitably presented Clubs with a range of operational considerations as they look to maintain high engagement levels with their fanbases.

WORDS // **ANDREW POMFRET**

93%

of fans were 'confident' or 'very confident' about returning to their Club's stadium for home matches

Since the start of the campaign, the League and its Clubs have undertaken a range of activity aimed at supporting Clubs' own efforts in encouraging supporters back to stadiums.

Crowd attendance levels across the League have been monitored and, while dealing with the various ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is encouraging to see that average attendance levels have continued to grow since the start of the season and compare favourably against averages in previous pre-COVID campaigns.

To support this attendance data, the EFL also ran a detailed 'Fan Attendance Survey' with supporters of EFL Clubs in October, with over 15,000 respondents providing some deeper insight into behaviours and attitudes to ticket purchase and attending matches in the early part of the 2021/22 season.

The findings were positive, with 93% of respondents confident returning to their Club's matches, and 90% of fans were satisfied or very satisfied with the matchday experience this season.

In the current environment Clubs are operating in, the onus has been on both safely admitting spectators, while simultaneously providing a welcoming and entertaining matchday experience. To understand some of these challenges, we caught up with three Clubs across the League, to get an insight into the preparations and planning involved in the return of fans across the country this season.

Ahead of the start of the 2021/22 season, many Clubs have had to revamp their approach to the entertainment they offer for supporters on matchdays. Ipswich Town PR Manager, Dan Palfrey, and Supporter Liaison Officer, Liz Edwards, told us more about recent positive changes at Portman Road.

"We listen to feedback from our fans as we constantly look to enhance the matchday experience," explains Palfrey.

"Against the backdrop of COVID restrictions, we were proactive and adjusted our popular activities to reflect this around the stadium – and the fans have been understanding and have reacted really positively.

"Already this season, we have added additional bar and food facilities to meet demand and to add variety. Alongside this, we have gradually brought back additional activities run by outside organisations and our charity awareness stands to boost our matchday offering.

"We are really proud of our FanZone, and while a lot of planning goes into running it each matchday, seeing how much it means to the fans is very rewarding."

Emphasising the importance of the FanZone, Edwards adds: "I am based in our FanZone on a matchday and it has been fantastic to see record numbers coming along before a game. Our COVID entry requirements apply to the FanZone, as well as the stadium, with all those aged over 11 checked for proof of full vaccination or negative lateral flow test.

"However, as the FanZone contains a fully ventilated marquee, and large open spaces, fans of all ages feel comfortable meeting up with new and existing friends and fellow fans, to enjoy the pre-match activities, entertainment and refreshments in a safe and COVID-secure environment.

"Alongside matchday activities run by our Community Trust in the FanZone, we also have local singers and groups perform for supporters, a pop-up Club shop, food vendors, ex-player signings and, most recently, a pop-up bar has been introduced to meet excess demand.

"Attendance in the FanZone has therefore increased from previous seasons. A number of fans who used to socialise in the Town centre before games have commented that they now come to the FanZone as they feel safer there. There is room to move, they have access to a ventilated pop-up bar and there are activities for the youngsters to enjoy aswell."

Adapting to the ongoing impact of COVID has certainly influenced matchday operations over in Wales, with Cardiff City, Newport County and Swansea City all having to adjust to Welsh legislation introduced in October 2021, that requires fans to show a COVID Pass to gain entry to a match.

According to Catherine Thomas, SLO at Swansea, nothing illustrated the importance of fan communication more than the short space of time they had to raise awareness levels of these changes across their supporter base.

"It has been fantastic to welcome our 'Jack Army' back to the Swansea.com stadium," she says. "However, with COVID restrictions, amendments to matchday activities and interaction, it has meant that communication and open dialogue with fans has never been so important."







86%

of fans are 'extremely aware' or 'aware' of their Club's communications regarding COVID-related protocols

Having immediately established a 'COVID pass working group' the Club quickly set about understanding the best way to disseminate information to supporters. By utilising a specific section of their website, speaking at Fan Forum events, across social media, direct to supporters' groups and through the use of letters and emails to their database, Swans left no stone unturned when it came to educating their fans on the new matchday requirements.

While engaging their fans was already ingrained in the way the Club operated, these events have still been a learning curve for all involved.

Thomas admits: "We continue to learn, grow and adapt to our ever-changing environment, but if we listen to our fans and share best practice, we should all have an enjoyable second half to this season.

"We're not resting there, though. We are working hard to proactively contact any fans who might not feel comfortable about returning for a matchday, to listen to them, understand and reassure that we have created a great and safe matchday environment to come and watch Swansea City."

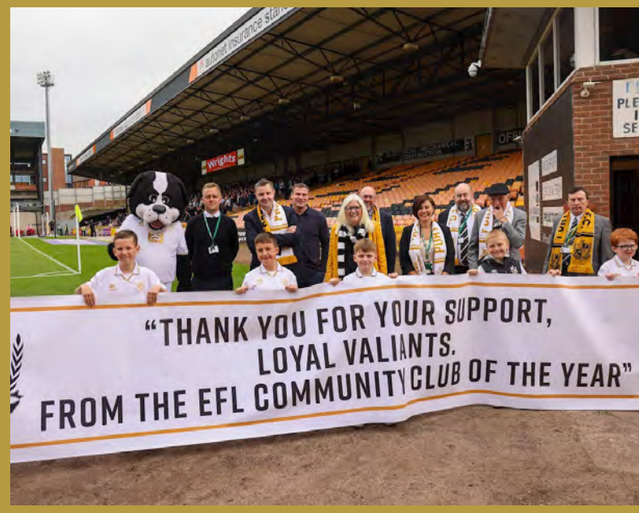
Another Club that has been working hard to welcome fans back is Port Vale. The Sky Bet League Two Club had undertaken a range of planning in pre-season to understand the potential impact of the pandemic on their fans' willingness to return to matchdays.

Club CEO and SLO, Colin Garlick, explains: "As a Club, we were mindful that supporters may be nervous about returning for matchdays in the wake of the COVID pandemic restrictions, and also conscious that many may have suffered financial challenges. Both were potentially going to impact on season ticket and matchday sales, so we wanted to ensure supporters didn't get 'out of the habit'.

"With this in mind, we recognised the need to communicate frequently and in detail with our supporters. We utilised our enhanced fan email database, which had grown significantly during the 2019/20 season due to iFollow sign-ups. We also used our social media channels, local media and liaised with the Supporters' Club, which amplified our key messaging.

"Effectively, as a Club we took a number of steps in an attempt to safeguard and grow our matchday attendances. The first measure was to freeze prices for season tickets for a fifth year in a row to take account of the difficulties experienced by our communities during the









90%

of fans were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their experience of returning to stadiums

pandemic and lockdowns. The second measure was to reward supporters who had bought season tickets during the period when fans were unable to attend games and kept their money in the Club.

"All received a limited edition 'loyalty scarf', season review magazine and discount voucher for the Club shop – along with free admission to our home group matches in the Papa John's Trophy. At the same time, we supercharged our 'Junior Valiants' initiative for young fans – offering a season ticket and home shirt for just £25.

"Previously, we had given Junior Valiants season tickets away free of charge to fans accompanied by a paying adult. This initiative has seen the number of Junior Valiants rise to around 1,400 from just a few hundred during the 2019/20 season."

Incentivising supporters to sign up for a season ticket and get along to matches is one thing, but, as Garlick points out, keeping them coming and ensuring they have a positive experience at the stadium is vital.

"Our pricing and packaging strategy has been a very deliberate attempt to grow our fanbase and to particularly engage with families.

On this note, we promoted and launched a new FanZone – sponsored by Staffordshire University – creating an area pre-match and during games where home fans could congregate, enjoy refreshments and music and meet players.

"This, along with significant investment in stadium infrastructure – including the refurbishment of kiosk and general ground and signage improvements – has all helped to enhance the matchday experience.

"It was very much intended to signal a 'welcome home' for supporters and at our first home fixture against Tranmere, the Owners and Directors, accompanied by Junior Valiants, walked a lap of the stadium carrying a banner which thanked our fans for their support during the initial COVID period and welcomed them back to Vale Park. We also held a very emotional memorial service on a subsequent match to remember all fans who had passed away during this period.

"We're really pleased with the progress we're making, and we've got plans to further develop our matchday experience going forward, to ensure we keep giving families and fans of all ages a sense of feeling part of the Club."

[MAIN FEATURE]

GARY NEVILLE: LIFE AS AN OWNER

WORDS // RYAN GRANT

Gary Neville has never been one to do things by halves. An ambitious and committed player at the very highest level for the best part of two decades, he's just about seen it all.

These days, ambition and commitment are attributes he has carried over into a variety of successful business ventures, unmistakable punditry and co-commentary for Sky Sports and, perhaps most importantly of all, his role as co-owner of Salford City Football Club, one which continues to catch the eye.



"I love it," he says with a smile, before pausing for thought.

"I enjoy it, but I also hate it. I'm happy, I'm frustrated, I'm passionate, I'm angry. It gives you every emotion. I feel as connected to Salford City and the players now, as I did as a player at Manchester United. It's my new life."

Indeed, since becoming involved with then-non-League Salford back in 2014, he has helped steer the Ammies to four promotions and an EFL Trophy success in just six seasons. It has been a rollercoaster ride that promises to continue on an upward trajectory, with the Club having recently played its 100th EFL fixture as a Sky Bet League Two outfit.

It will come as a surprise to very few that Neville has taken a hands-on approach to his role. With no fewer than eight Premier League and two UEFA Champions League trophies to his name from his playing days, as well as three FA Cup triumphs and a further two in the League Cup, he brings with him a wealth of experience, knowledge and contacts.

His is a name synonymous with achievement; and his Club, therefore, is one with a clear plan.

"We wanted this success," Neville continues. "We said we thought that a promotion every two years was viable and we've bettered that. We didn't think we'd get to an EFL Trophy Final and beat Portsmouth, so at times we've surprised ourselves and there are other things we're on track with. We always knew there would be a plateau at some point, but overall we're delighted with what's happened with the Club.

"We didn't have a stadium eight years ago and we basically had 160 fans watching us. These days, we get 2,500 for some games and that's massive for us in terms of our growth. I think we're only going to get better.

"Our ambition has never changed. We're a successful Club but we're finding it more difficult in League Two. We need to navigate through the division, understand how to play in the division and what our identity and values are as we enter into this next chapter. We're hoping to move into a new stadium too, so it's a time to reset and re-evaluate who we are, in order to create the Salford City for the next seven years.

"The first seven years have been a brilliant success with frustrations along the way, but we are where we are and we've had a great time so far. League Two is a really hard division with teams who fight like mad; it's a mad division and, in every game, you could flip a coin."

Now seems as good a time as any to take stock. Like many organisations attempting to manoeuvre through the countless obstacles presented by the pandemic, Neville's Salford have felt the impact of COVID-19 over the last 18 months.

The 46-year-old has often cited the EFL's myriad of Managers, playing styles and philosophies as the elements which make it so unique, unpredictable and exciting but, following the outbreak of Coronavirus, many at Club level suddenly found themselves in the same boat.

Whether it was the absence of supporters, implementation of additional health and

MAIN INTERVIEW | **GARY NEVILLE**



/theEFL /EFL /efl



safety measures or simply the desire for a return to normality, there existed a common ground in unprecedented circumstances, and Neville believes it's brought about a lasting positive.

"As an owner, it's been a tough time," he adds. "Now that we've got crowds back, we can probably say how desperate it was without them – it was terrible. I was commenting on games and I think the situation told you how important fans are. It was difficult for players to get up for games without that energy in the stadiums, but we got back on our feet and got football back. It's been a difficult time, but we've seen a lot of positives as well, and I think the EFL did a phenomenal job in the COVID environment in terms of getting football back. It was a brilliant operation.

> THAT'S FOOTBALL, THAT'S WHAT FOOTBALL DOES TO YOU... IT'S YOUR LIFE

"As an owner in that situation, you find yourself making instinctive decisions without any sort of comparable in the past or without a manual that tells you how to behave or what to do. It's been about making sure you look after others, whether it's your team, your staff, your fans or your community. We've had to communicate well and I think, at League Two level, football did that really well.

"Particularly in the first six months of the pandemic, a really strong community was built among owners in League Two and that's stayed with us since. I think League Two acted nobly during the pandemic and acted with great decency and integrity, and a really strong bond was built there.

"In a time of crisis, with a global health scare and Clubs going through a time of financial stress and uncertainty, I think we found out a lot about people. Speaking as a League Two owner, I really felt we bonded together in that moment and there was a lot of unity and empathy."

If 'vaccination', 'lockdown' and 'social distancing' have been some of the general buzzwords associated with the pandemic, 'community' – as alluded to by the former defender – has been football's raison d'être.

EFL Clubs and their respective Club Community Organisations were recognised at the 2021 Sports Business Awards for their collective community response to COVID, and now reach over 850,000 people each year across England and Wales through a variety of projects that tackle some key societal issues.

The pandemic has undoubtedly brought this long-standing work – as well as the importance of Clubs to the towns and cities they represent – to the fore. It is something the game, and indeed the country, can ill afford to lose.

"I recognise how important Clubs are because that's what I've grown up with; they're important to communities right across the country," Neville says.

