The official magazine of the
English Football League

EFL

Issue 10 / Summer 2024



A CHANGING OF THE GUARD



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Welcome

... to the tenth edition of the EFL Magazine, which comes during the early stages of a landmark EFL season.





The 2024/25 campaign marked the start of a new era of broadcasting for the League, after a record deal for Club football was agreed with the EFL and Sky Sports, which will see 1,059 matches across EFL competition broadcast live each season.

The demand for live EFL football stretches beyond the UK, as showcased by the League securing record guaranteed international rights fees, with Pitch International and Relevent Sports operating across global TV markets until the end of the 2027/28 season.

And yet, while broadcasting figures hit record highs, stadium attendances are also on the rise, with more than 21.5 million fans being welcomed through EFL turnstiles in 2023/24.

In this publication, we delve into the details of the historic broadcasting deals and examine the numbers that saw the League achieve the distinction of being the highest attended league body in Europe.



On the pitch, we have in-depth interviews with Sheffield Wednesday Manager Danny Röhl, Portsmouth captain Marlon Pack and Wigan Athletic goalkeeper Sam Tickle.

There are further stories from across the EFL, including an insight into Bromley's rise to the EFL from Chairman Robin Stanton-Gleaves and a look at the life of a Club Scout with Lincoln City's Mark Tracy, while Carlisle United Owner Tom Piatak discusses the Club's marketing and commercial strategy to tap into the American market.

Elsewhere, the EFL's ability to develop talent continues to be on full display, with England's EURO 2024 squad being heavily influenced by EFL competitions, while a new breed of managers are learning their trade across the three divisions.

We also pay tribute to EFL stalwart Andy Williamson OBE, who passed away at the age of 70 in June. Formerly the League's Chief Operating Officer, and a Board Member of EFL in the Community and League Football Education, Andy's significant contributions over the years helped shape the game we see today, and his legacy will live on for generations to come.

With additional pieces focusing on the League's commitment to EDI, environmental sustainability and the new EFL Innovation Lab, there is plenty to talk about off the pitch and we hope you enjoy the content captured in these pages.

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EFL MAGAZINE
ISSUE TEN
SUMMER 2024

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This magazine was designed and produced for the EFL by:
Ignition Sports Media
www.Ignitionsportsmedia.com



6 **Trevor Birch: On The Up**
EFL Chief Executive Trevor Birch discusses the strength of the League, its ever-growing popularity – both in the UK and on the global stage – and the unrivalled impact of EFL Clubs in their communities.

14 **Danny Röhl: Ready to Röhl**
After pulling off the great escape last season, Sheffield Wednesday's Danny Röhl reflects on his journey to date and the experiences that have helped shape one of the EFL's youngest bosses.





18 EFL Broadcasting: A New Era
With more live football on screens than ever before, the 2024/25 EFL season is set to be one of the most ground-breaking English football has seen in the world of broadcasting.

36 Marlon Pack: Leader of the Pack
From boyhood supporter to promotion-winning captain, Marlon Pack talks about living every Portsmouth fan's dream.

46 Robin Stanton-Gleaves: Building Bromley
Bromley Chairman Robin Stanton-Gleaves gives an insight into his ownership model, having helped steer the Club to the EFL for the first time in its 132-year existence.

50 Andy Williamson OBE: 1954-2024
A tribute to the EFL's former Operating Officer, Andy Williamson OBE, who sadly passed away at the age of 70 in June.

52 EFL Managers: A Changing of the Guard
Whether it's on the pitch or in the dugout, the EFL continues to provide an environment for talent to develop, with young players and managers thriving in the process.

54 England Euros: The EFL's International Impact
Whether it's in the Sky Bet Championship, League One, League Two, the Bristol Street Motors Trophy or the Carabao Cup, every single player in England's EURO 2024 squad has an EFL story to tell.

68 Sam Tickle: He's a Keeper
Having made his England Under-21 debut in March, Wigan Athletic's Sam Tickle is looking to build on his breakthrough season at both Club and international level.

74 Behind the Scenes: A Scout's Honour
Lincoln City's Chief Scout, Marc Tracy, takes us behind the scenes of his role with the Imps to give a glimpse of just what it's like to work in recruitment at an EFL Club.











On The Up

In what has been a hugely successful 12 months for the EFL on and off the pitch, Chief Executive **Trevor Birch** discusses in his own words the strength of the competition, the ever-growing popularity of the League – both in the UK and on the global stage – and the unrivalled impact of EFL Clubs in their communities.



AS Chief Executive of the EFL, I can positively say that the past 12 months have been hugely successful for the League and its Member Clubs.

I am of the belief that as an organisation, as a League and as a competition, we are very much on an upward trajectory. Our competitions now rank among some of the most exciting, popular and widely followed in world football, as evidenced by last season's record-breaking attendance and audience figures which soared to new heights.

With more than 21.5 million supporters attending live fixtures across the Sky Bet Championship, League One and League Two



in the 2023/24 season, the EFL renewed its standing as the highest-attended league body in Europe. That achievement is testament to the strength, depth and non-stop entertainment that is on offer across all divisions week in, week out, alongside the passion and dedication shown from the millions of supporters in the stands.

English football has a unique structure that is envied worldwide, and the EFL sits at the heart of it. But it is important to remember that we are not just about football competitions, we are also the beating heart of communities across England and Wales.

The EFL is built on two core pillars: successful football competitions on the pitch and helping people in local communities off it, both of which are at their peak. It is that authenticity and community spirit, alongside the vast reach of our 72 Clubs and Community Organisations, that sets the League apart and makes us unique.

It is important to acknowledge, of course, that football as a whole faces some pressing challenges. Financial sustainability across the divisions being one of them, and addressing it is central to our goals for the future.

We welcomed the re-introduction of the Football Governance Bill earlier this year, which, through the introduction of enhanced regulation and financial distributions, will see us work collectively with Government to protect the football pyramid.

In the meantime, we remain extremely grateful for the commitment and investment made by our Clubs' owners and hope for a successful outcome in the appointment of an Independent Football Regulator, which will ultimately reduce the reliance on our owners.

However, these challenges should not overshadow the immense success and growth of the EFL.

And there are many reasons for that growth: the quality of football on display, improvements in the matchday experience and facilities that are made available to fans, and the improved infrastructure at stadiums – in that respect, the EFL has never been healthier.





On the international stage, the appetite for English football is greater than it has ever been. The EFL, riding the wave of the Premier League's global success, has seen a huge increase in interest from overseas. Almost 50% of our Clubs now have some level of international ownership and that interest is only rising as Clubs continue to get important exposure in regions they may not have had previously. It's a new dynamic for the League, but is a direct result of the success of our competitions and a reflection of how we have embraced the global stage.

Our recent broadcast agreements with Sky Sports and the new deal with CBS in the United States have expanded that reach further than ever before. While the deal with Sky Sports, in particular, is a landmark agreement financially for Clubs, both are testament to how far the EFL has advanced as a competition in terms of the quality of football on show, the technical ability of the players and the excitement of fixtures that take place each week.

We should be incredibly grateful that, in a broadcast market that has seen other European leagues struggle to sell their rights, we have enhanced our offering to such a large extent. Yes, it's on the back of more games, but the Sky Sports agreement is a huge uplift from what we've had before, and I'd like to think we have maintained the balance of the traditional 3pm kick-off time compared with the spread across the whole weekend.

But our success is not just reflected in recent broadcast deals – the football on the pitch speaks for itself. The Championship is the second-best attended division in Europe, ahead of La Liga, Serie A and the Bundesliga. Its popularity is ever growing and the quality of football on show often rivals that of the Premier League, which has certainly contributed to attracting a wider audience and interest in the game.

Likewise, Leagues One and Two continue to evolve, offering highly entertaining football and a level of unpredictability that keeps supporters on the edge of their seats. For third and fourth tiers, the style of football really is of the highest quality. This progress is driven by a real desire among Clubs, players, managers and owners to push the boundaries and play technically advanced football, which again has made the EFL product more engaging than ever before.



It is that strength in depth that I believe is the League's biggest asset and one of which we are extremely proud.

Off the pitch, we're in as good a place as we've ever been. Clubs' community work has evolved considerably over the years, becoming a fundamental part of who we are and what we do.

Alongside their respective Community Organisations, Clubs' work in their local towns and cities is having a greater impact than ever before. It's often easy to associate Football Clubs solely with the non-stop action on the pitch, but they are far more than entities that put on football matches every week.

Clubs are the focal point for many





EFL CHIEF EXECUTIVE | **TREVOR BIRCH**





local people in their towns and cities, cornerstones of identity and a key pillar in community life. They improve lives every day through targeted initiatives and deliver critical work across mental health, education, social cohesion, getting people active and much, much more. It is that football and community togetherness that continues to win the hearts and minds of fans up and down the country and ensures Clubs remain resilient, regardless of any challenges that may lie ahead.

Football has always been a resilient industry and the EFL as an organisation is no exception. Despite ongoing financial concerns that have been forecast by many for decades, football remains as strong as ever. Clubs are rooted in their communities, communities that will always rally behind them, ensuring longevity.

So, I for one am hugely enthusiastic and optimistic when looking to the future. Football is still the global game and I can only see the growth, interest and opportunity in our League accelerating, with the overall strength of the competition and Clubs continuing to flourish.



The Innov

Innovation has long been at the heart of the EFL, as it consistently looks to drive change for the greater good of the game, its Clubs and supporters.

Responsible for a number of game-changing innovations on the pitch over the years, now the EFL is taking significant steps off it, with the launch of English football's first-ever Innovation Lab, positioning the League and its Clubs as leaders across the football ecosystem.

Daniel Saunders is the Chief Executive of L Marks, a corporate innovation specialist that has supported many of the world's best-known brands in identifying and implementing pioneering technologies and solutions.

Here, he explains the work being done to develop an EFL Innovation Lab.



First of all, just introduce yourself...

For the past 10 years, I have been fortunate to lead one of Europe's most successful innovation companies. We've launched over 100 corporate Innovation Labs that have delivered immense value to our partners, supporting them to discover innovation solutions, deliver measurable outcomes and achieve strategic objectives.

Our alumni of over 450 start-ups have also benefited in validating and deploying their solutions and succeeded to raise over $3 billion in investment funding since being a part of our programmes.

I'm a technologist at heart and I began my career as a software engineer and data specialist, creating data models for the financial sector and helping build one of the world's first mobile operating systems. Immediately prior to L Marks, I spent nearly a decade in economic development, focusing on developing global business relationships.

For over 20 years, I have designed, discovered or integrated the latest technological advances into large, complex organisations.

Explain to us what the Innovation Lab is and what its purpose is...

The EFL Innovation Lab has been designed in an attempt to deliver tangible value to the EFL through the identification of cutting-edge solutions relevant to the challenges and aspirations of the 72 Football Clubs.

A first-of-its-kind in English football, the EFL Innovation Lab is a 10-week collaboration programme that will bring the EFL and its Clubs together with start-ups, scale-ups and established innovative companies. Through the Lab, several Clubs will have the opportunity to co-create, develop and pilot these innovative solutions that address the specific business needs of the EFL and its Clubs.

These participating companies will work closely with the EFL and its Clubs to demonstrate the value of their solutions, culminating in a Demo Day where they will present the results of their pilots. The ultimate purpose of the EFL Innovation Lab is to elevate the operations and experiences for the Clubs, the EFL and across the football ecosystem.

How will it impact how the EFL and its Clubs operate?

The EFL Innovation Lab is a significant step in the EFL's innovation journey, marking the first initiative of its kind to potentially deliver cutting-edge solutions to all 72 Football Clubs. This will position the EFL and its Clubs as leaders in driving innovation across the football ecosystem.

Over the past few months, including at the EFL Conference in June, we have worked with the EFL and its Clubs to start to identify the areas that would most benefit from being addressed through the Innovation Lab. The EFL and the Clubs will benefit from identifying and validating innovative solutions from across the globe that will enhance internal operations, drive revenue growth and improve external fan and matchday experiences.

vation Lab

What are the intended outcomes?

The intended outcomes of the EFL Innovation Lab encompass several key objectives aimed at transforming both the EFL and its associated Clubs. Primarily, the programme is expected to implement and launch new technologies and innovations across the EFL and its Clubs. These advancements are expected to bring about tangible improvements by saving the EFL and its Clubs time and resources, streamlining processes, considering new and existing revenue streams and enhancing the overall fan experience.

Additionally, the programme aims to cultivate a culture of innovation within the EFL, creating a self-sustaining momentum for future innovations, establishing the EFL as a benchmark for innovation within the global football community.

What is the timeline for the project to be launched?

Work for the EFL Innovation Lab is already well underway, and the plan is for work to take place throughout the 2024/25 season, culminating in a Demonstration Day in May 2025.

We're currently working closely with senior representatives at the EFL and several Clubs from across the three divisions, establishing priority challenge/opportunity areas that we can address with innovative solutions.

Applications for the EFL Innovation Lab are scheduled to go live in early October 2024, where we will be actively scouting for innovative companies to take part in the programme.

L Marks will then work with the EFL project team through a collaborative multi-stage scoring and evaluation process to select the strongest companies to be considered for solutions.

In the New Year, following the scouting and screening phases, a one-day event is planned for the best applicants to pitch their solutions directly to the project team and respond to questions and queries. At this stage, support teams are formed to selected suppliers and they meet with the project team to launch the project, define scope and consider KPIs.

The next step is for the selected companies to collaborate with the project team over a 10-week period to accelerate the creation, development and adoption of their proposed solution.

All that works builds towards the Demonstration Day, where participants in the Lab present their progress over the 10 weeks to all 72 EFL Clubs, before the project concludes with a full review, feedback and offboarding supported by L Marks, alongside detailed handover and implementation sessions.

Clubs will be kept updated on the progress of the Lab at appropriate intervals throughout the project's duration and come the end of the season, we are hopeful that we will be in the position whereby we have enabled shared innovation across all 72 Clubs, that has tangible purpose and hopefully delivers significant benefits.







EFL
INNOVATION LAB

REMEMBERING
Matija Šarkić



The EFL and the entire football community was devastated to hear of the passing of Matija Šarkić at the age of 26 in June.

The Millwall goalkeeper made 33 appearances for the Lions in 2023/24, having previously spent time on loan at Wigan Athletic, Shrewsbury Town, Birmingham City and Stoke City.

His final EFL appearance came on the final day of the Championship campaign, where he made a memorable penalty save at Swansea City to help Neil Harris' side claim a 1-0 victory, while the Montenegrin's last outing came for his country in an international friendly against Belgium in June.

Here are some of the tributes for Matija, from Millwall and across football...



"Mati was always a positive presence, and it was just a pleasure to have him with us over the past year. We are all going to miss him deeply, both as a wonderful person and as an excellent goalkeeper and leader at the Club. He will always be a Lion and part of the family."

James Berylson – Millwall FC Chairman

"This is devastating news for the family and for our Football Club. As a character at the training ground every day, he came in – win, lose or draw – with a smile on his face and he just wanted to be better. I can't praise him highly enough as a human being, in the time that I knew him."

Neil Harris – Millwall FC Head Coach

"I met Matija as a 17-year-old, signing him at Aston Villa, Birmingham City and finally, Millwall. We would spend every day either working together, texting or speaking on the phone. He was developing into such an amazing goalkeeper, but an even better human being. Rest well and thank you for such amazing memories."

Andy Marshall – Millwall FC Goalkeeping Coach



"His premature departure represents an irreparable loss for his family, our football, sport and Montenegro. A shining talent, combativeness on the field and chivalrous spirit are the qualities that adorned our Matija and for which we will forever remember him."

Jakov Milatović – Montenegro President

"A great guy, a human boulder, an example for everyone. A great goalkeeper. We were all looking forward to many of his performances in the future. The work ethic that adorned him was a guarantee that Matija would reach the heights he deserved. We will miss him at every gathering, at every training session, and at every game we play."

Robert Prosinečki – Montenegro Manager

"Words seem inadequate to express the sadness we feel for this loss. A young, promising, talented goalkeeper, known for his smart, bright and warm character, leadership and passion, his legacy and trajectory on and off the pitch will not be forgotten, and he will be truly missed."

Gianni Infantino – FIFA President

"He was just a pleasure to be around and I'm proud I got the chance to work with him. We've spent so much time together, on and off the pitch, and I'll miss him so much. I'll always remember his smile and his support. I love you, Mati."

Bartosz Białkowski – Former Millwall FC Goalkeeper

"Not only have we lost an incredible football player and goalkeeper, but one of the nicest guys you could wish to meet. I cherish the moments spent sat next to him chatting on the bus. We will always remember him for his charisma, humour and infectious approach to life, and I will truly miss him."

Billy Mitchell – Millwall FC Midfielder

"We instantly got along – we had similar morals in life. He was very humble, worked really hard, wanted to be the best and had worked his way up the ladder in football. He just wanted to keep improving. Everyone would say the same: you can't say a bad word about him. We built up a real connection. It's so sad."

Max Kilman – West Ham United Defender

"That penalty against Swansea is my last memory of him. He was the hero in that moment – it's a special moment to remember him by. I'm proud that I got the chance to work with him for a part of his short time in this world."

Jake Cooper – Millwall FC Defender



"He was very professional, respectful and well-mannered – a manager's dream. You knew when he stepped onto the pitch that he'd give you everything he could. As a character around the place, he was well liked. Everyone respected him. He was one of the good guys."

Lee Bowyer – Former Birmingham City Manager

"I've never met a guy who has such a thirst to improve as a player, but yet remained humble, polite and kind. You were and always will be remembered as an incredible professional and an unforgettable human being, and it was an honour to share so many memories. Love you brother."

Tom Bradshaw – Millwall FC Striker

"He was a young lad coming through at Aston Villa who trained with the first team. When I got the news, I was absolutely devastated. Just 26 years of age, gone way too soon. I just want to send my condolences to his family."

Micah Richards – Sky Sports Pundit

"Mati, my friend, my teammate, my brother. You were such a wonderful, caring, thoughtful person, a leader on and off the pitch and a man who I learnt a lot from. I will forever take value in the guidance you gave me every day. All I can say is thank you."

Ryan Longman – Millwall FC Loanee (2023/24)

"I didn't know Matija, but I had the honour of sharing a pitch with this young man. Sincerest condolences to his family and his friends. Rest in Peace, Matija."

Bobby Madley – EFL Referee

Left: Matija during his last appearance, playing for Montenegro against Belgium.

"Thank you everyone for the love and support shown to Matija and our family. It really shows the amazing person he was. I wish he was still here with us – I couldn't be more proud to say he was my twin brother. Life won't be the same without you. Rest in peace, we love you."

Oliver Šarkić – Twin Brother & Former EFL Player


READY



TO RÖHL

By the time Sheffield Wednesday named **Danny Röhl** as their new Manager midway through last October, it was all but a foregone conclusion that the Owls were doomed for the drop.

After enduring their worst start to a season, the Club were rooted to the bottom of the Sky Bet Championship standings.

Six games into his reign, Röhl's side found themselves 10 points adrift of safety, with just one win in their last 17 league outings – 13 of which were defeats. The situation was bleak, and nothing short of a miracle would save their season.

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**

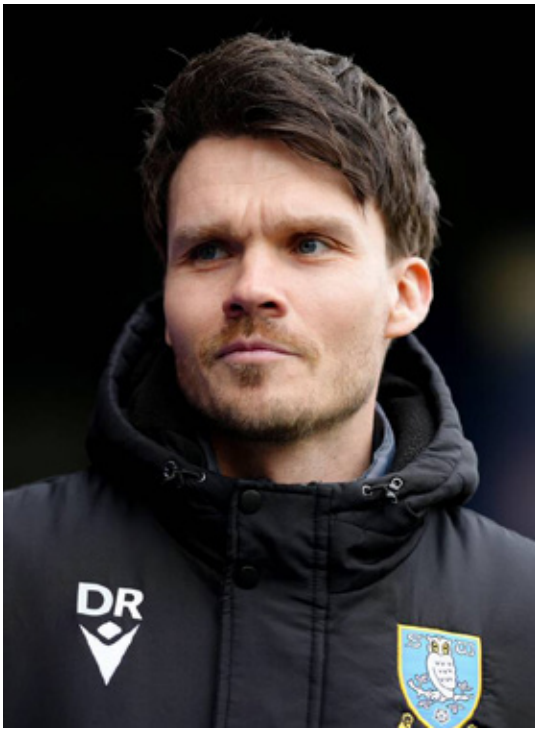
"When I took the job, a lot of people said it was a big risk," Röhl explains. "When we arrived, a lot of people didn't have the hope that we could do this. Even with a lot of pressure, I felt that I was in the right place. I looked at videos and looked at what it means to be a part of Sheffield Wednesday. It's not a normal Club – I felt that potential.

"At first, I thought, 'we still have 35 games to go, which is a lot'. What I didn't see was that we needed so many points to stay in the league. When you look back in the past few years in the Championship, sometimes 45 or 46 points is enough."

It was up to the new Wednesday boss to stop the rot, and the great escape was achieved under his stewardship as they finished the campaign on 53 points, not turning back after a 3-1 win over Blackburn Rovers in April lifted the Club out of the relegation zone for the first time since the opening day in August.

It was mission accomplished on the final day as the curtain came down on 2023/24. A point was all they needed when they travelled to Sunderland AFC, with their fate remarkably back in their own hands.

"The results weren't good enough," Röhl admits. "It wasn't easy in the first six games.



The biggest thing I've learned from this Club is about never giving up. If you look back, a crucial result was the draw against Leicester (in November) when we got the equaliser in the last minute, which lifted us. From that point on, I thought that nobody can stop us."

He might have been the EFL's youngest



I'm still a young coach but not a coach without experience."

manager at the age of 34, but what he lacks in age he certainly makes up for in experience. It's been a case of learning on the job, and he was no stranger to the predicament the Owls found themselves in, having been in a similar situation with Ralph Hasenhüttl at Southampton.

He says: "I'm still a young coach but not a coach without experience. In the training sessions, it's about football, which is what I've done for the last 10 years. But as a manager, it's about more than just football.

"Especially in England, it's different to Germany, where you have a Sporting Director very often. This was new for me – especially in January, in the transfer window and having to look for players, convince them and bring them here.

"You have to make the decisions and you're the picture of the Club – you're the guy who's at the front and you have to be the figurehead in front of the media and the supporters. Sometimes, as an Assistant Coach, it's a bit easier and you're protected behind the manager."

A conversation with Hansi Flick – Röhl's boss at Bayern Munich and the German national team – prompted his decision to take the plunge into management. Current FC Barcelona Head Coach, Flick, even paid a visit to Hillsborough in March to watch the Owls beat Plymouth Argyle.