"Last night, I left Salford's ground early; we'd had two men sent off and I was fuming, but we scored in the 95th minute and all of a sudden I feel brighter today. That's football,



> THE ENGLISH FOOTBALL PYRAMID IS ABSOLUTELY SACROSANCT – I WOULD FIGHT FOR THAT, I'D DIE IN A DITCH OVER THAT

that's what football does to you... it's your life. On another day, you'll be 2-0 up and concede twice at the end, and you'll be devastated all weekend. It affects your life, and people who don't understand football won't get that, but it's like that for millions of us, it consumes our lives.

"I had a photo with four Bristol Rovers fans who had travelled up to Salford on a Tuesday night; it had taken them four hours and I said, 'well done to you, fair play', and I thought of them on my way home. Those four lads would have taken the day off work, spent their hard-earned money and got home at three or four in the morning while I'm going to bed just around the corner. Football fans really are spirited, dedicated people.

"For many of us, our Football Club is the major asset in our community and every family is impacted by it, so these games and these Clubs really do matter."

But football has now reached a time for change, a critical crossroads at which those Clubs – and, by extension, their communities – need to be safeguarded for generations to come. "Ultimately, I've learned as an owner that football needs to protect itself from itself," Neville adds, asked to sum up his learnings since taking the reins.

It is hoped that the publication of the Fan-Led Review into Governance of the English game in November – which proposes a fundamental financial reset and additional distributions from the Premier League – will be the catalyst for that change, in order to make Clubs sustainable.

Led by Tracey Crouch MP and aided by contributions and reflections from Clubs and supporters alike, the 162-page Review is described by Government as a 'comprehensive examination of the English football system with the aim of exploring ways of improving the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of Clubs in the football pyramid, building on the strengths and benefits that our great game already provides the nation.'

"The English football pyramid is absolutely sacrosanct – I would fight for that, I'd die in a ditch over that," Neville adds.

"The EFL needs a greater alignment to the Premier League in terms of the money, because there can't be that element of desperation or Clubs gambling. Parachute payments and the disparity between the bottom of the Premier League and top of the Championship needs to close. We need financial controls that ensure a greater distribution of money, but with increased independent financial control to ensure we don't end up back in the same situation. If we get that, we'll be in a strong position coming out of the pandemic.

"We need more financial control in football. We need more sustainability, and that's coming from an owner who spends a fortune at his Club. We need better distribution of money, we need regulation and we need our heads banging together. Let's make sure we have a proper diverse and inclusive game moving forward. Clubs in League One and League Two shouldn't have had to wait 10 months for the Premier League rescue package to come into play.

"It's hard work running an EFL Club; a lot of time, effort, endeavour and passion goes into it, but we need to make sure we have controls in place that take the emotion out of it. These Clubs are not businesses, they're community assets that should be protected and the owners are the guardians. We shouldn't be allowed to just do what we want."

And while much-needed change is afoot off the pitch, the drama and excitement that has become part and parcel of EFL competitions continues to go from strength to strength on it.

Salford's place in the League Two table at the time of writing is a microcosm of the picture across the divisions. The Ammies are one of many Clubs vying for position, with just 10 points separating eighth place from 21st in the table, and the door to a promotion or Play-Off place likely wide open until the final weekend.

Change, then, whether it comes from a boardroom or a dressing room, is inevitable over the coming months and years, and Neville – like many others – is confident that can be a good thing.

"I think the quality of football in the EFL is the strongest I've seen it for years, it's been outstanding," Neville concludes.

"When we first came into the EFL, in that first season; Swindon, Crewe and Plymouth were fantastic teams. Forest Green this year are the same. I just feel that there are some really good teams playing some good football.

"The game's changing in this country, and it's in a good place. We just need to get the big, structural items right."



PAPA JOHN'S TROPHY

The Papa John's Trophy continues to provide opportunities for young players to get a taste of competitive senior football, with several current Premier League and international players featuring in the competition early on in their careers.

The likes of Reece James, Mason Mount, Declan Rice and Bukayo Saka, to name a few, gained experience in the competition before developing into world-renowned stars.

This year has seen the emergence of more promising talents, with Aston Villa U21s striker **Cameron Archer** being the standout player in the Group Stage, winning Player of the Round after scoring six goals in three games.





Here's a selection of those who benefited from minutes on the pitch in the Trophy:



Ethan Ampadu
EXETER CITY & CHELSEA U21S

Dominic Calvert-Lewin
NORTHAMPTON TOWN

Trevoh Chalobah
CHELSEA U21S

Dean Henderson
SHREWSBURY TOWN

Callum Hudson-Odoi
CHELSEA U21S

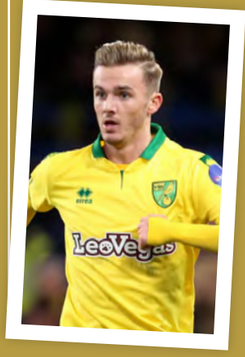
Reece James
CHELSEA U21S

James Justin
LUTON TOWN

Ezri Konsa
CHARLTON ATHLETIC

Tariq Lamptey
CHELSEA U21S

James Maddison
COVENTRY CITY & NORWICH U21S





Mason Mount
CHELSEA U21S

Declan Rice
WEST HAM UNITED U21S

Bukayo Saka
ARSENAL U21S

Robert Sanchez
BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION U21S

Emile Smith Rowe
ARSENAL U21S

Fikayo Tomori
CHELSEA U21S

Ivan Toney
NORTHAMPTON TOWN, BARNSLEY & SHREWSBURY TOWN

Ben White
BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION U21S & NEWPORT COUNTY



Win The Draw

The EFL added a unique twist to the Carabao Cup this season by searching the nation to find the perfect location with its 'Win the Draw' competition.



Supporters from across the country were provided the opportunity to suggest a venue for a one-of-a-kind Round Four draw, with over 1,200 entries being submitted.

The judging panel selected Potton Bowls Club in Sandy, Bedfordshire, as the ideal setting, with special guests Micah Richards and Harry Redknapp successfully conducting the draw live on Sky Sports, while Mark Wright took over socials for exclusive action from behind the scenes.





Hammers End City's Streak

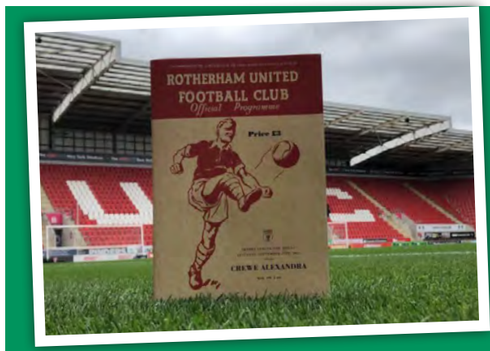
After 1,827 days, Manchester City's Carabao Cup reign finally came to an end in a dramatic Round Four tie.

The Citizens were last dumped out of the competition by Jose Mourinho's Manchester United in October 2016 before recording four consecutive Wembley wins against Arsenal, Chelsea, Aston Villa and Tottenham Hotspur.

Pep Guardiola's side, who had their hearts set on a record ninth Cup triumph, were finally ousted at the hands of West Ham United, as the Hammers edged their Premier League rivals on penalties.

Goalkeeper Alphonse Areola pulled off several saves to ensure that the two teams could not be separated in 90 minutes, with the Paris Saint-Germain loanee's heroics earning him the Player of the Round award.

Mark Noble, Jarrod Bowen, Craig Dawson, Aaron Cresswell and Saïd Benrahma all kept their cool in the shoot-out, while City starlet Phil Foden spurned his spot-kick to end their domination.



The First League Cup Final

September marked the 60th anniversary of the first-ever League Cup Final, which saw Aston Villa take on Second Division side Rotherham United.

To commemorate the landmark, the Millers released a special edition of the official matchday programme, filled with archive photographs, tickets and content from stalwart reporters.

The two-legged tie in 1961 went to extra-time, with Rotherham claiming a 2-0 advantage at the halfway mark before Villa restored parity in the second 90 minutes.

Peter McParland netted a 109th-minute winner, which was enough for the Claret and Blues to be crowned as the inaugural champions.

Describing his goal, the former Northern Ireland international said: "If you haven't got it on tape, I can tell you that I beat six men and back-heeled it into the net! Only joking, it was a ball that dropped into the six-yard box, and I just hammered it in."

PLAYER INTERVIEW | **BEN BRERETON DIAZ**

¡Buenos Diaz!

Just seven months ago, no-one could have known that Ben Brereton's life, name and fame included, were about to change forever – not even the man himself.

Over the course of two exclusive interviews with the EFL, the Blackburn Rovers attacker reveals how a single social media campaign, 7,000 miles from home, gave life to the remarkable story that everyone – from Stoke-on-Trent to Santiago – can't stop talking about.

WORDS // RYAN GRANT

If the last couple of years have taught us anything, it's that fortunes can fluctuate at the drop of a hat. And doesn't Ben Brereton know it.

Signed by Blackburn Rovers from Nottingham Forest on 28 August 2018, the then 19-year-old forward was unveiled on the Ewood Park pitch that very evening, receiving warm applause from supporters during the Club's Carabao Cup Round Two clash against Lincoln City.

Despite his tender age, with his significant transfer fee had come the weight of expectation, and two goals in as many subsequent seasons perhaps showed it. But, in many ways, those early chapters are now little more than a distant memory.

These days, chants of 'Diaz, Diaz, Diaz' rain down from the stands at Sky Bet Championship grounds across the country, in recognition of a player both reborn and renamed, and one that's far more than just the talk of the town.

"Two or three years ago, not long after I'd signed, I did an interview for Blackburn's matchday programme," he recalls, fondly. "I was asked to tell the readers something they might not know about me, so I went for the fact that I'm half-Chilean.

"My mum was born in Chile and came over to England with my grandad and her two sisters when she was 14 or 15. When I was born, she was still learning English and she didn't speak Spanish to me,

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but if you met her now you'd think she'd been born in England too."

Brereton had, prior to his move north, represented England at youth level, and the Staffordshire-born striker was top goalscorer when the Three Lions won the European Under-19 Championship in 2017, playing alongside Chelsea duo Mason Mount and Reece James.

Mark Hitch, a Rovers scout for popular game 'Football Manager', picked up on the programme piece and, before long, the simulation had been updated to show Brereton's Chilean eligibility. One of football's best kept secrets was no more, and thousands of Chilean nationals quickly caught wind.

Almost overnight, Brereton's Instagram posts, as well as those from his Club and team-mates, were flooded with comments from supporters in South America and a social media campaign was born. The hashtag #BreretonALaRoja grew in line with anticipation of further recognition and, sure enough, it came.

"It all just took off! It was a crazy time," Brereton, affectionately referred to by friends as 'Bezza' or 'Breo', adds.

In the games that followed, he did enough to catch the eye of not only the Chilean fans but their national team manager too, and when the 2021 Copa America arrived, so too did its latest attacking talent.

"A year ago, I hadn't even thought about the fact they might consider me, not in the slightest," he says. "We'd played away at Preston and there was some talk about a call-up after the game; I just thought 'wow, imagine if that happened' but didn't have it in my mind that I could actually be called up.

"When it came down to it and they suggested it to me, it was a no-brainer and I wasn't considering anything else. For them to come calling was an honour and I had no hesitation in accepting the call."

But Brereton didn't just accept his big opportunity, he grabbed it with both hands. With the support of his family and friends, as well as seemingly the entirety of the South American nation, Brereton packed his bags, added his Chilean family name to the

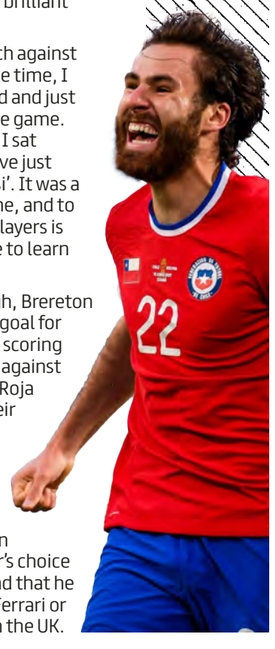


back of his shirt and prepared for the small challenge of facing Lionel Messi and Argentina.

"When I got called up, I was so happy, and then all of a sudden it was the night before the flight and the nerves were setting in!" he says. "It's such a big deal and the players in the Chile squad have done some incredible things over the years, so you worry about being accepted, but from the moment I got there everyone was brilliant and it immediately felt like home. The players, the coaches and the whole country got behind me and it really helped me – it was a brilliant experience for me.

"I came off the bench against Argentina and, at the time, I was nervous, excited and just concentrating on the game. Afterwards though, I sat back and thought 'I've just played against Messi'. It was a great moment for me, and to play against these players is something you have to learn from."

If that wasn't enough, Brereton Diaz netted his first goal for Chile just days later, scoring a well-taken winner against Bolivia to ensure La Roja progressed from their group. And though their dreams would later be dashed by Neymar's Brazil, the Chilean media preferred to focus on their new star scorer's choice of car, amazed to find that he didn't own either a Ferrari or Lamborghini back in the UK.



As the hype continued in the printed press, so too did the online frenzy, as 'Big Ben' endeared himself to the Chilean public further, sending a shirt to a young fan before following in the footsteps of the likes of David Beckham, Ronaldinho and Thierry Henry by becoming a poster boy for Pepsi.

"I was meant to fly home and then my agent called me to say they wanted me to feature in their commercial in Chile. It was another 'wow' moment, another great opportunity, and I knew I wanted to take it," he adds with a smile. "I was there for a full day and it was a mad experience; no-one spoke English but we got it done! I really enjoyed that.