And former defender Röhl, who started his coaching career at RB Leipzig after retiring at the age of 20, drew on everything he's learned so far when the time came.

"At Munich, I took the winning mindset to go into every game feeling we can beat them, no matter who the opponent is," he highlights. "That's what I tried with my team last season to give them that feeling that even if we go to a top team, I always said it's one game, 90 minutes and we always have a chance to take something.

"It's much easier to play a game where you can win something instead of a game where you can lose something. In a Champions League Final, you can win a trophy, but when you're in a 'final' to stay in the league, you can get relegated. It's a different kind of pressure.

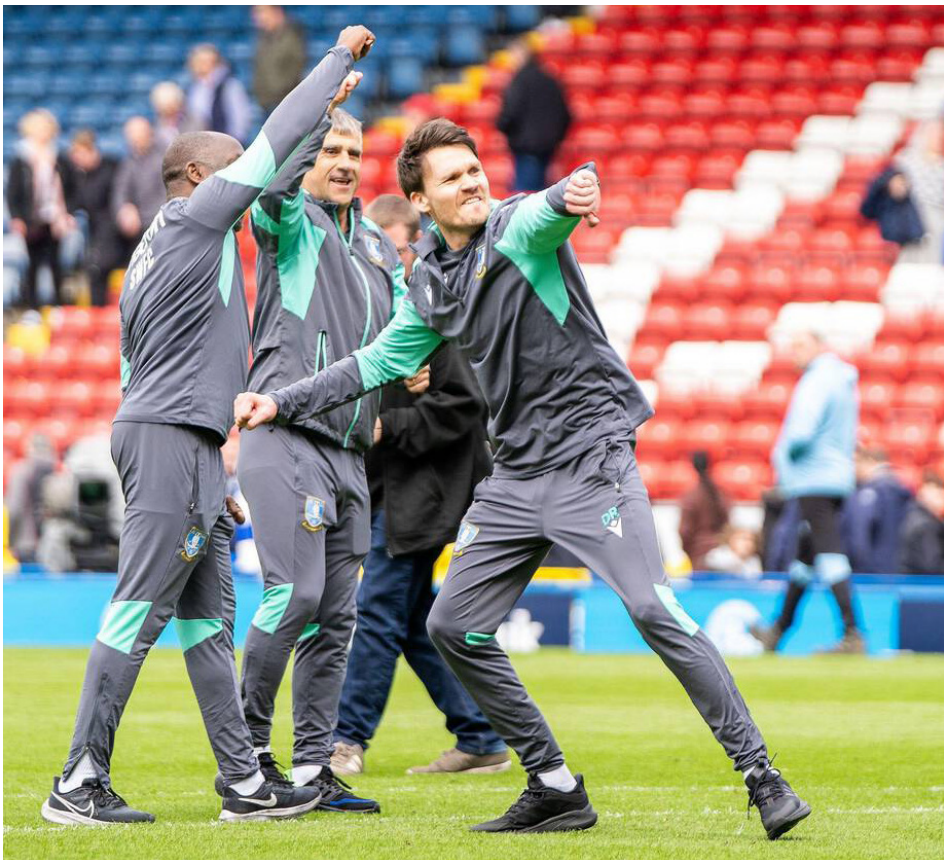
"It's about bringing all those different experiences together and choosing the right pieces in the right moments to make good decisions."



Röhl departed Bayern Munich as he swapped the Champions League – which Bayern won in 2020 during his stint at the Club – for the Championship. It's a career that has afforded him a range of experiences and his CV speaks for itself.

He explains: "Ralf Rangnick was the first person who showed me what it means to have a clear identity in how you want to play football; the typical Red Bull football – it's playing fast, always attacking and thinking forward.

"With Ralph Hasenhüttl, we arrived in a new country which was a big step, then I got the opportunity to work alongside Hansi, who showed me how to lead the group and it's not just about improving them as a player but improving them as a human.



"It's a different challenge to Sheffield Wednesday. To building something like at Leipzig, to fighting to stay in the Premier League at Southampton, fighting for titles and then the national team was special – they're all things I can bring here to my mindset."

It's been a whirlwind year for Röhl, who was in Qatar for the 2022 World Cup as Flick's Assistant Coach. Just four weeks after parting company with Die Mannschaft, he was installed at Hillsborough, and the rest is history.

He asserts: "With the national team, you don't have much time. When you look to a full season with 46 games, the best team will be on top. In a tournament, it doesn't necessarily mean the best team will be on top by playing the best football – it will be the team who use the momentum and get all the small things right."

Time was very much of the essence when he arrived at Hillsborough, though. It was a change of pace for a man who has worked alongside some of the biggest names in world football, including Robert Lewandowski, İlkay Gündoğan and Thomas Müller, to name a few.

"And Jamal Musiala!" Röhl is quick to point out, identifying the two-time Utilita Kids Cup winner, who hit the headlines when footage surfaced of the 21-year-old playing at Wembley in the junior football tournament a decade ago. "I followed his career very closely because we took him from Munich from the academy to the first team.

"Even when you work with the biggest players, you feel in those moments that they are still human. That's what we should never forget – that we're working with humans and not machines."

Even when you work with the biggest players, you feel in those moments that they are still human. That's what we should never forget – that we're working with humans and not machines"

Despite rumblings of interest from elsewhere in the summer, the Owls boss dispelled any rumours by inking a new long-term contract with the Club.

Röhl touched back down in South Yorkshire after spending a chunk of his well-deserved break working on ITV's coverage of EURO 2024, drafted in to provide his insight on the tournament alongside the likes of Gary Neville and Ian Wright.

"The studio was very close – it was in Berlin and I live in Leipzig," he explains. "My family is still in Germany and I have two kids, which is hard to say goodbye again after the break in the summer. It was a great week but I'm also happy to have my tracksuit back and be on the pitch!"

Now, his focus has well and truly shifted to Sheffield Wednesday's league campaign. Earlier in the summer, long-serving skipper Barry Bannan and boyhood Wednesday supporter Liam Palmer committed their future to the Club, before Wembley winner Josh Windass put pen to paper on a new deal at the beginning of July.

Wednesday got their season off to a flying start when they ran out 4-0 winners over Wayne Rooney's Plymouth Argyle on the opening day. And there is plenty to look forward to for Röhl's Owls – a first full season at the helm and the return of the Steel City derby for the first time in almost six years among other things.

He reflects: "It was really a rollercoaster over the last six or seven months, but the season had a happy ending. Everybody feels that we want to write our next story in the new season – nobody knows what that means at the moment, but I believe if we increase our limits, we can make the next step."

A New



With each new season comes excitement, anticipation and hope for football fans worldwide. And for the EFL, with the start of the 2024/25 season came a new era for televised coverage of its competitions, as the League's landmark new broadcast deal came into fruition.

While to many, Stockley Park may be known for being where VAR decisions are made in Premier League fixtures, it is in fact one of the biggest hubs of its kind in world sport. With more fixtures now broadcast live in the UK and abroad than ever before and approximately 200 staff working tirelessly every EFL matchday, it just got even bigger.

WORDS // **ABI RODWELL**

Running from season 2024/25 to 2028/29, the EFL's new broadcast deal was signed with Sky Sports after being unanimously approved by Clubs and is worth £935 million over a five-year period, with a record number of 1,059 matches across EFL competition to be broadcast live each season – the most for any Club football broadcast agreement.

Financially, it is a deal that represents a 50% increase on the value of the previous rights agreement, and through enhanced coverage and access, will see 10 live EFL fixtures broadcast domestically each matchday across existing Sky Sports channels or via the newly introduced Sky Sports+ streaming platform.

Era

With more live football on screens than ever before, the 2024/25 EFL season is set to be one of the most ground-breaking English football has seen in the world of broadcasting.



Of those 1,059 matches broadcast on Sky Sports across the season, IMG – one of the largest independent producers and distributors of sports media – will produce 866 of them, with the remaining fixtures produced by the Sky Sports production team for its main Sky Sports Football output.

It's clear that with increased audiences at home and abroad, the demand for live football – particularly EFL – is as great as it has ever been. As such, IMG will also produce a further 832 fixtures to be shown outside of the UK via the EFL's international rights holders Pitch International and Relevent Sports, as well as continuing to produce the weekly free-to-air terrestrial highlights programme on ITV.

While IMG have been producing EFL







content since 2018, the recent increase in live output has resulted in a series of operational changes, infrastructure enhancements and increases in resource, as well as unlocking new opportunities.

Over the years, the matchday operation has improved drastically since the introduction of the EFL's streaming service, iFollow, back in 2017, but the summer of 2024 saw a raft of yet more changes and infrastructure improvements to increase the production values and enhance the service for those at home and watching online.

"The production uses a fully remote solution supported by on site ENG camera operators plugged into dedicated stadium infrastructure," IMG's Senior Producer, Pete Walker, says, explaining the process.

"Each individual camera feed is then delivered to our production facility at Stockley Park via a fibre network, where directors and replay operators produce the live coverage. That also allows us to provide post-match highlights for Clubs and broadcast partners, as well as commentary on select games for both domestic and international licensees."

The biggest change in the weekly operation is more cameras across every division, with a six-camera production (plus Hawk-Eye access) now featuring at all Sky Bet Championship games, increased from four previously.

League One has increased to four cameras and League Two will have a two-camera production, both of which previously operated with just a single camera production. Similarly, Carabao Cup fixtures have also seen an uplift in cameras, with a mixture of four and two-camera coverage across the competition.

In addition to the enhanced camera angles, all broadcasts outside of Sky Sports' main TV selections will also feature a far richer suite of in-game graphics, recaps and highlights.

And all of this is managed remotely from IMG's dedicated EFL production centre at Stockley Park in West London.

So how has it been done?

In preparation for such enhanced production, IMG's engineering team spent the summer putting in the miles across England and Wales – 80,000 to be exact – as they visited all 72 EFL stadiums to upgrade the infrastructure and install 25,000 metres of new cabling that would allow for enhanced multi-camera production.

"We've had a really busy summer upgrading every stadium to bring it up to specification for the increased cameras," Walker adds.

"But we've also spent time enhancing the production centre at Stockley Park to accommodate all the incoming lines and providing the gallery improvements to deliver the enhanced productions. The team have also been busy coordinating commentary solutions via SIP encoders for both broadcasters and Clubs, with the old ISDN commentary workflow being phased out over the next 12 months."

With 36 fixtures taking place each matchday, a typical Saturday now sees more than 200 people either on site at Stockley Park or out at stadiums. That includes producers, directors, highlights editors, commentators, voiceover artists, camera operator engineers and much more, all working tirelessly to ensure that not only are the right games broadcast live to the right channels, but that the viewers at home are buying into a premium broadcast experience, and the EFL has a product to be proud of.

"Our production crew has grown massively, matchdays are now busier than ever before," says Walker. "With games staggered across the day, our teams are in action early and arrive at Stockley Park and stadiums four or five hours before kick-off.

"This is a vital window in the matchday preparation as it's when crews go through technical and editorial checks with the engineering team, while directors ensure the camera feeds are being received correctly into Stockley Park.

"For those on site at Stockley, the engineering team manage over 120 incoming individual cameras, remotely troubleshooting any technical issues with our connectivity partner NEP and the camera teams on site.

"Directors and replay operators then produce the live games; instructing the camera operators on their specific roles, cutting the pictures together live, adding graphics and replays and so on.