"I'll be honest with you, I've listened to the national anthem and tried to learn it but when I first went over for the Copa America, it was hard for me to remember the words! I know the rhythm of the song and how the music goes, but I didn't sing it because I want to know all the words perfectly and not make a mistake. Over in Chile, they all sing it with passion but they knew that I didn't know it, so I just stood there proudly and hopefully I'll know it all soon.

"I've tried the 'Duolingo' app and struggled; I think I'm better if someone is speaking Spanish to me instead! I've got a teacher who I see twice a week and my girlfriend is learning with me too, so I'm not a master yet by any means."

Indeed, on his return, there were some noticeable differences, even if fluency in Spanish would have to wait.

Calls into the Rovers press office were jokingly answered with the words 'Hello, Brereton Diaz hotline, how can I help?', while his Instagram following had swelled to almost a million strong. His posts, meanwhile – translated at home by his mum – were now bilingual, and his account highlights read 'Fishing, Rovers, Chile'.

Not quite the 'Wales, Golf, Madrid' made famous by Gareth Bale...

On the pitch, the contrast was starker still. Brereton returned to England as a player with an edge and new dimension to his play. Having reluctantly lost the 28 league goals of Adam Armstrong to Premier League side Southampton, Rovers need not have worried, as they would soon be replaced with a helping of South American flair.



"I'M REALLY HAPPY TO BE PLAYING FOR BLACKBURN; WE'RE DOING WELL AND JUST HAVE TO KEEP GOING, WITH WHAT IS A YOUNG TEAM"



"I think the whole experience has matured me as both a person and a player," Brereton continues. "I went over to Chile, not knowing much, and think I've come back with additions to my game. I've got more aggression about me, more confidence and more motivation too. I'm really happy to be playing for Blackburn; we're doing well and just have to keep going, with what is a young team."

At the time of writing, the 22-year-old – who was given odds of 1000/1 to score 20 or more league goals before a ball was kicked – is the second top scorer in the Championship, and still proudly wearing 'Diaz' on his blue and white shirt. Named the division's Player of the Month for September, he's since returned to Chile for international duty once more, scoring a crucial goal – his first at home for La Roja – in a World Cup qualifier against Paraguay, before also finding the net against Venezuela.

His performances have brought social media to life once more, with a 'Brereton challenge' appearing on TikTok, and replica face masks appearing on high-street stalls across the Chilean capital.

It's a story which already feels almost fictional, yet one which also feels in its infancy.

"Ben is a very strange phenomenon, with that special rapport he has with people. He gives a lot of himself and he is growing in his competency," said Chile boss Martin Lasarte of the country's newfound hero. From the North West of England to the southernmost nation on the planet, Brereton certainly isn't without his backers.

"Even before I had any chance of going over there, I'd heard about the history of the country from my grandad," the forward says. "He loves Chile and doesn't stop talking about it. I'd watched Chile play when I was growing up and so it was just about learning even more... the whole thing is just an experience I'll never forget.

"If I'm being honest, I've probably met my Chilean relatives once, and that was when I was six months old! It's something I absolutely want to do; I didn't have the chance during my first call-up because of COVID and the number of games, but I'd love to see them. I know they're so chuffed that I'm representing Chile and have sent me a few messages, which is great.

"When I first got back to Blackburn, there was a lot of banter in the changing room and that was all good fun! It's been one big whirlwind... I'm just Ben, though, I'm just me."

So whether it's Brereton, Diaz, a mixture of the two, or simply 'just Ben', his has been a journey quite unlike any other, and one which remains fascinating at every turn, flight and film. The unexpected nature of the striker's story has made it an instant classic and, as he continues to fly the flag for the EFL halfway across the world, there's no doubt he'll do so as a humble lad from Stoke who knows he's living the dream.

What happens next remains to be seen, but if 'Breretonmania' hasn't yet appeared in the dictionary, it's surely now only a matter of time.



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At eBay, we believe the heart of football is community. It's where it all started. When the butchers and the bakers, the shipbuilders and the ironmongers, all came together to form the humble origins of our beloved clubs. And today, these same people, the shop owners, the tradesmen, and the small businesses, continue to be the beating heart of our communities.

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MEET DAVID McARDLE



My name is David McArdle, and it's a pleasure to introduce myself as the EFL's Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

I've been working in the sports field for pretty much my full career over the past 15 years, primarily with the Scottish Football Association. I have plenty of experience in EDI areas, working with girls and women's youth football and being Para Football Manager in the Scottish FA for eight years, creating opportunities for people with a disability.

Part of that was setting up a charity called Scottish Para Football, which was the world's first affiliated Association dedicated to people living with a disability. This provided opportunities for a voice to be heard in the Scottish FA Board structures and led to me dealing with 118 Member Clubs, developing structures and processes to challenge the behaviour across Scottish football. That journey has led me to the EFL.

The stance is Together Against Discrimination, and that encompasses everything – racism, homophobia, misogynism, sexism and ableism. Our job now is to talk to people and be honest about what we want to achieve and for them to be honest with us about where we've been lacking in the past.

We need to support Clubs and ensure that they are allies and leaders in challenging discrimination and EDI areas. We also need to celebrate what is good across the EFL and showcase that the power of football can change our environment and the society we live in. That's the vision we have moving forward as the EFL.

We need to understand the landscape that each one of our Clubs is forming, which will allow us to shape the type of support that we need to put in place. It'll be a two-way process, where they provide an idea of what they need and we explain to them what we think is required through best practice and expertise.

I want Clubs to pick up the phone and ask questions that we can then work together to challenge. It's important we create a safe environment for discussion, education and support. Hopefully, that produces a better product that is accessible to everyone across the EFL.

There are 72 Clubs up and down England and Wales. The EFL can be the face of EDI best practice and the great range of communities that we work with means we can actually make a difference. We have the potential to change cultures in 72 communities, which is a phenomenal opportunity and we have to utilise it in the best way possible.

Not every part of the country is the same, so we must have a vision that reflects our own environment. We need to work with Clubs to identify what their community looks like and what the population represents – that's what they should be reflective of.

In this country, we overconsume football. It's in the back page of every newspaper, it's on the end of every news report and it impacts on people's lives on a daily basis. It's important that we are visible and vocal, because no other industry has the scope of reach that we do.

How can we use the power of the EFL to promote the messages that are important to us and the communities in which we work directly with? It's vital that our message is firm, so that it is clear that we do not accept any form of discrimination in the game.

That includes online abuse, which has become a major issue. No individual should have to face discrimination online. I can never understand what it feels like to receive that hate because I've never experienced it myself, so it's about listening to the players and finding out what they want to happen to make their lives and jobs better.

I need to listen and be educated by them to understand that experience. It's my job to take that message forward and present that to social media platforms and put the emphasis on them to make a change, and we'll be there to support when they make those changes.

Ultimately, now is the time for us to consult with as many people as we can, in order to truly understand what challenges people face and what barriers they have. We want to be innovative and do things that only the EFL can do because of the size of the organisation, the diversity of our Clubs and the scope that we have across England and Wales to make that difference.

I'm excited to start collaborating with Clubs and by the start of next season, we should be in a position to launch a sustainable and effective strategy that makes the EFL the best in class for tackling equality, diversity and inclusion.

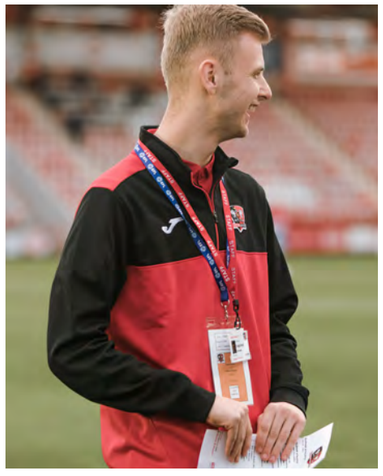
Since its launch in 2013, Clubs across the EFL have supported Rainbow Laces, with teams up and down the three divisions going bigger and better each year. **Exeter City** are one such Club that upped the ante this season...

Lacing Up Against Homophobia

Things could have panned out very differently for Exeter City Media Officer, **Craig Bratt**. Despite hearing homophobic chants on the terraces as a child that might have swayed him otherwise, he still opted to pursue a career within football and wouldn't change a thing about the path that led him to St James Park.

WORDS // HOLLY HUNT

Alongside his role at the Club, he has fostered a sense of inclusion and belonging at Exeter, by backing Rainbow Laces, among other campaigns and initiatives which tackle issues such as homophobia head-on.



"As probably one of the few 'out' people in the EFL, I felt a duty to help others that aren't as fortunate as me, so I do as much as I can to normalise that there are gay people that work in football," he begins.

"I was just so keen to help other people knowing that when I was growing up, I didn't have the opportunities that they do now. For me, visibility is key."

The growing understanding within football was one he described as a learning process for players and supporters alike.

In previous years, Exeter have sat down with members of the Grecians squad to expand and build on their knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community and educate players on how to go about reporting abuse.

"I did a Zoom call with our captain and one of our other players and in those, we just had a chat and spoke about the campaign," he explains.





"It's quite eye-opening that towards the end of my chat, he said he had no idea what it's like for a gay football fan because apart from me, he doesn't know anybody that's gay. He ended up asking me questions and it turned into a story about how players didn't know about it, but they wanted to learn more.

"We had some really perceptive comments from fans saying how powerful it was. I wanted to emphasise the fact that the players were socially aware."

And his turning point was a one-on-one conversation with one of the current crop, who initiated some simple small talk about his personal life.

Bratt continues: "Something happened just before the start of the season in the first few days of August when we had a training session at the stadium. One of our players sat out and I was just chatting to him in the stands. He said, 'you're buying a house with your boyfriend, aren't you?'

"Looking back five years, never ever did I think I'd have a football player ask me about a boyfriend, because five years ago, I didn't think football would be for me."

Exeter City have their own LGBTQ+ supporters' group, the Proud Grecians, which was founded by Alan Quick – a close friend and ally of the late Justin Fashanu.

"It was on 8 December 1992 that my late friend Justin Fashanu, the only ever professional footballer to 'come out' as gay, played in a game at St James," Alan says.

The country's first million-pound black player was playing for Torquay United against Exeter City in an EFL Trophy match when he made his appearance at Exeter's ground. Sadly, during his lifetime, Justin suffered both racism and homophobia.

He adds: "Exeter City has a great record on opposing homophobia and all types of discrimination, and it is a credit to the Club. City's One Game One Community Group aims to address all types of discrimination in football, including race, disability, gender, age, religion and sexual orientation.

"Fans, sports leaders and athletes are all playing their part in order to help kick discrimination out of sport. We have a long history of supporting rights for all, including taking a stand against homophobia for more than 11 years."

Members of the LGBTQ+ and allies supporters' group have distributed Rainbow Laces to some of Exeter City's community teams and Club staff, and rainbow armbands, along with corner flags and promotion in the matchday programme.

"We have to develop a culture where, from a young age, everyone understands homophobia is wrong," Quick says.

"Getting to this point will help change the culture of football, and perhaps even encourage players to come out and then become role models to the LBGTQ+ community. Rainbow Laces is a chance to celebrate the community and make everyone in, or connected to it, feel comfortable and welcomed by football.



"We have to lace up and speak up. Laces are a symbol of inclusion in sport and do a good job in raising awareness. We have to change the conversations and talk about why we are wearing them to make sure everyone knows that sport is for all, and that everyone should be made to feel welcome. By doing this, having those conversations, this leads and drives change."

This year, Exeter have plans to do more around the campaign, after the past year 'stoked the fire' of the issue-at-hand and while Craig is at Exeter, he will make it his mission to keep flying the flag.

"Every time someone says Rainbow Laces isn't needed, they are wrong," he notes. "It is needed for as long as there is a problem with homophobia in football, just as anti-racism campaigns are needed for as long as there's racism in football."

Top left: Exeter City Football v Homophobia

Top right: Alan Quick and the Lord Mayor of Exeter Cllr Rob Hannaford

Above: Alan Quick with collection of Justin Fashanu memorabilia

Opposite page: Craig Bratt, Exeter City Media Officer





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TACKLING ONLINE ABUSE

The EFL remains committed to combatting online abuse in all its forms, and will not tolerate any online behaviour that constitutes hate speech, violence, threats or criminal activity.

Having first been suggested by Clubs in the Sky Bet Championship and following a number of high-profile incidents, sport united across the world on the weekend of 30 April to 3 May 2021, calling on social media companies to do more to stop online abuse via a joint boycott.

The combined following of the accounts known to have supported the calls for change totalled over 1.7 billion, as English football's requests to social media platforms were shared far and wide across the UK and overseas.

Football authorities later proposed a set of recommendations to further strengthen the Online Safety Bill, in order to ensure victims of online abuse are adequately protected, and work has continued in a bid to reduce the prevalence of the issue.

In line with the boycott activity, the EFL provided its Clubs with detailed social media guidance – including the most efficient and effective methods of reporting online abuse when it occurs – and continues to meet regularly with relevant stakeholders as part of the Football Online Hate Working Group.

Through this forum, the League continues to explore the necessary action required, as well as further solutions, working alongside its partners in football and law enforcement, in addition to the social media companies themselves.

The EFL and its Clubs have also used their own social media channels to raise awareness of the issue while sending a clear message, uniting under the banner of the 'Together Against Discrimination' campaign.