"All that coverage is then overseen by a team of QC producers, ensuring that the output remains universal across the divisions. They also cast their expert eye over all post-match content to ensure it meets editorial and technical standards before being pushed out to Clubs, Sky Sports and other external channels."

A huge operation, but one that is not only providing a viewing experience like never before, but more live content for supporters than ever before. There's no doubt that despite only being in the early months of the campaign, it's already been a significant season of progress.








POD A - TX 1
POD B - TX 1
POD C - TX 1
POD E - TX 1
POD F - TX 1
POD G - TX 1
POD I - TX 1
POD J - TX 1
POD Q - TX 1
POD K - TX 1
POD L - TX 1
POD M - TX 1
POD P - TX 1
POD R - TX 1
POD S - TX 1
POD V - TX 1
POD W - TX 1
LPD 113 - TX 1
POD
Q


POD A TX 4
POD B TX 4
POD C TX 4
POD D TX 4
POD D - TX 1
POD E TX 4
POD F TX 4
POD G TX 4
POD H TX 4
POD H - TX 1
POD I TX 4
POD J TX 4
POD Q TX 4
POD T TX 4
POD T - TX 1
Huddersfield Town vs Shrewsbury Town
Wrexham vs Reading
POD A - TX 1
POD B - TX 1
POD C - TX 1
POD D - TX 1
Barnsley vs Northampton Town
Cambridge United vs Blackpool
POD N - TX 1
POD E - TX 1
POD F - TX 1
POD G - TX 1
POD H - TX 1
POD U - TX 1
Charlton Athletic vs Bolton Wanderers
Sunderland vs Burnley
POD I - TX 1
POD J - TX 1
POD Q - TX 1
POD T - TX 1
LPD 114 - TX 1

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Watch your EFL team **over 20 times** next season,
including every Carabao Cup fixture,
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Sky's the Limit

The new landmark broadcasting deal with Sky Sports not only sets a new record for live coverage across football, but it has also transformed the home viewing experience for fans who, for the first time ever, now have access to over 1,000 live matches across EFL competitions.

Each weekend will see a total of 10 live EFL fixtures shown, including five 12:30pm kick-offs on a Saturday, as well as frequent slots on a Friday night and Sunday afternoon, and additional picks on a Thursday and Monday night. In addition, the agreement will see all midweek league games broadcast live, as well as opening day, final day and bank holiday fixtures.

In addition to the huge uplift in fixtures broadcast across the EFL this season, from January 2025, Sky Sports and ITV have also agreed for a select number of Carabao Cup and Championship fixtures to be made free-to-air on ITV, as the two organisations will jointly broadcast a select number of games.

Each full season, ITV will screen at least nine Carabao Cup matches in total, including:

- **One tie from each of the first four rounds**
- **One additional tie from either Round Three or Four**
- **Two Quarter-Final ties**
- **One Semi-Final tie**
- **The Final**

Additionally, they will show 10 matches from the Sky Bet Championship each full season, and five matches in the second half of the 2024/25 season.

Fixtures will be shown live on Sky Sports' new streaming service, Sky Sports +, as well as NOW TV and will be broken down as follows:

sky bet CHAMPIONSHIP | EFL
328 matches

sky bet LEAGUE ONE | EFL
248 matches

sky bet LEAGUE TWO | EFL
248 matches

Carabao Cup | EFL
All 93

BRISTOL STREET MOTORS TROPHY | EFL
All 127

sky bet PLAY-OFFS | EFL
All 15

MEET THE SKY SPORTS EFL TEAM

sky sports

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David Prutton
Emma Saunders
Julian Warren

PUNDITS
Jobi McAnuff
Curtis Davies
Don Goodman
Andy Hinchcliffe

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GET READY FOR FREE LIVE COMMENTARY OF OVER 230 MATCHES ON **talkSPORT** THIS SEASON



BRING IT ON

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ON RADIO ONLINE ON THE APP

EFL

On the Airwaves

Off screen, supporters have access to more live commentary than ever before across EFL competitions, with talkSPORT and the BBC providing exclusive coverage of a record number of games in a deal that will run until the end of the 2027/28 season.

As part of the enhanced agreement, both broadcasters will be making a strong commitment throughout the season to support EFL in the Community and promote Clubs' life-changing work in local areas.

Both talkSPORT and BBC will continue to share non-exclusive rights of the Carabao Cup, while talkSPORT will also have access to some Bristol Street Motors Trophy games for the first time.

In addition, the BBC will continue to have the ability to broadcast score flash updates across all three EFL divisions, the Carabao Cup and the Bristol Street Motors Trophy, which supports their coverage of the League on other platforms.



talkSPORT

Exclusive live commentary rights, including:

- **Sky Bet Championship** – a minimum commitment of 130 live matches, with a maximum of 150 live matches.
- **Sky Bet League One & League Two** – a minimum of 15 live matches.
- **Sky Bet EFL Play-Offs** – all matches across the three divisions.
- **Bristol Street Motors Trophy** – 10 matches per season.

Non-exclusive live commentary matches, including:

- **Carabao Cup** – Up to 30 matches per season.

Non-exclusive rights to score flash updates across all three Sky Bet EFL divisions, the Carabao Cup and the Bristol Street Motors Trophy.

BBC SPORT

- Non-exclusive rights to score flash updates across all three Sky Bet EFL divisions, the Carabao Cup and the Bristol Street Motors Trophy.
- Non-exclusive rights to transmit live match commentary of up to 25 Carabao Cup matches throughout the competition, including the Final, on BBC Radio 5 Live or 5 Sports Extra.



The exciting action and prestige of the EFL, as the oldest league in the world, adds tremendous value to CBS Sports' premium soccer portfolio

Dan Weinberg, Executive Vice President, Programming, CBS Sports.

The Global Game

As well as the EFL's biggest-ever domestic broadcast deal coming into effect, the League's presence in international markets – particularly across the USA – has also been enhanced, with a fresh approach taken to delivering content around the world.



CBS SPORTS

- **A minimum of 155 Championship matches**
- **A minimum of 38 League One and League Two matches**
- **All 15 Play-Off matches**
- **A minimum of 30 Carabao Cup matches**
- **Three Bristol Street Motors Trophy matches**

Ahead of the 2024/25 campaign, an exclusive, multi-year, multi-platform deal was agreed for CBS Sports to offer the widest distribution of EFL matches ever in the United States. The deal will see CBS air at least 250 EFL matches across the Championship, League One and League Two, as well as the Carabao Cup and the Bristol Street Motors Trophy throughout the season.

The deal followed the announcement that the 2024/25 campaign would see Clubs receive record international rights revenues through enhanced agreements with Pitch International, a long-standing relationship that has been in place for 15 years, and Relevent Sports, who have become the distribution partner through North, Central and South America.

With the EFL already broadcast to a global audience of 400 million across 182 territories worldwide, and appetite for English football in the North American markets growing year on year, it is a partnership that represents a significant milestone.

EFL Clubs also feature more than a dozen rostered American players, including Haji Wright (Coventry City), Josh Sargent (Norwich City) and Ethan Horvath (Cardiff City), while Wrexham AFC, Burnley, Leeds United, Birmingham City and Swansea City are among 26 EFL Clubs currently boasting notable American investment.

EFL | Elms

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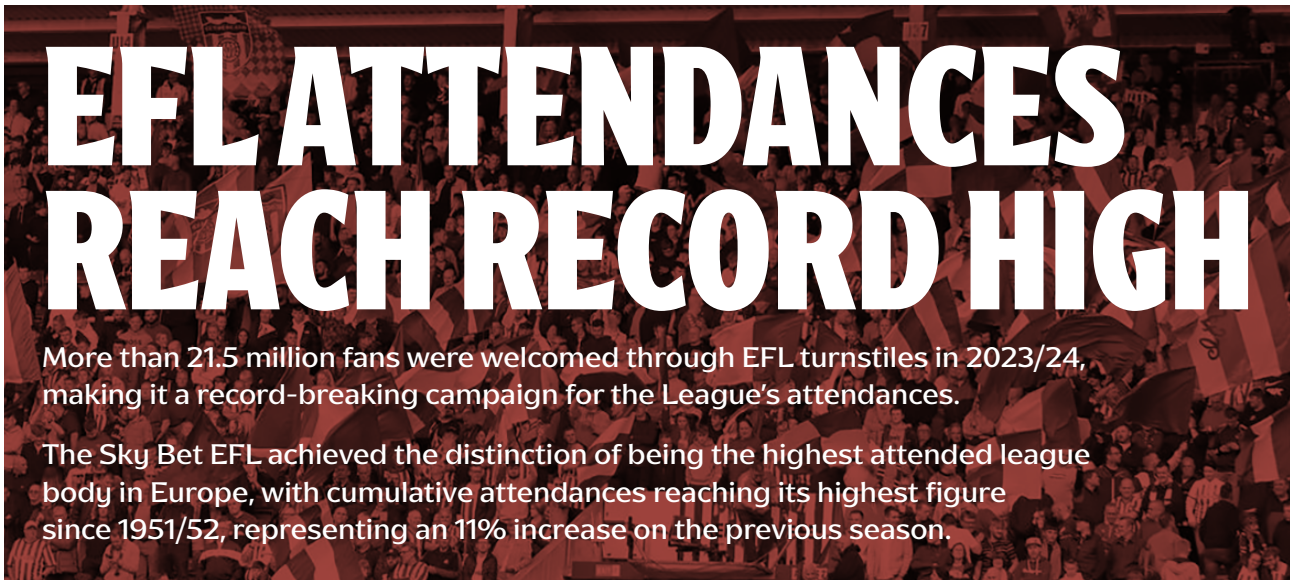


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EFL ATTENDANCES REACH RECORD HIGH

More than 21.5 million fans were welcomed through EFL turnstiles in 2023/24, making it a record-breaking campaign for the League's attendances.

The Sky Bet EFL achieved the distinction of being the highest attended league body in Europe, with cumulative attendances reaching its highest figure since 1951/52, representing an 11% increase on the previous season.

The League finished ahead of Germany's Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2, while the Sky Bet Championship beat the likes of Spain's La Liga, Italy's Serie A and the Bundesliga to be the second most-attended league division in Europe, rising from fifth position after the 2022/23 season.

It was a historic total for the second-tier competition since records began in 1892, with 12,723,678 supporters (a 22% increase on 2022/23) attending Championship fixtures.

Additionally, fans in League Two helped set a new benchmark, with the cumulative audience of 3,458,968 being the highest fourth-tier attendance since the 1964/65 season and representing an increase of 8% on the previous season.

EFL Chief Executive, Trevor Birch, said: "The 2023/24 numbers are tangible proof that our competitions now rank among some of the most exciting and popular in European football. To be the highest attended league body in Europe is testament to our League and Clubs.

"It really is a remarkable feat when you consider the quality of players and football on show across the continent. These numbers are not only a result of the strength and depth of the EFL, but also highlight the importance of the football pyramid and the reasons why we need to protect it."

These figures come after conscious efforts across the League to improve the matchday experience for EFL supporters up and down the country.

At the start of the 2022/23 season, the EFL joined a cross-football campaign, implemented by the FA, Premier League and EFL, to tackle anti-social and criminal behaviours within football grounds and underline the importance of fan safety in a matchday environment.

The campaign targeted activity such as entering the pitch without permission, football tragedy abuse, carrying or using smoke bombs or pyrotechnics and throwing objects, as well as drug use and discriminatory behaviour.

Committed to helping create an enjoyable, safe match experience at all Clubs, the EFL also hosted a live match experience fan forum – in association with the Football Supporters' Association (FSA) – in March 2023, delivered to listen, inform and educate on a range of areas linked to the matchday experience.

Furthermore, in order to embed a culture for all Clubs to follow, the EFL's Safeguarding team launched a guide to safeguarding on matchdays in May 2023, providing practical information on how Clubs might prepare for, manage and respond to the safeguarding considerations of children and adults at risk when hosting a fixture.

Among the recommendations in the guidance, the appointment of Matchday Safeguarding Champions has increased the level of practical support that can be provided by Clubs around their stadium.

Meanwhile, the 2023/24 campaign saw a record number of EFL Clubs achieve family excellence across the three divisions, which coincides with a 2% increase in junior season ticket sales, with one million junior fans passing through turnstiles for a second successive campaign.

A total of 68 Clubs were recognised for the family experience they provide, rewarding them with gold, silver and bronze status across a range of touchpoints, including ticket purchase, matchday entertainment, accessibility, facilities and communications.

Elsewhere, an increasingly popular tactic to support away fans on a matchday is for Clubs to utilise the skills of their Supporter Liaison Officer (SLO) by travelling with supporters away from home, to be the source of information and a reliable friendly face.

SLOs – a regulatory requirement at all EFL Clubs – act as a point of contact and sounding board for fans, to ensure that two-way dialogue is facilitated and the feedback, thoughts and experiences of supporters are fed back to a Club's senior staff.

In addition, season ticket sales were up by 3% compared to the previous campaign, and efforts are ongoing to continue that trend, with the EFL reviewing its current ticketing regulations, undertaking various steps to understand what works and what challenges Clubs face under the current regulations, as well as identifying areas that can be collectively improved.

So, while the EFL's new broadcasting deals provide supporters with unrivalled access to the action across the country, it's evident that the appetite for experiencing live action inside stadiums is stronger than ever.

NEW R
ENGAG

At the EFL's 2024 Summer AGM, Clubs unanimously voted through the introduction of new regulations regarding Fan Engagement.

Although dialogue with supporters is a regular and expected activity for Clubs, the introduction of new rules will provide renewed focus in respect of what exactly fan engagement means.

In 2016, following recommendations of a Government Expert Working Party (EWP), steps were taken to mandate Clubs' interaction with their fanbases, with the subsequent introduction of EFL Regulation 128 requiring them to carry out a minimum level of 'structured dialogue' with supporters.

In recent years, fan engagement has been brought further into focus with discussions emanating from the previous Government's Fan Led Review in 2021 and proposed new Independent Football Regulator (IFR) for professional Football Clubs, as part of the Governance Bill earlier in 2024.

Having sought the views of a wide range of stakeholders as part of the initial Fan Led Review, its recommendations included key references to the domestic game, considering 'ways to improve supporter engagement in the running of Clubs', the 'importance of supporters having a voice' and 'for Clubs to liaise closely with their most important stakeholder and develop plans with their views at the forefront'.

Subsequently, the EFL considered how those recommendations could be implemented practically across its 72 Clubs going forward to raise standards, and ensure they are ready for the introduction of an IFR in future.

As a result, an amendment to existing Regulation 128 was proposed and passed by Clubs, providing a new opportunity to ensure long-term ongoing meaningful dialogue with supporters across the League, to further embed key principles of consultation and collaboration and continue to recognise good practice in this space.

What's the Plan?

From the start of the 2024/25 season, all EFL Clubs are required to produce and publish a Fan Engagement Plan (FEP) on an annual basis.

They are also required to nominate a Senior Official to oversee delivery of the Club's Fan Engagement activity; and at the end of each season, report back to the League with a summary of work carried out to achieve the Club's Fan Engagement Plan objectives.

While Clubs have always been encouraged to broadcast their fan engagement activity, in whatever guise that may have taken, the requirement to create and publish an FEP effectively strengthens accountability for, and transparency around, that activity.

Supporters will be able to better understand how their Club intends to engage them throughout the season, with a range of tactics and procedures for consultation within their plans acting as a blueprint for the campaign ahead. An end of season analysis and assessment of how Clubs have implemented their FEPs will then create momentum for the following season, and ongoing ways to further evolve their supporter engagement activity.

In creating their FEP, Clubs have an opportunity to reset or reinforce their relationship with supporters. Many will be able to promote positive changes that have arisen



RULES OF GEMENT

WORDS // **ANDREW POMFRET**

as a result of prior engagement, and for several other Clubs, seize the opportunity to set a new aspirational tone, led by their nominated senior lead figure or Club CEO/Owner.

As a key aspect of the initial Fan Led Review proposals, the commitment to engage should also include an overview of those key 'heritage' areas that Clubs regard as 'in scope' for fan consultation (e.g. Club colours, crest, name, stadium developments) and how the Club intends to engage supporters in relation to any proposal to amend any such asset(s).

Realistically, Clubs will consult across a much broader range of areas though, and to that point, the manner in which Clubs engage is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all. This was recognised in the Governance Bill, which stated: "the range of fan engagement measures each Club utilises will differ, and the IFR will be expected to recognise these natural variations."

Clubs should therefore use their FEP to reinforce key principles and values, to set expectations and targets for the role the Club wants to play for its fanbase and within its local community.

Collaboration on these aspects takes on a renewed importance, as developing, aligning and evolving such values will benefit from consultation with fans and supporter groups. Naturally, this is where the benefits of existing supporter relationships and engagement structures will



bear fruit, as the FEP document should ideally be embraced as something mutually crafted by the Club with its fans.

Collaboration on these aspects takes on a renewed importance, as developing, aligning and evolving such values will benefit from consultation with fans and supporter groups. Naturally, this is where the benefits of existing supporter relationships and engagement structures will bear fruit, as the FEP document should ideally be embraced as something mutually crafted by the Club with its fans.

A Strategic Approach to Fan Engagement

Looking more holistically, there are several accepted principles behind effective dialogue that can maximise meaningful consultation. A fundamental step in developing a strategy for engagement is recognising the value of the supporter's voice, and the power of ongoing consultation and dialogue.

Creating a Fan Engagement Plan is one step, but bringing that plan to life and understanding the need to cultivate a strategic approach to its activation is a vital element of the process for any Club.

Amendments made to Regulation 128, and the added focus placed on accountability, transparency and consultation, help form the basis for two-way dialogue with supporters, but to truly maximise the opportunity in this space, it's important to view fan engagement as a strategic growth tool.

Clubs, unlike most non-sports entities, already have some degree of emotional investment from their fans or followers, so developing ways to harmonise this and create opportunities for collaborative dialogue should help shape policies and practices that can be introduced positively.

Without doubt, the changes to EFL Regulation 128 can help to maximise the opportunity for Clubs to align with fans on key matters, and a Fan Engagement Plan will be a positive step in doing so.

128 Supporter Engagement

128.2 Each Club shall comply in full with the League's requirements to create a 'Fan Engagement Plan' and agree to:

- **128.2.1** produce and publish a Fan Engagement Plan on an annual basis;
- **128.2.2** nominate a senior Official to oversee delivery of the Club's Fan Engagement activity; and
- **128.2.3** provide to the League (by no later than 30 June in each Season) an end of season summary of work carried out to achieve the Club's Fan Engagement Plan objectives.

128.3 Where a Club amends its Fan Engagement Plan throughout the course of the season, the Club must update the version published pursuant to Regulation 128.2.1 with the latest version within no less than five business days of it taking effect.

League Football Education Turns 20

League Football Education (LFE) is celebrating two decades of nurturing the next generation of football talent and fostering educational excellence as the organisation marks its 20th anniversary.



LFE works with 64 EFL Clubs to deliver the Level 3 Sporting Excellence Professional Apprenticeship Standard to 1,184 apprentices, as well as partnering with 13 EFL Club Community Trusts to provide the Level 3 Sports Coaching and Development programme to nearly 700 16 to 18-year-olds.

The role played by LFE ensures that young footballers become well rounded individuals, making sure they are well prepared for their future, whether that is in the game or outside it.

Notably, 11 of England's 26-man squad for UEFA Euro 2024 were former LFE apprentices, including Real Madrid superstar Jude Bellingham, Manchester City treble winner John Stones and Aston Villa striker Ollie Watkins, whose late strike against the Netherlands sent the Three Lions into the Final in July.

Reaching our 20th anniversary is a proud moment for League Football Education and is testament to the hard work and dedication of so many people.

We are incredibly proud of the impact we have made over the past two decades and we are excited to continue building on our success so far and helping young footballers achieve their potential, both on and off the field.

SARAH STEPHEN, LFE Chief Executive

Unfortunately, not every player at an academy will go on to make it in the professional game, and being released from a Club is one of the hardest moments in a young player's career. While some will find opportunities at other Clubs, for many this will be their first experience of a world outside football.

LFE stays in regular contact with players for a three-year period after being released, supporting them as they pursue their new career paths. There are a wide range of success stories from former players who are now thriving in new careers after their time in football came to an end.

Former scholar, Ollie Smith, is now an airline pilot, George Barmby is enjoying a career as a pain management practitioner for the NHS, while Drew Ricketts is now a firefighter.

While there is undoubtedly a focus on helping players transition to other careers, LFE also works to provide players with opportunities to continue in the game, either at home or further afield.

A particularly well-trodden and successful route for young players looking to stay in the game has been to Sweden via the European Player Placement initiative. One of those players was Jamie Hopcutt.

After being released by York City, and following brief spells in non-league, then-Östersunds FK Manager Graham Potter, a former York player himself, expressed an interest in taking the midfielder to the Swedish third tier back in 2011. LFE facilitated that move, with the Erasmus+ programme funding his initial three months in Scandinavia.

20 Years of LFE:

- Worked with **102** Football Clubs and **16** Community Trusts.
- Successfully guided over **11,000** apprentices through its programmes.
- Delivered close to **13,000** BTEC qualifications.
- Helped more than **5,000** young people who didn't pass their English and/or maths GCSE to achieve a Level 2 Functional Skills qualification.
- Reached a total of **150,000** people through various personal development and life skills initiatives.
- Provided over **100,000** hours of one-on-one reviews and support.
- Facilitated **293** European player placements.
- Sent **88** teams on European pre-season tours and **63** Coaches on European CPD trips.
- Hosted Assessment Trials for around **3,500** released apprentices, playing in front of approximately **2,600** scouts.
- Graded **'Outstanding'** by OFSTED, testament to LFE's unwavering commitment to the development of young people.

After impressing, his contract was extended and during his first spell at the Club, Hopcutt went on to make 189 appearances, scoring 46 goals, achieving two promotions, winning the Swedish Cup and playing in the UEFA Europa League – including a start in their 2-1 Round of 32 victory over Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium.

LFE is now also helping apprentices secure playing futures in the USA and Australia through a recently approved Turing fund project.

As part of their apprenticeship, players are also given a grounding in a wide range of areas that benefit them both on and off the pitch. These include topics such as:

- **Nutrition**
- **Personal Finance Management**
- **Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing**
- **Sexual Health and Consent**
- **Racism and Discrimination**
- **Safeguarding Awareness**
- **CPR and Cardiac Health**

The quality of LFE's provision was recognised in its most recent OFSTED report, published in April 2023, where they were judged to be 'Outstanding' in all areas, with inspectors stating that learners and apprentices "consistently demonstrate extremely positive attitudes towards their learning," and are "highly enthusiastic and motivated to achieve" in what was described as a "calm and focused environment for learning".