Speaking in April, EFL Chair Rick Parry said: "The message is that we've had enough of the abuse. There's been too much of it and it needs to stop.

"Football is massive within social media. Social media is massive for us as well and we want to work responsibly; there's been a lot of talk and correspondence, but this is about action.

"The opposite of doing nothing is doing something in football. We've been writing and talking and there's been a lot of thought going on, but this is action, because we need to get the message out and reinforce to people that online abuse is just not acceptable. We don't accept it."

The EFL appointed a social media monitoring service for the duration of the 2021/22 season to detect and report any discriminatory abuse aimed at players across the League, working closely with the CPS, local police forces and the UK Football Policing Unit to ensure that there are real-life consequences for those who are identified as having sent hate speech online.

Alongside the various ongoing workstreams in this area, the League announced a set of Community Standards guidelines in December, which outline both the behaviour expected of those interacting with EFL content and the action which will be taken should behaviour fall short of those standards.



A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**

Almost two years ago, Mal Benning was subjected to unacceptable and inadmissible online abuse – an incident which set him on a path to stamp out racism as it encroaches on the game. And it wasn't the first time the Port Vale full-back had suffered racial discrimination.

But what more can be done to tackle the issue?

Disgust, surprise and anger. Just a snapshot of the emotions running through Mal Benning's mind when he first opened up his mobile phone to see a message which included expletives and racially abusive language, directed towards the then-Mansfield Town defender.

Rewind to a decade-and-a-half ago. Following trials at Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion and Birmingham City, he joined Walsall at Under-8s level and eventually made his breakthrough into the Saddlers' first team, inking professional terms in January 2013.

All the while, weighing on his mind was the pressure to succeed as he came through the West Midlands team's Academy.

"The older I got, I knew my chances to get into the youth team were getting greater," he recollects. "My dad instilled in me from day one that I needed to be that 20% better than everyone else to get recognised. That's stayed with me throughout my professional career."

Benning, now 28 years of age, recalls two instances of discriminatory abuse as he made his way through the Saddlers' ranks.

He was aged around 12 when he first experienced racial abuse on the pitch, which provoked him to storm off the field in a furious protest, unable to digest what he was hearing.

"At that time, there wasn't much noise about it. Both instances, I got angry to the point where the Manager took me off the pitch for everyone's sake. It's not on because I don't want it to scar any other Asian players coming into the game."

It wasn't until 15 years on, after signing for Mansfield in 2015 from Walsall, that it reared its head once more.

In January last year, he was scrolling through his social media feed after a training session when he came across a racially abusive tweet from an opposition supporter. Local police took matters into their own hands and investigated the incident, while the post was reported to social networking platform Twitter.

"I was taken aback when I first saw it," he says. "I clicked on his profile and saw that he was a Chesterfield fan. The previous year, I scored the winner against them when I played for Mansfield. I thought about it in the sense of, yes, I scored a goal against your Club, and that put them in the relegation zone. It was a big rivalry, but at the same time, it's football."



With over 250 appearances under his belt for the Sky Bet League Two side, Benning – who was christened 'Sir Mal' by Mansfield supporters as a nod to his heroics in a Stags shirt – praised the role of the Club's fanbase – with whom he had built up a rapport during his six-year stay at the One Call Stadium.

"Mansfield, at the time, were very good with me and made sure I was alright," he adds. "I texted the media man at Mansfield and he said, 'we'll deal with it as a Club however you want us to'. I took it upon myself to make it publicly aware that it's not on.

"I had a great relationship with the Mansfield fans. They loved me and I loved them back. When I made it public on social media, I got a great backing from them, which I did throughout my whole career at Mansfield. The love and support from the fans did help when I was thinking that I was playing football to put smiles on fans' faces."

Highlighting the importance of educating the younger generation, he discovered that his perpetrator was just 13-years-old; around the same age Benning was when he first witnessed racial abuse.

"I was disgusted because, at that age, you're still learning about life, in a sense. He had a picture of a Chesterfield player, but he was able to write what he wanted to whoever he wanted, but I hope he learned about it.

"The way kids are brought up now, they're brought up to know that every colour is the same and it's an equal playing field. I felt that I had to be better just to make it as a professional footballer being from Asian descent. That's one way it can help."

Earlier in June, the defender – who made the switch from the Stags to Port Vale in the summer – was named on Kick It Out's Advisory Board, as part of his mission to tackle discrimination head-on.

The EFL has continued to work with players, Clubs and authorities to combat discrimination in the game, releasing a League-wide anti-discrimination video in August as part of the Together Against Discrimination campaign, which encourages all in stadiums to call out abuse, report discrimination and to respect players and one another.

"More needs to be done," Benning reaffirms. "The people that got involved with me were very good. Hopefully, it can be stamped out to a certain extent. The people that do it, they know that if they do it, players like myself are going to make it aware to everyone. They know it makes the game worse.

"There's been more racial abuse in the last couple of years. We've been trying to get together and come up with ways that we can help because we can be there for players who do experience it, while at the same time, we're working on initiatives to stamp it out as much as we can.



"Back in my Walsall days, I played with Romaine Sawyers, and the fan that racially abused him at West Brom has gone to jail. We're trying to come together as a Board to help people that do experience it and the punishments that go with it."

Despite his own experiences of racial abuse, Benning is striving towards shaping a better future for football.

A role model in his own right, he hopes to inspire a new generation to take up the beautiful game, which could be even more beautiful without the threat of online and discriminatory abuse.

A streaming success

There is no doubting that the impact of COVID-19 made the 2020/21 campaign a football season quite like no other, yet for fans that were locked out from stadiums, the EFL's dedicated streaming service ensured supporters didn't have to miss a single game, whilst offering a critical financial lifeline to Clubs.

WORDS // **BILLIE MARSHALL**

OVER 360,000 FANS WATCHED THEIR TEAM THROUGH THEIR OFFICIAL CLUB SERVICE, IN 175 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, WITH OVER £43 MILLION OF REVENUE GENERATED ACROSS ALL 72 EFL CLUB STREAMING SERVICES LAST SEASON.

This remarkable feat was recognised at the Football Business Awards 2021, as iFollow won the Best Use of Technology in Football Award – an achievement that wouldn't have been possible without the continued support of Clubs, supporters and staff behind the scenes.

But don't just take our word for it – "The iFollow product has provided us with a fantastic tool to keep fans engaged with the Football Club.

"This was particularly true throughout the 2020/21 season, when the COVID pandemic kept them away from Fratton Park."

That is the view from Sky Bet League One side Portsmouth and their Chief Executive, Andrew Cullen.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the iFollow service needed to be significantly scaled-up in a very short period of time, having previously only been a facility accessible to overseas fans and a limited number of domestic midweek fixtures.

With challenging COVID-19 protocols in place, a number of logistical challenges needed to be overcome to ensure operations ran smoothly at all EFL Clubs. Remarkably, the iFollow operation converted to a full-scale streaming platform for the League in a matter of months, which is a testament to the delivery and supply team behind the complex operation.

All (non-TV) Sky Bet Championship fixtures are covered by four cameras, while all League One and Sky Bet League Two fixtures show replays and feature a far richer suite of graphics and branding, including in-play stats, team line-ups, league tables and substitutions.

Importantly, this gave the opportunity for over 160,000 season ticket holders to be offered free promotional codes in lieu of a refund or as part of a wider package as determined by individual Clubs, protecting vital revenue at a crucial time.

This saved Clubs an estimated £32m in season ticket revenue refunds, providing yet further relief in an unprecedented period for English football and its Clubs at a time of need.

As a League Two Club averaging over 14,000 supporters, Bradford City's Chief Executive, Ryan Sparks, reiterated the views of his counterpart at Portsmouth, adding: "iFollow is a platform we are really keen to help further develop and work on.

"It provided much-needed income during the pandemic, in the region of £400,000, which contributed to safeguarding the future of our Football Club.

"It is a service we as a Club are very passionate about, and we are dedicated to ensuring its long-term viability and continued success outside of the Premier League."

The passion and commitment of supporters up and down the country following their Clubs continues to grow, with 'normality' resuming following the return to stadiums in some capacity.

However, the importance of iFollow is more relevant now than it ever has been.

At the time of writing, iFollow sales in 2021/22 have increased on a like-for-like Club basis versus the same period 2019/20 by over 50%, with international revenue up and all video revenue indicating an upward trend.

The EFL's Chief Commercial Officer, Ben Wright, explained that the pandemic has been a 'habit-changer' for supporters, with the necessity to change their matchday routine, including watching on iFollow, a potential catalyst for the platform to evolve in the future.

"Having been through last season and what we did on iFollow, we have a balanced model at the moment, but we're having much more informed and open debates with our membership on what the future looks like.

"The Clubs are driving that debate – they now know there are different audiences they can cater for, and they don't believe that one will be at the expense of the other, i.e. attendances.

"You can't ignore the will of the supporter or consumer. What we're now getting is fans saying to us that they want to make more streaming available, but of course, we have to balance that with the live matchday experience for watching our Clubs, and broadcast agreements in place."

While attendance at stadia across the country has always been the priority, the iFollow platform allows supporters to follow their Club wherever they are and helps the modern-day supporter consume all aspects related to their Club.











"TO BE ABLE TO WATCH EVERY SINGLE GAME OFFERED A REAL LIFELINE FOR OUR PASSIONATE SUPPORTERS, AS WELL AS GIVING CLUBS UP AND DOWN THE COUNTRY A MUCH-NEEDED REVENUE STREAM."

Portsmouth Chief Executive, **Andrew Cullen**

As Ian Mather, Chief Executive at Cambridge United, explains, the iFollow service has simply added to the matchday experience for supporters of the U's, rather than impact them.

"iFollow was a huge help to us last season, both financially and from a point of fan engagement," he says.

"This season we have streamed games at every opportunity. I know some clubs have reservations that streaming will affect their attendance – this has not been our experience.

"Fans attend games for a range of reasons. The fact the game is streamed has not put them off coming. Those that buy iFollow passes are doing so because they can't get to the game. The net effect for us is a substantial growth in income and happier fans.

"What's not to like?"

After a thoroughly difficult period adapting to life in a pandemic, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Clubs and supporters alike, with the EFL's award-winning streaming service iFollow continuing to form an integral part of the matchday experience, now and in the future.



[BEHIND THE SCENES]

The Life of a Stadium Manager

While players, Managers and Owners dominate most of the headlines, Football Clubs are indebted to their staff across a range of areas, whose efforts can often go unnoticed.

The EFL's 'Behind the Scenes' feature puts the spotlight on the role of a Stadium Manager, which was revolutionised following the Valley Parade and Hillsborough disasters.

WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

During his 43 years at Cambridge United, **Ian Darler** has seen it all. Thirty-one managers, five promotions, six relegations, two Play-Off Final defeats, one FA Trophy triumph and a spell in administration.

Throughout the highs and lows, Darler has been a constant, having joined the Club in 1979 as the youngest-ever Head Groundsman in the EFL at the age of 19, before taking on additional roles as Stadium Manager and Safety Officer.

In that time, the U's stalwart has shouldered the task of complying with ever-changing laws and procedures while developing the facilities at Abbey Stadium, including the introduction of all-seater stands, electronic scoreboards and ticketing machines, divided terraces and a new drainage system.

"The job is relentless, you either love it or you hate it," he says. "On a Saturday, I'll be in at half 7 in the morning and be done by 8pm if we are lucky. For a midweek match, I'll be in at half 7 and won't leave until midnight.

"Years ago, the matchday experience was people just turning up, watching the football and going home. Now, it's about entertainment from two or three hours before kick-off and making sure everything is available to any supporter.

"Nowadays, pitches are in a better state, hospitality is massively improved and the stadium also provides income on non-matchdays, with lounge areas being extended so that we can have corporate events during the day. When I first started, there was nothing other than football going on here."

It's not just matchdays where the Stadium Manager is required.



Whether it's inspecting and repairing facilities, organising stewards, sourcing materials and equipment or communicating with the local authority, Darler is never short of something to do.

"I don't have a day where I come in and there aren't things we can improve or reinstate," he says. "Every part of a job is then documented on my maintenance list, which has been running now for about 20 years.

"Even something as trivial as replacing five seats goes on the sheet, so if anything did ever go wrong at this Football Club, we can show that we have a running maintenance programme.

"Before the clocks went back, the yellow edges weren't as bright as I would like, so we re-painted every set of stairs in the stadium, because the extra visibility is so essential when light drops."

Darler experienced the industry repercussions of tragedies at Valley Parade and Hillsborough in the 1980s, which drastically transformed the demands of stadium management.

"They were life-changing events," he continues. "Prior to the Bradford fire, I would be the only person with a key to unlock the gates 10 minutes before the final whistle. Nearly all the gates were locked during a match to prevent access into the stadiums, due to the threat of hooliganism.

"Before Hillsborough, there used to be barbed wire fences all around the ground to stop fans getting on the pitch. The focus was on controlling supporters, rather than safety. That all changed after those two events."

COVID-19 provided the latest challenge to contend with, although the 62-year-old was suitably prepared to combat the restrictions.

"Cambridge were the first Club to have a League game in front of a crowd after the COVID outbreak," Darler adds. "We had a contingency plan in place for a major incident, if somebody had been taken ill or something had happened structurally to the ground, so we were prepared to be a pilot Club.

"We put in one-way systems all around the stadium. It took me two-and-a-half weeks, bending over with stencils to put red arrows two metres apart everywhere. When people from the Government came to oversee it, they said it was such a simple process and they were happy with its effectiveness.

"I did a small video to help out other Clubs. Before and after events, we were spraying every part of the stadium. Even during the game, we had staff that ensured handrails were being cleaned regularly.

"Staff were so conscientious about protecting their own and other people's welfare and we didn't have an issue. We took on board all the information that was available to us and we can hold our hands up and say we never turned a blind eye to anything."

The developments made by Darler over the years have meant that fans are not just kept

Stadium Manager Responsibilities

BEFORE EVENTS

Inspect gangways, entry points and exits.

Test turnstiles.

Examine crush barriers.

Ensure there is no rubbish, missiles or combustible waste.

Test exit gates.

Check firefighting equipment is in place.

Ensure outside broadcast equipment is in agreed locations, including cable runs.

Ensure media activities do not interfere with normal safety procedures.

Test PA system.

Ensure all exit signs are illuminated.

All generators are tested on load 48 hours before event.

Goal post inspection.

DURING EVENTS

Ensure that litter and waste is not allowed to accumulate.

Ensure all exit gates, aisles and escape routes are kept clear.

AFTER EVENT

Carry out general inspection of stadium.

Ensure combustible waste is cleared.

Ensure any concerns are recorded for remedial action.

EVERY MONTH

Extinguishers inspection.

Generator test on load.

Three-hour full load test on emergency lights.

Legionella water test/ temperature tests.

EVERY YEAR

Inspection and service of all gas boilers.

Inspection and test of emergency lighting.

Fire alarm service every six months.

Kitchen extraction units cleaned/ serviced every six months.

Firefighting equipment serviced.

CCTV inspection service.

PA inspection service.

Barrier testing general electrical inspection – 20% of stadium per year with 100% inspection within five years.

Lightning protection inspection test.

Portable appliance testing.

Intruder alarms serviced every six months.

Turnstile monitor system serviced annually.

Television gantry inspected every six months and before each event.

Roof safeline inspection .

Structural inspection of the stadium – all areas, brickwork, terrace, steelwork, etc.

Medical centre equipment service.

Generator service/ inspection every six months.

Annual pitch floodlight lux level tests.

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safe and entertained during a matchday. In extreme cases, Cambridge staff have saved lives.

He recalls: "Over the course of 12 years, we've had three people that clinically died in the stadium due to heart attacks, but because of the extensive training and resources we have here, all three are alive to tell the tale.

"Within a minute and a half, they'd received CPR and were on a defibrillator. Every single steward on our books went through that training. Subsequently, I've personally saved two people's lives outside of football by being able to give CPR.

"I pulled a woman out of a burning house and she wasn't breathing, then the other one was my father, who had a heart attack at my son's wedding. One of our stewards has also saved a chap's life. If you follow the guidance from football and the EFL, it's surprising what you can provide to people inside and outside the stadium."

Over the course of his four decades of service, Darler has received many honours for his skills as a groundsman, while he was recognised for his longevity in the game with an EFL Long Service Award in October.

However, it is his charity work that fills him with the most pride, which resulted in the Cambridge Hall of Famer being rewarded with a BEM in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2020.

"It's an addiction," he admits. "At my testimonial game 17 years ago, I made a pledge that I would give East Anglian Children Hospice a chunk of the gate receipts. That was the start of 'Cambridge Charity Fundraisers' and it's rolled on and on.

"There are so many good things that come out of football; it has enabled me to raise money for so many causes over the years. I was also involved with the Heads Together campaign, coordinated by the Duke of Cambridge. Football is so powerful.



"I'VE LOVED EVERY MINUTE OF IT...I JUST DON'T WANT TO STOP"

"Pre-COVID, we'd raise between £10,000 and £15,000 each year for national and local charities. Most recently, I signed up to do one million steps in three months, with all the money going to Shout.

"Last Christmas, we went out and bought enough food to feed 10 families from a deprived area across from the stadium, with a full Christmas dinner, pudding and every kid got a gift. Being able to do that is better than any award."

With retirement age approaching, the fire keeps burning for Darler, who has no intentions of slowing down. And he has not forgotten about all the volunteers who have helped him along the way.

"In my 40th year here, the Club were kind enough to give me a dinner, and I invited around 150 people who had all contributed over my time here, whether it's the supply of materials, donations, labour, and so on," says Darler.

"It gave me the opportunity to walk around the room and thank every one of these people. I can genuinely show that we've had in excess of £1 million of freebies in 40 years.

"I'm already the longest serving member of staff Cambridge United has had, but I'm dreading counting down the years I've got left to go. My aim is to get to the magical 50 years and I've just signed a contract that could potentially keep me here until I'm 70.

"It is hard work and it is challenging, but I've loved every minute of it, even more so now I'm involved with charity work and helping people with mental health. I just don't want to stop."





Neil Warnock MANAGERIAL MASTER

Neil Warnock has made memories for fans of Clubs across the League for over 30 years. In November, a month shy of his 73rd birthday, he broke the record for games managed in English professional football.

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**

RECORD-BREAKER | **NEIL WARNOCK**

Everyone must start somewhere, and English football's longest-serving Manager was no different. A colourful character with a decorated CV, he first cut his teeth in the non-league pyramid, and he wasn't ashamed to bend Gainsborough Trinity Chairman John Davies' ear for an opening.

The then-31-year-old also balanced his chiropodist practice on the side whilst taking his first steps into management.

Stewart Evans became his first ever signing as a Manager and his brief cameo at Gainsborough paid dividends for the Club, after Warnock managed to negotiate a fee with Sheffield United for the forward, who was instructed not to play by the Board of Directors.

"I knew Neil from Rotherham, where I first signed professionally as a schoolboy," Evans begins. "I was already going to Sheffield United and there was a six-week gap before I signed.

"We had a mutual friend called Les Saxton and I was wanting to keep fit for those six weeks. Les said, 'Why don't you come over to Gainsborough and help Neil out?'

"I went against my better judgement because I didn't want to get injured before going to Sheffield United, but Neil smooth-talked me into signing a contract to play in the league with Gainsborough.

"The next minute, I'd gone to Sheffield United, and Gainsborough got something for it. It was a win-win situation. He would try anything to improve the Club."

Under the Sheffield-born boss, Gainsborough drew in record crowds and on the pitch, the team came on leaps and bounds. His style of play matched the no nonsense attitude that non-league football fans in the 80s demanded.

When he wasn't dragging his players around local pubs to play dominoes and darts with fans to drum up support for the Club, he was on the lookout for new recruits.

And he hasn't forgotten his roots, either. Warnock called into Lincolnshire to pay a visit to the Club that he owed so much to in 2016. With Gainsborough embroiled in a relegation battle, he headed down to the training ground one cold, damp Thursday evening to give the players some pointers.

After around 20 games at the helm of Trinity, Warnock received an offer he couldn't refuse from Burton Albion Chairman Ben Robinson. Little did he know that a decade later he'd be turning Chelsea away.

Trust in any Manager is key but former Scarborough striker Rob Gauden quite literally put his life in the then-Burton boss' hands when he re-joined the Club as First-Team Manager six months later.

Warnock's Burton paid a visit to his old stomping ground, The Northolme, when the two locked horns in the Northern Premier League on a Tuesday evening in November 1982, and Gauden came off worse from a bad challenge.

"I went in for a tackle with Andy Lodge which left me with a horseshoe-shaped cut on my kneecap," Gauden recalls. "Neil said he knew the local doctor, so after the game, I was waiting in this small room with Neil when the doctor came in.

"He had three or four goes at threading the needle and I said to Neil, 'Are you sure this is a good idea?' and he replied, 'Yes, he's the best.' So, Neil gave me a towel to bite on, and eight stitches later, my knee was now twice the normal size!"

He laughs: "The doctor went back to the bar and then Neil said, 'I wouldn't have let him anywhere near me.'"

Gauden, who was purchased for a nominal fee of £500, turned out to be worth his weight in gold, netting the winning goal in front of 10,000 fans at a packed-out Wembley Stadium at the FA Trophy final – one of Warnock's many feats with the Club.

He enjoyed five successful years at Eton Park, but it was at Scarborough that he truly made his mark as a Manager. Under Warnock, the Seagulls became the first team to win automatic promotion to the League in 1986/87.



"Neil's marmite – you either love him or you hate him," Evans admits, matter-of-factly. "He's a typical northerner and a spade is a spade with him. He's had a lot of players go through the game with him and been loyal to them. Once you get a bit trust in Neil, he has you for life."

One such player that stuck by Warnock's side was Stewart Mell. The Doncaster-born forward joined Burton from Halifax Town and when Warnock began handing out whiskies before kick-off, he knew he was on to something good.

"I played under Billy Bremner, the former Leeds captain, at Doncaster Rovers and he knew the game inside out – he was a master tactician – but what he didn't have was Neil Warnock's man management skills," Mell explains.

"What struck me about Neil was how brilliant he was at getting the best out of his players. I've experienced it in football where you sometimes get little cliques at Clubs, but Neil wouldn't have any of that.

"He always had a fantastic team spirit. It was like being in a holiday camp. We had a fantastic time but when everyone got on the pitch, everyone knew what they were doing. He's a psychologist and that's what helps him."

Even now, with seven others to choose from, Warnock still recognises his promotion with Scarborough as one of his greatest achievements, ranking alongside managing his boyhood Club Sheffield United and guiding Cardiff City to the Premier League against all odds.

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Top: Neil Warnock and his Scarborough team in 1987.

Right: Warnock in his most recent managerial role at Middlesbrough

Leading marksman Mell, whose goals fired Scarborough back into the League, adds: "All of these things have helped to springboard Neil to the positions he's had since. That was one of his first forays of success."

Warnock succeeded Harry Dunn as Scarborough manager, which came as quite the culture shock to supporters.

The EFL veteran was nothing like his predecessor, who was described as modest, polite and quietly spoken by fans. Warnock, on the other hand, was a different kettle of fish.

As a youngster, Mitch Cook was something of a blank canvas for Warnock to shape into a new player when he landed the Scarborough job, and even the players couldn't quite believe their luck when they did the impossible and reached the promised land.

"Nobody had heard of him when he came to Scarborough," Cook comments. "I was one of 15 new players he brought in to overhaul the Club. At the beginning of the season, we were 60/1 outsiders and we ended up being the first team to get automatic promotion to the English Football League!

"He created a camaraderie like he does everywhere. You can see it even now. We had nights out that everyone had to go to. We had 13 1-0 wins in the season. I don't know how he did it."

The forward, who also had a short spell on the books of Warnock's most recent employer Middlesbrough, blossomed under the Manager's tutelage, with Warnock possessing a knack for when a player needs an arm around the shoulder, as opposed to the tough love approach.

He adds: "I wasn't having a particularly good game one time and people were shouting 'He's useless' and 'Get him off.' He didn't, so I went to see him to ask him why. He said, 'One thing that you do, Cooky, even if you're playing crap, you'll try your hardest.'

"He said, 'Every week you're a six or a seven out of 10, whereas my superstar can be a four out of 10 one week and a nine the next week.' It made me feel 10-feet tall and gave me such confidence."

Warnock's tactics were slightly more unorthodox back in the day and there are even stories that the Seagulls jammed the away dressing room window to eavesdrop on team talks or turn off the heating in the opposing team's facilities.



"NEIL'S MARMITE – YOU EITHER LOVE HIM OR YOU HATE HIM. HE'S A TYPICAL NORTHERNER AND A SPADE IS A SPADE WITH HIM"

"Me and a lad called Steve Richards were social secretaries in charge of organising get-togethers and looking after the kitty," Cook reminisces. "He'd come on the night outs and there'd be a Club fine if you didn't go.

"Neil used to go to the Board of Directors and get £100 if we won the game and they'd tell him to get all the lads a drink. He'd pull me and Steve Richards in and say, 'Lads, I've got you £50 for a drink'. We thought it was great because we got £50 but years down the line at a reunion, we found out it was £100!"

Even now, Warnock struggles to stay away from football or, more specifically, the EFL, and whether they'd like to admit it or not, supporters of each of the 72 Clubs crave him.

His passion for the game shines through in his touchline antics, charged personality and animated self.

He is relatable, revered and remarkable.

He is Neil Warnock.


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1899
Huddersfield Town
P·A·F·C
Oldham Athletic
AFC
1895
SHEFFIELD UNITED F.C.
1889
CRYSTAL PALACE F.C.
QUEENS PARK RANGERS
1882
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Keeping Football Safe

WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

The EFL is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults at risk, and expects all staff and volunteers to share this commitment.

Earlier this year, the FA published the Sheldon Report, which investigated historical sexual abuse allegations in football. Former England international **Paul Stewart** is one of the survivors, and now works with the EFL to support the industry in learning from what happened.

Stewart, who made over 500 career appearances for the likes of Liverpool, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, publicly revealed the trauma he faced as a child in November 2016 and featured alongside many other victims in a three-part BBC documentary called Football's Darkest Secret.

Determined to make a difference, the 57-year-old has since delivered a talk to EFL Board members and spoke about his lived experience of abuse during Senior Club Safeguarding Manager training, alongside the NSPCC, which has been completed by all 72 League Clubs.

"It's great for me to be back in the game," he says. "Despite what happened to me, football was my life and it's good for my mental health because I feel like I'm giving something back.

"It does take its toll sometimes, because I'm talking about my personal experiences, but the comments from the Clubs and the players show that what I'm doing is making a difference and that makes me feel okay, so it helps me as much as it helps them, in a healing way.