LFE has played an integral role in developing young football talent, while also prioritising their educational achievement.

The role they play in supporting young footballers is vital in developing them into well rounded young men who can thrive in the game and beyond, and they have made a hugely positive impact on so many lives over the past 20 years.

We look forward to seeing LFE continue to thrive and support the next generation of players and professionals.

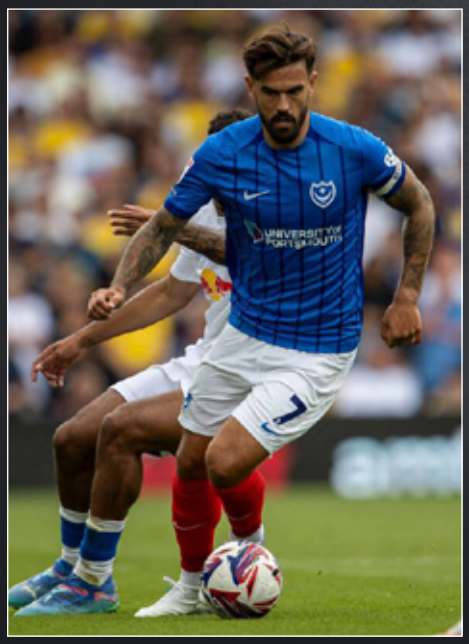
TREVOR BIRCH, EFL Chief Executive

Leader of the Pack

WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

"Coming back to play for the Football Club was a dream achievement in itself, but to actually have that legacy moment, that'll be etched in history and nobody can take away, is incredible."

From boyhood supporter to promotion-winning captain, **Marlon Pack** is living every Portsmouth fan's dream.



As a young professional, the midfielder was forced to leave Fratton Park after making just two senior appearances, forging a career elsewhere at Cheltenham Town in League Two before working his way up to the Championship with Bristol City and Cardiff City.

But when his Cardiff contract expired in the summer of 2022, Pack eyed a romantic return to his hometown team. Now, he's back where he belongs – and loving every moment.

"I didn't truly realise how much the Club means to me until I came back," the Pompey skipper says. "Obviously, I always kept an eye on the Club, but I'd spent over a decade away and had just been concentrating on myself and my career.

"Once I came back, those memories and feelings that I experienced as a kid at Fratton Park came flooding straight back. The Club means everything to me. If I wasn't a footballer, I'd be in the stands supporting the team.

"I always had in my head that there was unfinished business, but as I was progressing through the leagues, Portsmouth had fallen down the pyramid and it never really worked out.

"When I was leaving Cardiff and there was an opportunity with Portsmouth, I felt like if I didn't come back when I did, that opportunity might not be there again. Sometimes, the reality of coming back isn't


EFL CAPTAIN
UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

as good as the dream, but that was a risk I was willing to take and thankfully, the fairytale has really worked out for me."

Pack was Pompey-mad from a young age – watching the Club win the FA Cup and compete in the Premier League and in Europe as a season ticket holder, while also working his way through the academy ranks.

Fast forward to the present, the Portsmouth-born kid, who dreamed of replicating his heroes, is now idolised himself by the Fratton Park faithful, having captained the Club to the League One title and a return to the second tier for the first time in 12 years.

"To get the Club back to a level where it deserves to be was a fantastic achievement for all of us involved," Pack proudly remarks. "Coming back here was a full circle moment for me and a dream come true to represent the Club again, but there was the ambition to be successful and really achieve something too.

"No matter what the Club goes on to achieve in the future, we'll always be the team of 2023/24 that won promotion to the Championship. To have been part of that, and as captain, it's probably exceeded my expectations and dreams that I had as a kid.

"For all Clubs across the EFL, when 'one of your own' makes it, it's special for the Football Club and for the city. I'm living their dreams right now, so I just try to do them justice every single game.

"I'm just a normal lad from a council estate in Portsmouth and I hope I can be a case study for the kids from the area that they can achieve it if they put their mind to it.

"The majority of kids in the area are fanatical Portsmouth supporters and that's been one thing that I've really taken stock of – you don't really realise the impact you can have as players, especially being a local player."

Making an impact is something Pack has done in abundance since returning to his beloved Blues, through his efforts on the pitch and also his commitment to work in the community – something that is embedded in the culture of the Club.

"The Football Club is the community and Portsmouth in the Community do so well in everything they do," he says. "As a boy who grew up in the city, for the Club and Portsmouth in the Community to have the willingness to put camps on and educational sessions and all sorts of other stuff, it's fantastic to see.

"It's something we spoke about as a group because we want to give back to the community. The fans give a lot to us and we want them to watch us and be proud, and be proud of the Football Club. We want to be a team that they feel represents them as people."

A standout performer in Pompey's promotion push – winning the Club's Player of the Year prize and earning an inclusion in the Sky Bet League One Team of the Season – Pack also set the standard off the pitch, winning the division's Player in the Community award.

Despite being acknowledged for his coaching in the local area and dedication to one-on-one time with several fans in need of support and special treatment, he's keen to highlight the collective effort of the squad, Club and Community Trust.

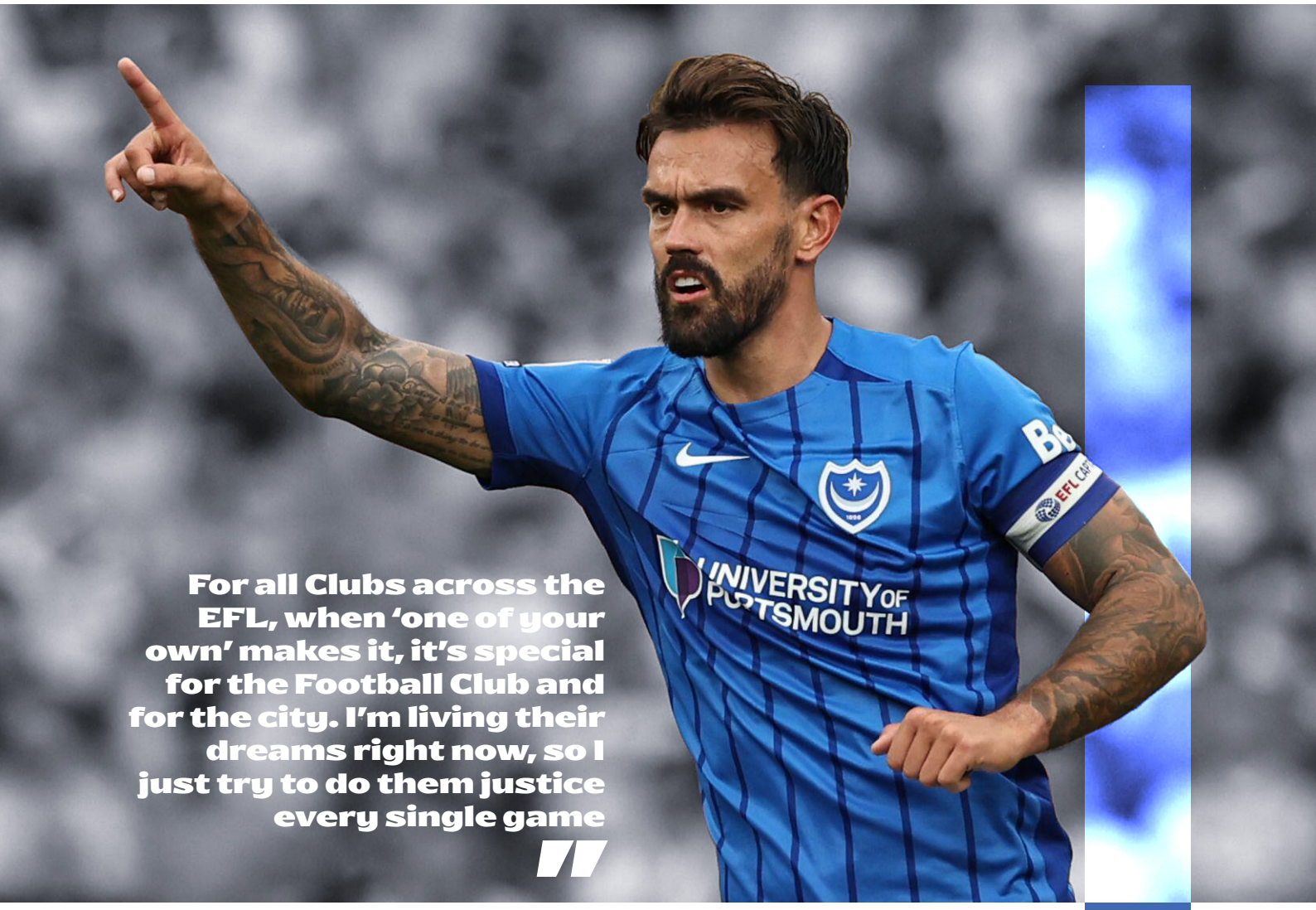
"It's nice to receive that recognition, but it's not like we're at these events all day, week in and week out," he says. "We'll give a couple of hours of our time to give back to the community and make people's day, but it's also to take the burden off some of those people who are in charge on a day-to-day basis, and give them something to look forward to as well.

"It's a real honour to be able to do that and as a group, we spoke about being committed to player appearances and engaging with the community because we know it comes full circle. I know I got the individual award, but I think collectively, the boys were fantastic in their approach to the work in the community."

After a period of turmoil and instability,







For all Clubs across the EFL, when 'one of your own' makes it, it's special for the Football Club and for the city. I'm living their dreams right now, so I just try to do them justice every single game"

Portsmouth is now a Club that is unified, with a strong connection to its fanbase and community – a crucial factor in its recent success, according to their experienced skipper.

"It's definitely a Club that feels like it's got its mojo back," says Pack. "Of course, winning games helps that, but there's a foundation that's been built off the pitch, with the new training ground and general infrastructure off the pitch, as well as a lot of young players coming through.

"There's been a real conscious effort from the Football Club to get it in a good place and we're slowly reaping the rewards. We're not quite where we want to be just yet, but the signs of progression are positive and I think we're heading in an upward trajectory.

"The fans deserve it – they've had tough times in recent years being in lower leagues after a period of great highs in the Premier League and the FA Cup win.

"Through thick and thin, our fans are there in their numbers and they got us through key moments last season. They're going to be pivotal for us this season."

Portsmouth arguably couldn't have had a much tougher test than a trip to Elland Road to start life back in the Championship, but showed they're not just there to make up the numbers with a terrific 3-3 draw against a much-fancied Leeds United.

Pack, who claimed an assist on the opening day, says: "In years to come, I'll look back on my career and I don't think anything will be better than last season.

"It's something we've enjoyed over the summer and made the most of, but the focus of the group is now fully on the new season in the Championship. It's a challenge that we're all going to embrace and take in our stride.