"I genuinely believe that the EFL are at the head of promoting the importance of safeguarding. To bring someone like me with my lived experience on board, and then also taking the time to help develop my deliveries, I think that shows an intent.

"They've made safeguarding a priority, getting the CEO and Directors to listen about the topic and delivering training to every Club. With the courses they put on and the engagement they've had across the board, other organisations







need to take note and follow the EFL's lead."

The 1991 FA Cup winner is also providing safeguarding awareness to Academy footballers via the EFL's education partner, League Football Education (LFE).

Stewart has supported players at several Clubs across the country since joining LFE's collection of speakers on the Life Skills programme last season, which covers a wide range of identified subjects.

"After I came forward, I was invited to tell my story at various places and there'd be nothing afterwards," he continues. "People would feel sorry for me and pity me and that's not really why I came forward.

"My talk has evolved from just delivering about my own story since getting involved with LFE. What I faced back in the 1980s is completely different to what the youngsters are facing now, so I try to make sure that what I'm saying is relevant to the present day.

"Whether it's social media awareness, dressing room banter or consent, there are so many things I talk through and show the lads where it's gone wrong for certain individuals. I feel like what I'm doing now is far more educational and informative."

A particularly key message that Stewart drives home is the need to be open about any issues, advising the young players to take advantage of the extensive support network that is available to them.

"I try to express to the lads that it's important for them to make sure they enjoy the experience that they're embarking on," he reveals. "I show them my career stats, which look like I've had a really good career, but I didn't enjoy it because there wasn't the support network around that they have nowadays.

"I might have looked like I was enjoying it because I was one of the jokers in the pack, but when I was alone, I was dying. I just had nowhere to turn to.

"For the young lads now, no matter how big or small the problem is, they can go and speak to somebody and it's so important that they do. The game has come on leaps and bounds and there is so much support around.

"My key objective is for lads to start thinking, 'I'm not feeling great about that, I'm going to talk to someone about it'. The EFL and its Clubs have created a safe environment, where staff are all versed in safeguarding and lads can approach them and share their problems in confidence.

"It's also about being aware of others and taking care of your colleagues. You can't always tell if someone is struggling, but it doesn't take much to check in every so often and ask how people are doing."

Bolton Wanderers are one of many Clubs to receive Stewart's delivery in recent months. First-year scholar Abdul Kamara comments: "I wasn't expecting the details of his story, especially hearing what he went through and then still managing to play top level football for so long.

"Paul is able to use his experience to educate and give people the knowledge that they can go through hardship and get past it, with the support that's now in place for us. It's important to hear because it makes us aware that there are people who we can talk to at any time, no matter what we might be going through."

Meanwhile, Sunderland Academy youngster Marshall Burke says: "It was an eye opener to what people might be going through outside of football and how some people use football as an escape from all their problems.

> **I GENUINELY BELIEVE THAT THE EFL ARE AT THE HEAD OF PROMOTING THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFEGUARDING**

"I feel the message we learned was that no matter how big or small the problem, always speak to someone, and also be aware of any slight changes in the morale or behaviour of your team-mates."

It's not just players who Stewart is impacting, with his workshops extending to parents, carers and Club staff.

"Paul's talk was both deeply sad and a real-life reminder of the predators that unfortunately exist in our world," observes Richard Walker, Stoke City Lead Professional Development Phase Coach. "Paul displayed extreme bravery and selflessness in relaying his story in order to help us as staff be aware of potential tell-tale signs, if we ever were to encounter any signs of abuse with any children within our care.

"The lengths and manipulative measures used by Paul's abuser highlight how vigilant adults who have responsibility for young people must be, including an awareness of the smallest signs and dealing with them sensitively."





Above: Paul Stewart at Carlisle United
Left: Stewart at Bolton Wanderers
Previous page: L to R Paul Gascoigne, Erik Thorstvedt & Paul Stewart 1988

Carlisle United Head of Education, Scott Taylor, says: "Myself, the CEO Nigel Clibbens and the Board realise that safeguarding has got to be a priority at the Club. Providing excellent educational sessions such as this presentation by Paul Stewart is so impactful and helps spread the message."

Academy Sport Psychologist at Portsmouth, David Price, adds: "Paul's powerful and compelling story gives players and the wider coaching team a snapshot into some of the potential devastating consequences of poor safeguarding practice that can have a severe impact upon mental health.

"Through his vulnerability, Paul provided an informative and engaging workshop on best practice recommendations for safeguarding, as well as the power of speaking up and seeking support when faced with challenging situations."

While there is more work still to be done, Stewart's influence in establishing a safer and more knowledgeable football community cannot be understated.

"It is our duty to ensure that safeguarding is the bedrock upon which everything happens," explains Simon Williams, LFE Life Skills Manager. "LFE's Life Skills programme and the wider player care support within Academies is heavily focused around this to both protect and enable people to flourish.

"It can sometimes be difficult to make connections between safeguarding and the life of an Academy player, and this is where Paul provides a valuable education. The feedback from players, staff, parents and carers has been reassurance that he is having the desired impact and there are more and more Clubs requesting from our programme.

"Paul is an asset beyond LFE's Life Skills programme, too. He recently provided CPD to our staff and he is always striving to make sure that we are at the forefront of what is happening in the world of safeguarding."

EFL Safeguarding Manager Alex Richards echoes these thoughts: "Paul's positive impact to the work of the EFL Safeguarding Team is immeasurable. In order to create a culture of safeguarding throughout the League and our Member Clubs, people need to hear lived experience of child sexual abuse.

"I am so grateful to Paul for his contribution. It has been a professional and personal privilege to deliver training alongside him."

The latest development in the approach to safeguarding came in November, when the FA's new Play Safe campaign was launched during National Safeguarding Weekend.

Consisting of a series of short films emphasising key messaging and advice, the initiative is another step towards ensuring everyone has a consistently positive experience in football.

As a collective, the FA Survivor Support and Safeguarding Advisory Group states: "Learning from the past is crucial, so that we can prevent the horrific experiences that happened to us and so many others in football from happening again.

"As a group of survivors, we fully support the ethos and important messages that Play Safe conveys – whether to Club officials, parents/carers or vitally, children and young people themselves.

"Equally important is that Play Safe is not a one-off campaign. It will be used at key points in the football calendar to remind everyone in football that children's welfare and keeping them safe should be at the heart of all that we do."



PLAYER INTERVIEW | **CONOR GALLAGHER**

ROCK 'N' ROLL STAR

Meet **Conor Gallagher**, the all-action midfielder lighting up the top-flight, and whose journey – like so many others – both began and developed with the help of EFL competition...

Most players would be forgiven for wanting to erase the memory of a 3-0 midweek defeat at Newport County, not to mention the journey home, but it's one Conor Gallagher won't be forgetting in a hurry.

For the midfielder, that Tuesday evening in September 2018 with Chelsea's starlet-laden Under-21 side marked the start of what has since become an eye-catching career in the senior game.

WORDS // **RYAN GRANT**

Defeat in the EFL Trophy that night was merely a footnote. The opportunity afforded to the Blues youngsters was priceless, and one which had seen them going from playing for pride to playing for silverware; from playing against boys to playing against men.

As the players themselves will so often allude to, it's the kind of platform for which there's no substitute, and Gallagher is no different.

"I remember it clearly," he says, speaking immediately after finishing training at his current loan Club, Crystal Palace. "Those were always big games because the Trophy gives you a chance to play against men, and they were usually at Stamford Bridge or at the opponent's stadium, so I really enjoyed them."

Indeed, Gallagher made four appearances in the competition that season and, ultimately, they would prove more than enough for him to impress. Like Chelsea team-mate Callum Hudson-Odoi and former England Under-21 team-mate Declan Rice before him, he would be able to use the competition as a springboard.

Also in the squad to face Newport were the likes of Marc Guehi, Billy Gilmour and Tariq Lamptey, all of whom are currently playing in the limelight of the top-flight, and whose names help make up a long list of similar success stories.

"Yeah, just thinking back to that side, there will be quite a few boys who have gone on to play in either the Premier League or EFL," he adds.

"I would have only been 18 at the time, so it was all about learning, and to play against men was really important in that sense. At Chelsea, in the Academy, the Manager always wanted us to prepare for when we did go out on loan or play first-team football, and that was great. To have those experiences in the EFL Trophy was great for me.

"After losing to Newport, I think we then went and beat Plymouth 5-0, so it was great for us in terms of helping the players understand the level."

Gallagher's name was soon on the radar of Clubs across the land, attracting interest from various EFL sides, particularly after claiming a Europa League winner's medal with Chelsea and being named the Club's Academy Player of the Year for the 2018/19 season.

And it didn't take him long to justify the hype.

August of that year brought both a new Blues contract and loan move to Sky Bet Championship side Charlton Athletic; and with it, a chance to earn his stripes further.

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"My time in the EFL was unreal," he says with a reminiscent smile. "I was nervous, but a move to the Championship was important to me and Charlton were a perfect fit. I started well and my confidence just grew from the very start; I began believing in myself more and more as the games went on, and from there I think I've improved a lot as both a player and a person."

Indeed, just weeks after making his Addicks debut, the plaudits continued to pour in, both in the form of praise from players and pundits, and an EFL Young Player of the Month award.

"It was amazing to be recognised like that in my first month," he adds. Gallagher had been deployed as a box-to-box midfielder by then Manager Lee Bowyer, and it was working.

"It was a surprise, you might say, because I didn't expect to come in and play straight away, but I scored a few goals and it almost came out of nowhere. I didn't let it get to my head; I carried on working hard and it just gave me confidence to go and improve even more.

"I loved it at Charlton; the fans were great, and they always supported me. The experience and the confidence it gave me were priceless."

In six successful months in South East London, Gallagher scored six goals, before being recalled by his parent Club in January and loaned back out to the Championship just 24 hours later. This time, Swansea City were his suitors, with their sights firmly set on a return to the Premier League.

Under the tutelage of now-Nottingham Forest Coach Steve Cooper, it was there that the youngster would be tested by a different, possession-based style of play, and would be surrounded by the experience of Andre Ayew, Wayne Routledge and Nathan Dyer, to name but a few.

"My overriding feelings are happy ones, definitely," Gallagher says. "I was fortunate enough to go on loan to Swansea in January and that was a step up; they're a great Club and they were fighting to get into the Play-Offs. I was really excited to be part of that and, thankfully, we made the Play-Offs and that was an incredible experience."



And although the campaign would end in Play-Off Semi-Final defeat to Thomas Frank's Brentford, it had been a learning experience for many of the Swans' younger players, Gallagher included.

"I think the loans have improved me each time and that's been good for me and my development. Playing under different Managers with different styles of play or philosophies and playing alongside different players, it's all helped me develop. I look back on my time in the EFL with only positive thoughts.

"I can pick out loads of people who helped me on the way. At Charlton, they were all just normal lads and that was brilliant. Most of them were older and had families, whereas I was only 19 and still getting used to men's football, so they helped me a lot both on and off the pitch to help me feel comfortable. I can't name just one – so many players helped me along the way."

These days, Gallagher is a different animal altogether. With those positive EFL experiences and the advice of former team-mates and Managers still fresh in his memory, he's continued to learn and raise his game, taking his talents to new heights at Selhurst Park.

The bright lights of Stamford Bridge might have alluded Gallagher on a more regular basis up until this point, but the feeling among his fans is that it's only a matter of time before he's turning out for his boyhood team each and every Saturday.

"I strongly believe he has what it takes to get to the highest level," current boss and Arsenal legend Patrick Vieira said of Gallagher recently, citing the midfielder's "fantastic work ethic and positive attitude" among his standout attributes.





Top left: Conor Gallagher in action for Charlton Athletic

Top right: Gallagher at Swansea City

Above: Gallagher with Crystal Palace team-mate Marc Guehi

For many, there can be no higher level than representing your country, and with every member of August's England squad having either played in the EFL, come through an EFL academy, or made their debut in EFL competition, the trail for players like Gallagher has been blazed for some time.

His well-deserved call-up to the Three Lions' senior squad arrived in November 2021, in a moment which felt as much the end of one incredible chapter as the start of another.

"We've tracked him for a very long time in his loan spells at Charlton, Swansea, West Brom and now at Palace," Manager Gareth Southgate said when discussing Gallagher's inclusion.

With the quality of the League's three divisions improving year-on-year, we can be confident that he won't be the last EFL graduate to make the step up.



NEW BEGINNINGS

at the EFL TRUST

The EFL Trust, the charitable arm of the EFL, appointed a new Chair in September, with **Liam Scully** – Chief Executive of Lincoln City and Trustee of the Lincoln City Foundation – taking over from John Nixon, who stepped down after a hugely successful 10 years in the role.

Scully sat down with **Jack Wylie** to discuss his arrival, objectives and the pivotal work being done by Football Clubs and Club Community Organisations (CCOs) up and down the country...

First of all, what interested you in the role of becoming Chair of the EFL Trust?

At 16 years of age, I was fortunate to be offered an apprenticeship, funded by The PFA, working as a community coach at Doncaster Rovers Football in the Community. I achieved lots of qualifications and was lucky enough to be kept on full-time. I enjoyed a 15-year career working in that side of the game, so I'm incredibly indebted to CCOs.

I've walked a mile in various shoes in football during 21 years in the industry and this enables me to understand both sides. Hopefully, my influence, my knowledge and my experience can maximise the potential and the reach to ensure that we have the maximum impact within our communities.

What do you hope to bring to the role?

Right now, it's an interesting time for football and I think we've got a great opportunity. I think my experience and my slightly different way of working can help the EFL Trust, both proactively as we come out of a pandemic, but also by maintaining and respecting the legacy and hard work that's gone on.

I'm really respectful of where the Trust has come from, but equally very excited to be leading this area of the game and fundamentally driving partnerships and collaboration to maximum effect.

How vital are Football Clubs to their communities?

Incredibly so. The things that Football Clubs can do as lynchpins and cornerstones of the community, with their social reach and ability to engage, it's like no other.

The world has looked very different for the last 12 to 18 months. Elements such as loneliness, healthy lifestyle and active living took a real setback while we've had to operate in a world with social distancing, home working and lockdown.

I think that's where our Football Clubs can have a key impact going forward and they've also had a phenomenal impact over the last 12 to 18 months by what they've been doing virtually and through the existing structures.

How have you seen Football Clubs respond to COVID and make an impact to support communities?

One thing we can do as we look back on the last 18 months is be incredibly proud of Football Clubs for the way they've reacted and how they've contributed to keeping communities safe and together, helping to deal with the challenges that people have faced.

We've seen great stories of Football Clubs distributing resources or ringing up the fanbase to have conversations with them and seeing how people are.

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We can look at this from a national perspective and we can look at the reach, but fundamentally, this boils down to lots of one-to-one interactions and that's where Football Clubs and CCOs have done an incredible job.

Football Clubs on a Saturday at 3 o'clock are a phenomenal place for community cohesion and bringing people from all different walks of life together. We lost that for a period of time, and I think what Football Clubs did really well through their CCOs is manufacture or artificially recreate those opportunities in a sincere and heartfelt manner.

Does that show that there are a lot of 'unsung heroes' working within Football Clubs that maybe don't get the coverage they deserve?

We absolutely know that the stars of our show are the 22 blokes that run around on the green rectangle. What we are seeing, and it's not always in the public eye, is that these players are human beings who are incredibly committed to the communities of the Clubs they play for. Footballers have done an incredible job of engaging with their communities during this time.

In addition to that, team members based within CCOs and within Football Clubs, either where it is their day-to-day job or where they've made it their day-to-day job during the pandemic, they've just done some incredible things.

The return of fans in stadiums this season has been a huge positive. How important is it for supporters to be back in the ground, and for the Clubs to get that support back?

I was incredibly emotional walking into the stadium on that first Saturday with fans back. One thing that we are very clear about is that football is nothing without the fans. Having them back was incredibly important for our game, not just purely from a financial point of view, but from a community aspect.

A full stadium, fans of two teams cheering on their players, the rollercoaster of emotions that you go through from 3 o'clock till 5 to 5 on a Saturday. We recognise some of the changes and the evolution for the future, but that is our sport and without fans in stadiums, we don't have an industry.

When you delve into the core values of the Trust, there is a vast amount of work to cover all demographics and there is no one 'left behind', so to speak...

Football is for all. We know that and we've got to make sure that we continue to actively engage with communities across the breadth and depth of the UK



and further afield to ensure that they feel included within their Football Clubs. I'd like to think we're doing a great amount of work in this area.

Football is a leveller and a unifier. It brings people together. Culture and strategy can have a real multiplying effect and that's where I'm incredibly excited about my role within the EFL Trust, as well as being a serving Executive in football.

If we continue to work at pushing the boundaries and creating those opportunities, it can only have a significant lasting impact for our game as a sport and an industry, as well as communities and the challenges that they face, from Carlisle to Plymouth.

Thinking about a specific initiative, Fit Fans has been particularly successful and shows that Clubs can motivate and inspire fans in a positive way...

Fit Fans is a very noteworthy example of what can be achieved and we're so proud of all the participants and all those that have engaged. We do look at the scale and size of the programme and the numbers are incredibly impressive, but I get most joy when I hear the individual stories about the significant changes that it has made to people's lives.

You can pick various areas and what you can fundamentally see is that through a lot of hard work and determination, we are absolutely harnessing the power of the sport with some very skilled and dedicated practitioners and specialists, be that in health, education or community cohesion.

Inclusion and anti-discrimination are also core areas of focus for the Trust. Having an ambassadorial role with the Asian Sports Foundation, is that something you feel you have a level of expertise to bring to the table?

I'm incredibly humbled that I'm in a position of responsibility as Chief Executive of a Football Club and it is my duty to make sure that we are welcoming and inclusive to all.

We know society has challenges and we know that not all environments are welcoming to minority groups, but I think, collectively, we can continue to challenge some of the issues that we do have in society and use the power of football for good.

We have a social responsibility, and we take that seriously. What we have seen since football and stadiums have been full is Clubs being very proactive, where they have actively challenged things that can be taboo.

They've set the tone and been an example for society as a whole and the most pleasing thing to see from that is the wider support this has had from communities.

What is your vision for the EFL Trust and, more generally, for Football Clubs in communities?

It's using the power of football to have meaningful impact, making sure we bring communities closer to the Football Clubs and the Football Clubs closer to their communities.

At Lincoln City, we are very aware that we are just temporary custodians of this

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great Football Club that's been around for over 130 years. We want to make sure that we protect Lincoln City as a community asset and we continue to bring pride, pleasure and excitement to the fans, but we do so in a way that is aligned and has impact with the community.

With the EFL Trust, the aim is to take those principles and broad concepts and manage that to a scale of 72 Clubs. It's about creating solutions to meet specific challenges for people in different areas across the country.

We've got to be dynamic and react to what we see out in the communities and make sure we adapt and continue to meet the community's needs. Football Clubs and CCOs are absolutely primed and in a good position to do that.

We don't have a crystal ball to see what's coming, but we can spot early signs and challenges. The example of tackling loneliness is a fantastic one, where CCOs, through the support of the EFL Trust, have done some phenomenal work in their communities.

You're taking over from John Nixon, who had been in the role for a long time. Did he leave you with any parting words of wisdom?

John's a really respected individual within football. He leaves a fantastic legacy and he's captained the ship phenomenally well. They're big shoes to fill and it's a big responsibility to hold.

John has tooled me up with the knowledge and given me as much wisdom as he can possibly share, but equally he's given me the space to shape things and take things forward, so I couldn't have asked for any more to be honest.

I have huge respect for John and the work he's done and there are others as well. In the past few months, we saw Keith Hicks retire from Rochdale Community Trust, having been there for over 20 years. People like that are the true ambassadors of this industry. It's my job to continue supporting them because that's where the difference is made.

If you look ahead 12 months or so, what will represent a successful start to the role for you?

Prior to the pandemic, there was an incredible amount of hard work put into the strategy and vision and it's my responsibility to make sure we deliver that.

We're operating in a slightly different landscape now and it would fill me with a sense of pride to successfully adapt to the challenges that we face. I'm very confident that we're going to have very meaningful impact within our communities.

> I would like to thank John Nixon for his hugely impressive and impactful 10 years at the helm of the EFL Trust. John's influence has seen the Trust and CCO network grow exponentially over this period, and he leaves a legacy of positively impacting hundreds of thousands of people's lives.
>
> The EFL Board believes Liam has the knowledge, skills and desire to continue his work and I personally look forward to working alongside him as we seek to strengthen our links with our communities
>
> **RICK PARRY** | EFL CHAIR

THE SYMNS STORIES

Back in May 2004, Peterborough United were heading in a downward spiral, which ultimately led to relegation from the third tier of English football a year later.



WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

"I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO HELP IMPROVE THINGS AT THE FOOTBALL CLUB AS A BUSINESS AND ENTITY, FOR THE SUPPORTERS AS INDIVIDUALS, AND FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AS WELL"

However, a key recruit at that time contributed enormously to halting the fall. Not a big money signing or addition to the coaching staff, but a former Executive Manager of a catering and leisure company, named Bob Symns.

Taking up the role of Chief Executive and freeing up Barry Fry to focus on running the football side of things, Symns' business background stabilised the Club off the pitch, and allowed them to prosper on it.

"We were a Club that was more worried about going down to the Conference than going up," he admits. "Money was tight and it was a difficult time.

"I started to put in building blocks for the Club. We needed to have good relationships with the banks, the City Council and the safety authorities. We had to build from the bottom up, so that's what I did.

"The way I describe it is I'm like the conductor of an orchestra. I can't play the piano, I can't play the trumpet, I'm no good on the violin and I'm terrible on the flute, but what I can do is bring them all together as a unit. I tried to build a group of people that would give us what we needed across all the departments, whether it's finance, administration, retail, hospitality, groundskeeping, media, cleaning and so on.

"Once we brought in Darren Ferguson and the new Owner, Darragh McAnthony, came in, things started to rocket and we got the back-to-back promotions, which were great reward for all the work that went on behind the scenes. It was a long and winding road, but we got there."

Symns called time on his lengthy stint as CEO in October, retiring after being a custodian of the Club through four promotions and an EFL Trophy success, although it is his impact in the community that will be the lasting legacy.

"The Club is in a good place having got back up into the Championship," he says with a satisfied smile. "Football Clubs mean more than just the results on the pitch, though. I see Peterborough as a Community Club and the impact spreads far wider than just 90 minutes every Saturday.

"No matter where you are in the country, you'll have a diverse group of people living in your area. There are people who are comfortably well off and there are those that are really struggling in life – a lot of them through no fault of their own. I just think it's part of our responsibility to support those people in need.

"We've seen kids come through here that couldn't afford a football kit or pair of boots, who are going to be very high profile, very clever and very successful footballers as they get older, and they wouldn't have had the chance to do that if we as a Football Club hadn't have been able to pick them up, look after them, get them to training, support the family by being able to kit them out and things like that.

"For old folk like myself, we bring them along to the Football Club once a month and bring in old players to have a chat with them about their experiences and memories. It's an absolute joy to welcome them to the Club, have a cup of coffee and a biscuit and talk about the old days. We can't do enough of that."

The importance of Clubs to their communities has never been more evident than the time following the outbreak of COVID-19. Symns and the rest of the Club stepped up to support those in need.

He continues: "We opened breakfast camps and took food out to people. I did some deliveries myself to some of our elderly supporters and that was very emotional. I was also taking signed shirts around to



people who we knew lived on their own or people who had been particularly ill.

"That's the sort of thing you can do as part of a Football Club. You can change someone's day and show them that there are people out there who care about them.

"We set up as a vaccination centre for a period and we've also opened up as a flu centre, just to try and help where we can. You can't guarantee to people that you'll help them on a matchday, but we can guarantee it off the pitch and that's just as important, if not more so, in my opinion."

Among his long list of achievements, one of Symns' proudest came very recently, when the Club managed to secure approval for a dome as part of the Category Two Academy status application, which will not only support the Club's young players of the future, but also help the local community via work with the Foundation.

"Initially, the City Council didn't give us planning permission to build the dome," says Symns. "Myself and the Head of Academy, Kieran Scarff, went down to a Council meeting, where you're allowed two minutes to state why you think it should be allowed.

"I just read out a list of all the stuff that the Academy and Foundation do for the community, such as the amputee and girls teams, the soup kitchens that we run, the food parcels that we gave out during lockdown, all the stuff we're doing for LGBTQ+.

"All the Councillors were stunned into silence for a while and eventually said that they never knew about any of that. That was a massive step forward for me because that's the true legacy. This facility can help the community for many years to come."

"THINGS STARTED TO ROCKET AND WE GOT THE BACK-TO-BACK PROMOTIONS, WHICH WERE GREAT REWARD FOR ALL THE WORK THAT WENT ON BEHIND THE SCENES"

Symns' strong values and selfless nature have made him a popular figure at the Posh, with the news of his retirement being met with a barrage of sadness and well wishes.

"I was quite overwhelmed by the response; I really wasn't expecting it," he adds. "Retrospectively, I think it's just because I've been as honest and open as I can be, and I've always wanted to help improve things at the Football Club as a business and entity, for the supporters as individuals, and for the local community as well.

"I'd like to think that I've been approachable and always tried to help. It might be difficult, it might be awkward, sometimes we might have to put our hand in our own pocket, but it just means the world to me to be doing things to help people who are less fortunate."

With a new stadium on the horizon for the Sky Bet Championship outfit, Symns steps aside from a Club in a far healthier state than the one he arrived at 17 years ago. And one thing is for sure, the impact of his work will be felt by the Club and wider community for generations to come.



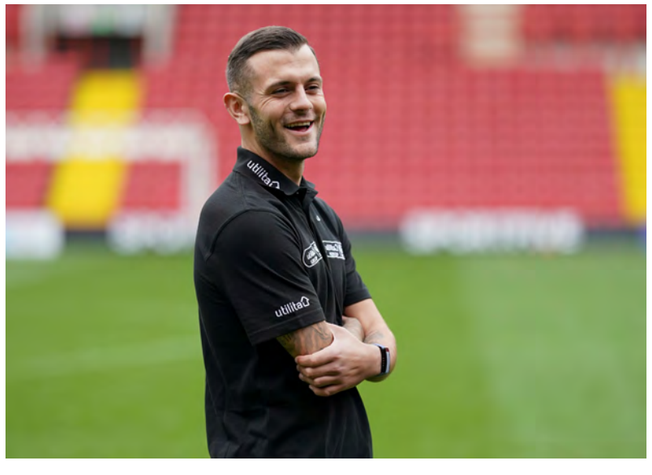


Next generation shine at Utilita Kids and Girls Cup launch

Charlton Athletic played host to the launch of the Utilita Kids and Girls Cup in October and there were two very special guests present to kick off the annual football tournament.