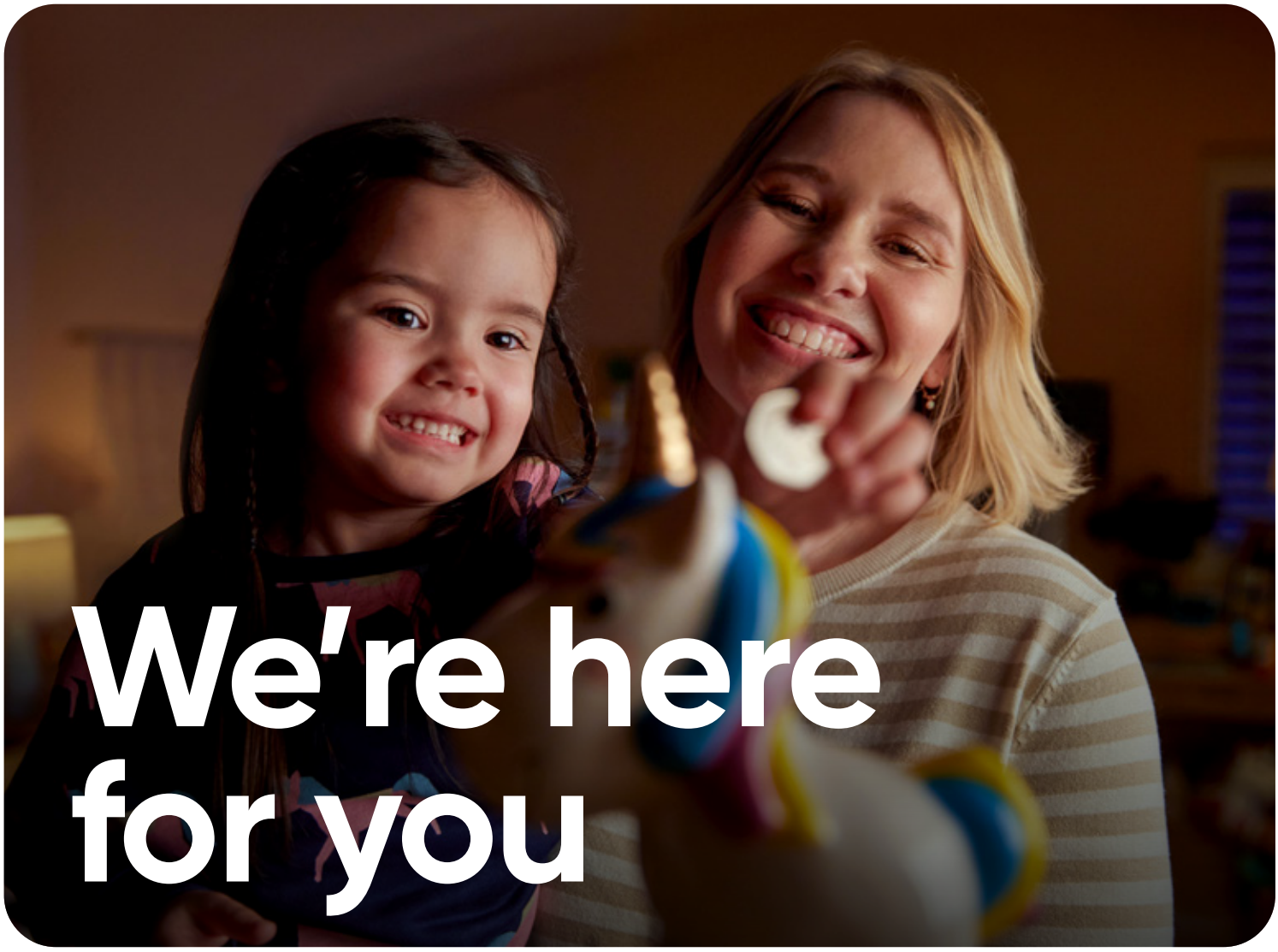
"There are no easy games in the Championship and you can end up going into them a little bit timid and tentative, or you can embrace the challenge and go at it front-footed. We do have momentum from last season and we've got to ride that wave."

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EQUALITY CODE OF PRACTICE

A key part of the EFL's Together Strategy is to support its Clubs on their own EDI journey. In order to do so, the League launched a revamped version of the Equality Code of Practice.

The Code of Practice, which forms part of Regulation 129 of the EFL handbook, requires Clubs to meet Bronze level across six requirement areas set out by the EFL.

The first year has been a great success, with 64 Clubs reaching at least bronze in the first season of assessment.

Huddersfield Town and Watford have led the way, becoming the first Clubs to achieve Gold in recognition of their efforts to enhance their equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices across all areas of the Club. They were awarded a Gold rating based on assessment by the EFL's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team that reviews the Club's holistic matchday experience for their fans.

Fans have a role to play in the assessment through discussions on how the Club engages with them, with a staff forum also taking place to understand how the Club's EDI journey is embedded across all areas of the business.

EFL Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, David McArdle, is delighted with Club progress in the first season of assessment.

He says: "To have the vast majority of EFL Clubs already reaching at least Bronze in the first season of assessment is a fantastic achievement and a great indicator of just how seriously Clubs are taking their EDI journeys.

"Watford and Huddersfield Town are excellent examples of how Clubs can be representative of the communities they serve and really show the way for other Clubs looking to follow in their footsteps in the future."

To further support Clubs within the new Code of Practice, the EFL invested in two new dedicated roles within the Inclusion Department, specifically supporting Clubs on their Code of Practice journey and the sustainable approach to EDI within Club structures.

Since the launch of the new Code of Practice in 2022/23, the EFL has provided over 400 individual Club meetings and assessed 67 EFL Clubs to award their Code of Practice ratings.

In 2024/25, Clubs will undertake a development season in which the EFL will support the development of their Action Plans and empower Clubs to progress within their EDI journey before being assessed again in 2025/26.

The EFL allows Clubs relegated from the Premier League a three-year window in which they can continue on the Premier League PLEDIS Programme before joining the Equality Code of Practice if they remain in the EFL after the three seasons.

Equality Code of Practice Achievement Season 2023/24 Results

Gold (2)

Huddersfield Town
Watford

Silver (9)

Blackburn Rovers
Charlton Athletic
Lincoln City
Middlesbrough
MK Dons
Plymouth Argyle
Preston North End
Salford City
Stoke City

Bronze (53)

Accrington Stanley
AFC Wimbledon
Barnsley
Barrow AFC
Birmingham City
Blackpool
Bolton Wanderers
Bradford City
Bristol City
Bristol Rovers
Burton Albion
Cambridge United
Cardiff City
Carlisle United
Cheltenham Town
Colchester United
Coventry City
Crewe Alexandra
Derby County
Doncaster Rovers
Exeter City
Fleetwood Town
Gillingham
Grimsby Town
Harrogate Town
Hull City
Ipswich Town
Leyton Orient
Mansfield Town
Millwall
Morecambe
Northampton Town
Notts County
Oxford United
Peterborough United
Port Vale
Portsmouth
Queens Park Rangers
Reading
Rotherham United
Sheffield Wednesday
Shrewsbury Town
Stevenage
Stockport County
Swansea City
Sunderland AFC
Sutton United
Swindon Town
Tranmere Rovers
Walsall
Wigan Athletic
Wrexham AFC
Wycombe Wanderers

Non-Compliant (3)

Clubs who failed to meet the minimum criteria

Crawley Town
Forest Green Rovers
Newport County

Clubs currently on the Premier League PLEDIS Programme

Leeds United
Leicester City
Norwich City
Southampton
West Bromwich Albion

Football Operations Review

Over the past 12 months, a number of operational changes have been introduced across the EFL, predominantly to improve the amount of time the ball remains in-play and addressing the behaviour between players and officials.

Here is a look at why these new measures were implemented and what results have shown on the pitch.

MORE ENTERTAINMENT

In line with IFAB guidance, the EFL and PGMOL adopted new approaches to time keeping across the 2023/24 campaign, with match officials retaining a more accurate allowance for time lost during the game and the League introducing the multi-ball system.

The outcome from these changes was that while the average length of matches only rose by 1.2%, the average amount of 'effective' playing time increased by 9% to 54 minutes and 56 seconds.

With additional ball-in-play time, more goals were scored across the three divisions – a 12.4% increase from 2022/23 – while the number of goalless draws fell 30%, ultimately providing a greater experience for supporters.

The feedback from fans has been positive, showcased by responses to the EFL's 2024 Supporters Survey, with 69% expressing their belief that measures to reduce time-wasting and time lost due to celebrations and substitutions are good for the game.



AVERAGE LENGTH OF EFL MATCHES

– 100 minutes & 2 seconds (1.2% increase)

AVERAGE BALL-IN-PLAY TIME

– 54 minutes & 56 seconds (9% increase)

Championship – 9% increase

League One – 7% increase

League Two – 12% increase

TOTAL GOALS

4,552 (12.4% increase)

AVERAGE GOALS PER GAME

2.74 (13.5% increase)

NUMBER OF GOALLESS DRAWS

100 (30% decrease)

PARTICIPANT BEHAVIOUR

Last season, a new Participant Behaviour Charter was introduced across English football – a whole game commitment and action to deliver a long-term culture change.

The Charter outlines stronger measures for players, managers, coaches, support staff and Club officials to adhere to on a matchday.

As a result, charges for surrounding match officials and of mass confrontations in-game were significantly lower in the 2023/24 season in comparison to the previous year.

Under the new approach, match officials have been empowered to take a robust approach to incidences of unwanted behaviour, resulting in a rise in technical area misconduct charges and dissent cautions.

The new efforts to address the behaviour between players and officials were met with approval from an encouraging majority of Supporters Survey respondents, with 65% saying they had noticed an improvement in participant behaviour.



MISCONDUCT CASES IN THE 2023/24 SEASON:

61.5% decrease in charges for surrounding of a match official (from 13 to 5 charges)

37% decrease in charges for mass confrontations (from 46 to 29 charges)

53.5% increase in charges for technical area misconduct (from 28 to 43 charges)

MATCH DISCIPLINE IN THE 2023/24 SEASON:

97% increase in dissent cautions for players (from 364 to 716 cautions)

REFEREE KMI DECISIONS

85.5% CORRECT

from 1,233 decisions

ASSISTANT REFEREE KMI DECISIONS

86% CORRECT

from 351 decisions

KEY MATCH INCIDENT CRITERIA:

- Penalties (awarded/not awarded)
- Sending Off (issued/not issued)
- Denial of goal scoring opportunity (issued/not issued)
- Second Caution/Dismissal (issued/not issued)
- Goal (awarded/not awarded)
- Offside Judgement leading to Goal (awarded/not awarded)
- Major Application of Law
- Technical Area Removal (issued/not issued)

PERFORMANCE DATA

Introduced at the beginning of the 2023/24 season, the Key Match Incidents (KMI) panel is an independent panel primarily made up of former players and coaches, alongside one representative from the EFL and another from PGMOL, with a goal to provide an independent assessment of decision-making during matches.

It sits every week to review major incidents from Championship fixtures and assess whether the eventual rulings of decisions were correct, with a majority vote resulting as a correct or incorrect indication.

Clubs are able to submit incidents and decisions for review to the EFL to ensure everything is covered, while PGMOL analysts also review each fixture for key match incidents to nominate to the panel.

Statistics from the initiative revealed that match officials were accurate on 86% of occasions when confronted with a key decision throughout the campaign.

INTRODUCING... BEN FISHER
EFL ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER

Ben Fisher joined the EFL in January 2022 to lead on EFL in the Community's work providing advice and support to Club Community Organisations as they developed their approach to environmental sustainability.

Over the last couple of years, his responsibilities have evolved, and he now oversees the EFL's Green Club Scheme that supports Clubs across the country to improve their environmental practices and operations.

In this article, Ben discusses his role and what the future of environmental sustainability looks like for the League and its Clubs.



What is your role and why is it so important?

I support EFL Clubs and their community organisations, the EFL and EFL in the Community to understand and address our environmental impact. That's not just the important work of our organisations in reducing carbon footprint and resource use, but also using the amazing platform that football has to engage and inspire fans and communities.