Jack Wilshere and Karen Carney were on hand to witness the next generation taking their first steps into the game at the official launch of the competition.

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**



Recent EFL footballer Wilshere and former England international Carney joined 16 young football hopefuls at the home of Charlton Athletic, The Valley, to officially start two of England's biggest national football tournaments for junior schoolchildren.

In between kickabouts, midfielder Wilshere, who was most recently on the books of AFC Bournemouth, caught up with the EFL to discuss the role the competition plays in the development of young players.

The 29-year-old notched his first goal for Arsenal in the League Cup in September 2008 against Sheffield United, chipping in during a resounding 6-0 victory. Wilshere made it 5-0 as the Gunners progressed to Round Four of the competition and it wasn't long before his first professional contract followed.

"I think Clubs and the EFL are doing a great job now with trying to involve kids from a young age, especially after the 18 months we've been through where everyone's been locked down," he says. "It's been good to get out and be active and play football.

"I'm sure every English player, in the EFL or the Premier League, at one point in their life played in grassroots. It's a start for everyone. We do a fantastic job in this country. I've got kids that play in it and they love it. The coaches are brilliant and it's a great setup, so it's very important.





"I think it's just about inspiring the next generation to go on and try to be a professional footballer."

And he encouraged the schoolchildren to get involved, with grassroots football playing an active part in many current EFL footballers' careers.

"It's nice for the kids to get into a proper stadium and get a little taste of it," he continues. "Hopefully it will inspire one of them to go on and be a footballer."

With a career under her belt that spanned almost two decades, Carney also knows a thing or two about playing on the biggest stage of all, but she urged players to set aside any pressures and enjoy the experience.

"When you have fun and you're smiling, everything is so much easier, and you play your best or you work your best," she explains. "There should never be any pressure. It's a joy to play football and it's a joy to be with your friends to grow together as a community.

"THERE SHOULD NEVER BE ANY PRESSURE. IT'S A JOY TO PLAY FOOTBALL AND IT'S A JOY TO BE WITH YOUR FRIENDS TO GROW TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY"

"I did local sessions in my community and it was really important. Probably my fondest memories growing up were here because that's where you learn your fundamental skills and where you grow the most. That's probably why I enjoyed it so much and the kids looked like they enjoyed it."

The annual tournament gives 22,000 boys and girls the chance to take to the pitch to represent the 72 EFL Clubs across England and Wales, helping to forge even stronger ties between Clubs and their local communities.

And Carney highlighted the beneficial effects of sport to her own wellbeing, citing the career paths of Manchester United's Scott McTominay and Crystal Palace's Will Hughes, who both won the tournament.

"Physical health and mental health are massive," she emphasises. "It's a great tournament. A lot of players have come through it, like McTominay and Hughes, which is pretty awesome. Now, having a tournament for kids and girls is really cool. It's important for communities for kids to get out there again."

The Utilita Kids and Girls Cup, which culminates in four Finals under the arches at Wembley Stadium, offers up the opportunity for kids and girls to play in front of fans in the country's national stadium; an occasion which Carney strongly encouraged participants to grab with both hands.

"Wembley is the home of football," she adds. "Every person wants to play there, male or female, boy or girl. The opportunity is one you can't turn down. It's a great Final to strive to be in."

Indeed, the competition could give rise to the next Jack Wilshere or Karen Carney, and it's only just getting started.

A Greener Future

In October, the EFL announced the launch of 'EFL Green Clubs', a new League-wide scheme that will help support Clubs across the country to improve their environmental practices and operations.

In a first for football, the initiative sees the EFL joining forces with GreenCode, the new environmental accreditation scheme born from the work of the team at Forest Green Rovers, who pioneered work at the Sky Bet League Two Club – helping it become recognised by the United Nations and FIFA as the world's greenest Football Club.

With the aim to share that expertise across its 72 Members, EFL Green Clubs will include an accreditation scheme that will benchmark Clubs' environmental rating, provide bespoke guidance and practical advice to help Clubs implement change and recognise those that excel in this area. The EFL will provide funding to enable any Club to access the scheme.

Billy Nickson caught up with **Dave Farebrother**, Chairman of the Board at Sutton United and a Chartered Environmentalist, on how one of the League's newest Members has already began its journey to becoming more environmentally sustainable...

Dave, you have been working with energy and environmental issues in the property sector for over 35 years. Can you tell us more about that?

After completing my degree in Astrophysics, I was working in the area of Physics, but my job at the time required me to work on a Saturday morning. As a lifelong Sutton United fan, when we won the Isthmian League in 1986 and were promoted into the Conference, I began looking for another job that didn't involve working Saturdays so I could go to the matches.

I then became Energy Manager for the largest property company in the UK at the time, which was a new role back then, but as wider environmental issues started coming to the fore, the role continued to evolve. I eventually became Environmental Director, and I am now Head of Environment and Sustainability at Bouygues Energies & Services.

Although I wasn't necessarily an environmentalist when I first started, there are very few people that have nearly 30 years' experience within this field.

So how did the role as Chairman of the Board at Sutton United come about? Have you been able to influence any environmental sustainability changes at the Club?

In 1987, I joined the Management Committee as Fixtures Secretary and have been on the Committee ever since.

About five years ago now, just before we faced Arsenal in the FA Cup, I began implementing the knowledge from my day job into the Club. We didn't necessarily have the capital to do what I wanted to do but we took the approach of any works planned, we tried to take the sustainable option.

At first, we produced a sustainability report which reported on our full energy and carbon footprint, but also included all of our community work, such as local hospital visits



and the work we were doing with schools, so essentially it became a full CSR report. This is something we will look to do again next year and repeat on an annual basis.

We then introduced an environmental policy and began to apply some straightforward changes, such as changing the single-glaze windows in our function hall to double-glazing, removing the radiators and gas boiler and replacing those with an electric heat pump. We replaced the old gents' toilets with waterless urinals and our showers now run off electric water heating as opposed to gas, while we changed our waste contractor to someone who recycles a large percentage of our waste.

Even what would seem the most simple thing of promoting the fact we are very close to a railway and bus station, so encouraging our fans to travel by public transport as opposed to driving, can make a difference.

After the Arsenal game, we actually replaced the old floodlights with LED lamps, and ahead of our first season in the EFL this summer, we have since upgraded those LED floodlights again to the most energy efficient ones we could find.







Top: Sutton United's Gander Green Lane, officially known as the VBS Community Stadium

Above: Sutton fans walk into the Club shop

Above right: Sarah Urquhart from Forest Green Rovers, Carol Shanahan Chairman of Port Vale, Dale Vince Chairman of Forest Green Rovers, Trevor Birch, Helen Taylor, Mike Evans during the EFL Trust National Conference 2021 held at St George's Park

What are your initial views on the EFL Green Clubs scheme? What role do you think football has to play in the environmental sustainability challenge?

Within my experience, I have realised that the majority of people are keen to do the right thing, but whether it's lack of knowledge, time, resources or because of other priorities, things get in the way.

EFL Green Clubs will be able to raise awareness and encourage Clubs to not let those things get in the way. Some just won't know how to make changes, so EFL Green Clubs will be able to tell them how they can manage their waste better, construct differently or manage their heating system in a more sustainable way and therefore, give Clubs solutions to their problems.

Wearing my climate change hat as well as my football hat, if we can get the carbon footprint of the 72 EFL Clubs halved by 2030, personally I would say that would be a huge success and can set the benchmark for football and wider society.

It's all about starting on the journey. I haven't done any science on that and whether it is achievable, but if we can collectively come together to implement change, there should be no reason why that couldn't be a realistic goal.



The Official EFL Podcast

Launched in February 2019, the Official EFL Podcast is the place for the best stories across the EFL on a weekly basis.



With thousands of listeners from across the world, the podcast is available on all major providers, including Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Google Podcasts.

Hosted by BBC EFL reporter Mark Clemmit from the start of the 2020/21 season and produced by Want Some Media (WSM), the podcast covers all three divisions of the EFL, as well as the Carabao Cup and Papa John's Trophy.

"We really get to the heart of the stories from across the EFL and I'm so proud of the work we do," says Clem. "I've covered the EFL now for more than 20 years and loved every minute.

"The best thing about this podcast is that the people we speak to get the chance to tell their whole story.

"There aren't the time constraints of having to cut the interviews down that you have to battle with on radio or TV. That means Managers, players and supporters all get the platform to get their whole point across. It's great for them, me and our listeners."

The show also highlights some of the most important stories from the EFL's Clubs in the community, as well as important initiatives such as Rainbow Laces and Not Today or Any Day.

"Some of these stories that we're covering are so important to highlight," says Official EFL Podcast Producer and former Radio One DJ, Dave Vitty.

"It's what makes the show unique. We get the interviews with the top Managers and players, but we also get the chance to tell the stories to support the League's vital campaigns.

"Recently, as part of a World Mental Health Day special, former players Darren Eadie and Chris Kirkland bravely discussed all they have been through and offered advice to those who have struggled, or may still be battling their own mental health demons.

"It was an extremely powerful listen. In an age where statistically it seems to be more and more common, especially amongst young men, this is an episode that everyone should take the time to listen to.

"We've also spoken to people in the game who've benefitted massively from the work the EFL Clubs do in the community. It's so inspiring to hear these stories and it's an honour for us to be able to give them the time and the platform that they deserve."

The Official EFL Podcast features the biggest names, best action and reaction to all things in the English Football League. It's available to download every Thursday.

EFL OFFICIAL MATCH BALL
PUMA TEAMWEAR

Fulham's players celebrate taking the lead at Bristol City with young fan Rhys Porter, who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and was subjected to vile online abuse after posting a video of him making a save.

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WORDS // JACK WYLIE

REMEMBERING THE DAY LAZARUS RAISED QPR FROM THE DEAD TO CUP GLORY

In the 61 years since the League Cup was founded, few finals have rivalled the drama of the 1967 meeting between Queens Park Rangers and West Bromwich Albion.

As a fixture, it will be remembered in the history books as the competition's first single-legged Final and first to be held at Wembley Stadium. But that merely scratches the surface.

West Brom were on the verge of successfully defending their crown, having claimed silverware in the previous season by seeing off a West Ham United side boasting the likes of Geoff Hurst, Bobby Moore and Martin Peters, who would all go on to win the World Cup just four months later.

Jimmy Hagan's team brushed aside the Hammers again to earn their place at Wembley, claiming a 6-2 reversal over two legs, including a resounding 4-0 home win.

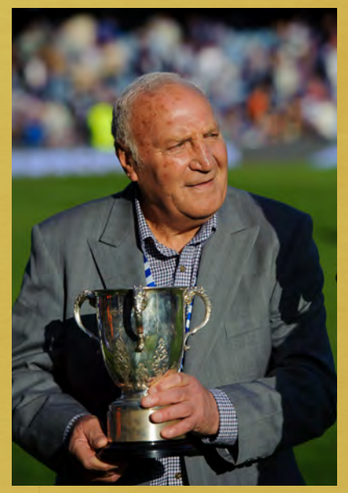
An established First Division outfit since 1949, the Baggies were competing in the European Fairs Cup – predecessor to the UEFA Cup – that season, led by a potent frontline of Jeff Astle, Tony Brown and Clive Clark.

In contrast, QPR lacked experience on the big stage, having built a youthful squad under manager Alec Stock, and fielded five players aged 21 or under in the starting line-up (Tony Hazell, Ron Hunt, Roger Morgan, Frank Sibley and Peter Springett).

As a Club, they had never previously reached the last two of a showpiece tournament and were vying for promotion from the Third Division, setting up a David v Goliath billing.

Watched by a crowd of 97,952, it was ex-Rangers player Clark who commanded the early spotlight, breaking the deadlock after just seven minutes before doubling his tally half an hour later as West Brom appeared to be cruising to victory.

But the Rs, who had scored four earlier in the competition against a Leicester



City side that included legendary goalkeeper Gordon Banks, had their own talented attackers and launched a comeback 15 minutes after the break, spearheaded by future England international Rodney Marsh (pictured right) – a £15,000 signing from Fulham 12 months earlier.

Morgan's header halved the deficit before Marsh took matters into his own hands – or, more accurately, feet – with a stunning individual effort, dancing past a couple of defenders and striking into the bottom corner from 25 yards out.

With top-flight Albion shellshocked, the Hoops seized their moment. Marauding forward from deep, Hunt came agonisingly close to latching onto a deflected through ball, although his collision with keeper Dick Sheppard knocked the ball loose into the path of experienced and aptly-named winger Mark Lazarus (pictured above).

The then 28-year-old, in his third spell at the Club, calmly slotted the ball into an empty net to complete a remarkable turnaround, and they successfully held on for the remaining eight minutes to become the first-ever team from England's third tier to win a major trophy, ensuring their place in QPR and English football folklore.

And the celebrations didn't stop there as the West Londoners sealed a League and Cup double, concluding a memorable season as runaway winners of the Third Division.

The League Cup success remains QPR's most prestigious to date, with the winning team being paraded at half-time at Loftus Road in 2007, while a special limited-edition commemorative kit was unveiled by the Club to celebrate the 50th anniversary in 2017.



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