This work is important because the multiple environmental challenges of climate change, nature loss and increasing pollution are urgent global problems that are forecast to get significantly worse if we continue with 'business as usual'.

For the EFL, that means considering how these challenges will affect our competitions, adapting to the consequences we're already seeing and taking action to mitigate future environmental impacts.

It also means understanding how this connects to our work in communities and how we can deliver social benefits through our environmental action.

Tell us a bit about your background, your passion for the environment and what you do in your own life to live sustainably...

While I've had an interest in the environment from an early age – and have a green Blue Peter badge to prove it – I found my passion for this topic through jobs in youth development and youth and community, where I could see the connections between big environmental issues and the things we were working on locally.

I ended up retraining, getting a Masters in Sustainability from Leeds University, and moved into roles such as nature outreach for Kew Gardens and running sustainability projects in higher education.

I came to the EFL because I saw the impact that Club Community Organisations have in people's lives, and my role created a perfect opportunity to bring the environment into that conversation.

I try to do what I can in my personal life to practice what I preach: things like a meat-free diet, limiting my flights (all my recent holidays abroad have been to Europe on the train – very good fun!) and I've recently made the switch to an electric car. But, as everyone who works

in sustainability knows, nobody is perfect, and we shouldn't expect perfection. It's far more effective to create a big impact by everyone collectively taking the actions they can.

Environmental sustainability is one of the biggest challenges facing not just football, but sport as a whole. How important is it that sport leads the way in this area?

Climate change is already having a real impact, whether it be the increased risk of floods and storms causing disruption to fixtures, or the risk to athlete and spectator health from increasingly intense heatwaves. Without action to tackle climate change, these risks will get worse and worse.

A report released last year by BASIS highlighted that by 2050, 39 of the 92 stadiums in the top four leagues of English football will face high risk from things such as extreme rainfall, drought, flooding and windstorms.

There's also an increasing expectation from fans that Clubs will be considering the environment in their operations – in the EFL's 2024 Fan Survey, 67% of fans agreed or strongly agreed that environmental sustainability is important to them.

Beyond that, sport has a huge cultural impact, and with that comes a responsibility to be considering the good that we can do with our platform.

Tell us more about the EFL's Green Clubs scheme and why it was introduced.

Green Clubs was set up in October 2021 to address the need for a consistent framework for our Clubs to engage with environmental issues and set a common standard to aspire to.

The scheme has two main aims: to offer Clubs a framework to understand and address the impact of their operations, and to support Clubs with training and advice to enable them to take environmental action.

Participation is voluntary, and last season we had over 50 Clubs take part. Each Club gets a score against the scheme's criteria, and is given an action plan to guide them in their future work, with accreditation from GreenCode – part of the Green Britain Group – available when reaching a sufficiently high level of environmental performance (confirmed by an external audit).

What factors have enabled Clubs to be successful in achieving GreenCode accreditation?

One of the most crucial elements to the success of these Clubs is that environmental sustainability has been made a core consideration, with support and direction from senior leadership.

From there, the wide variety of practical actions these Clubs have taken – whether that's installing solar panels, introducing reusable cup schemes, taking action to reduce water use or engaging with suppliers on low-impact products – can be sufficiently resourced and supported to be rolled out operationally.

These Clubs are also great examples of how important it is to communicate about your environmental goals and actions. By being open about their journey in understanding and addressing their operational impacts, they have brought fans on board with their goals. This can then really help with introducing initiatives to reduce impact or inspiring fans to take environmentally positive action in their own lives.

You also lead on the EFL's own efforts to become more environmentally sustainable. Explain more about what this entails.

Although a lot of our work focuses on supporting Clubs and their Community Organisations, it's important we lead by example.

In our head office (EFL House) we've focused on reducing the impact of our energy use, procuring 100% renewable electricity in 2021, and achieving a 26% reduction in electricity use in 2023 (compared to 2022) thanks to a variety of energy saving measures. We have recently completed installation of solar panels on EFL House, which we estimate will cover approximately 20% of the building's annual energy consumption.

We are also considering the impact of the EFL Finals, working closely with Wembley Stadium, who have a lot of sustainable infrastructure in place. The EFL Events team have done a lot of work to build on this strong foundation, including measures to reduce single use plastic, reusing as much branding as possible, and increasing the amount of vegetarian and vegan options available on hospitality menus.

What are the biggest challenges faced by Clubs when it comes to environmental sustainability?

In many cases, the challenges that Clubs face are similar to other organisations, such as difficulty in finding the resource to fund some of the bigger investments needed, e.g. renewable energy generation and electrification of the transport fleet. Another is how to effectively engage with their supply chains to reduce the impact of the goods and services they buy.

However, Football Clubs, along with other sports and event sector organisations, do face some unique challenges – the most impactful of which is sustainable travel for both teams and fans.

The environmental impact of fans traveling to matches is likely to be the biggest contribution to a Club's carbon footprint, but Clubs generally have limited control over this. Clubs can communicate different options to fans to use, such as existing walking, cycling, bus and train routes, but ultimately, it's something that we as an industry, along with other stakeholders like transport companies and local councils, collectively need to come together on to find solutions for.





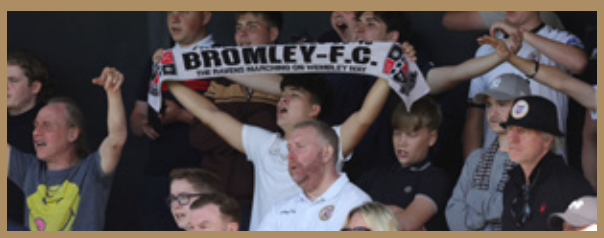
Building Bromley

WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

The 2024/25 campaign is a historic one for Bromley Football Club, as they compete in the EFL for the first time in their 132-year existence.

The Ravens secured their EFL status via the National League Play-Offs in dramatic style, with captain Byron Webster converting the decisive penalty in a shoot-out victory over Solihull Moors at Wembley Stadium.

Behind the scenes, it was the vision and guidance of Club Owner and Chairman, **Robin Stanton-Gleaves**, that steered the Club into a winning position on and off the pitch.



In the history of Bromley Football Club, I have the accolade of being the first Owner that drove this Club into the EFL," he declares. "Being from Bromley, I think that probably means more to me than I give myself credit.

"I grew up in Bromley, I was educated in Bromley, I went to school across the road from where the Football Club is, so there is an emotional attachment to where I come from.

"It is a piece of history for the Football Club and I'm incredibly proud to have been part of it, but I think it's only half the job. I think we have to stay up for a couple of years, and then it really is history."

Since becoming sole shareholder four years ago, Stanton-Gleaves has placed an emphasis on being a visible Owner, communicating his aims and objectives with clarity at regular intervals.

"I think that's important as a leader," he affirms. "If you're in charge of something, people should understand what your focus and your strategy is, and what your objectives and ambitions are.





Left: Bromley Chairman and Owner, Robin Stanton-Gleaves.

Above and below: Wembley celebrations and Michael Cheek enjoying the moment after scoring in the in the National League Play-Off Final.

"I've been quite open about that and that means I have to fulfil it, and I think that's important to do if you really believe in the words you say."

At a time where ownership models are increasingly under the microscope, Stanton-Gleaves is living proof that careful planning and an eye for steady, sustainable growth can lead to significant success.

Over the past four seasons with him and his managerial appointment, Andy Woodman, at the helm, Bromley reached the Play-Offs twice and won the FA Trophy before finally earning Play-Off glory at the third attempt in May.



"Owning a Football Club is interesting because you don't truly own it, the supporters do," says Stanton-Gleaves. "You do own it in terms of funding it, but there's a balance between thinking with your business head or your personal perspective, while acknowledging the Football Club is there ultimately for its supporters.

"I think we have a model that allows us to compete and hold our own. I've never splashed money on players, that's not the way I do things. The budget I give to the Manager is quite small, but then I've spoken to Clubs like Crawley and Crewe and look what they've achieved. It's not the budget you've got, it's the way you spend it.

"People focus on the destination of getting up, but it's about the journey and then carrying that on now that we're in the EFL. That's probably why I haven't got too carried away with the promotion. Of course, we celebrated, but it's now about saying 'we deserve to be there, and we can fulfil our ambitions for year one and then look ahead from there'.

"In years gone by, I showed ambition to get promoted, but I think if we'd have gone up a year or two ago, we'd likely have gone straight back down. The cost of the infrastructure change would've been too much and I'm not sure the Football Club would've got through it.

"Now, the heartbeat of the squad is good enough to compete, and much of the infrastructure was done – we'd upgraded



PROUD TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY

Bristol Street Motors – part of the wider Vertu Motors plc group – joined forces with the EFL earlier this year, with the award-winning national automotive brand becoming title partner of the EFL Trophy.

The Road To Wembley for two lucky football fans ended last month with the opportunity to walk out onto the hallowed turf, all thanks to Bristol Street Motors.

The first Bristol Street Motors Trophy final saw Peterborough United go up against Wycombe Wanderers, with two fans afforded the opportunity to enjoy a true money-can't-buy experience at the match.

David Allen from the Peterborough United Foundation and Kirk Williams from the Wycombe Wanderers Foundation were both nominated by their clubs to attend the game as guests of Bristol Street Motors, with the pair rewarded for their work within their respective communities.

The pair were given the chance to take a behind-the-scenes tour of the famous Wembley Stadium, enjoyed hospitality in the Bobby Moore Suite and then took their place in some of the best seats available for the game.

The crowning moment came before that however, with David's brother Richard joining Kirk in walking out onto the Wembley pitch ahead of kick-off to deliver the Bristol Street Motors Trophy - shortly before mascot Brummie drove out to the centre circle to drop off the match ball.

"We've been looked after really well all day, with the chance to look round the ground and do a challenge on the pitch before enjoying the game," Richard Allen said. "The Bristol Street Motors Trophy Final has been a truly memorable day that I'll remember for a long time."

It was a similar story for Kirk, who was joined at the game by daughter Tilly, despite the fact that Peterborough emerged victorious, with an injury time strike from Harrison Burrows securing a 2-1 win.

"We had a brilliant experience throughout the day, touring the stadium, meeting Adebayo Akinfenwa and David Seaman, and then the big moment of carrying the Trophy out onto the pitch.

"The whole thing was an unbelievable experience, and a huge thank-you has to go to both Bristol Street Motors and the EFL for the opportunity."

The Road to Wembley for the 64 teams competing in the 2024/25 Bristol Street Motors Trophy will kick off in early September with the first fixtures in the group stage.



Peterborough United F.C. Bristol Street Motors Trophy winners 23/24

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the floodlights, we'd upgraded the turnstiles, we'd upgraded the changing rooms; the only thing that was left was the pitch, which was an artificial surface, so that's been the only major piece of work over the summer."

Having previously exclusively been a non-league outfit and entering the EFL with one of the lowest average attendances across the 72 Clubs, Bromley have to be innovative with their approach for sourcing income.

Stanton-Gleaves explains: "When I first got involved with the Football Club, everybody always spoke about what's going to happen on a matchday, but there are 46 games in a season and 23 of them are away.

"For 23 days, success on the football pitch will decide the future of the Football Club, but I wanted to look at the other 340 days a year, because it's what we do with those that will create a more sustainable model.

"I compared it to baking a cake, where the football activity was the cake and the other 340 days were the icing. I wanted to flip that. My cake is 340 days, so there's a sustainable model going through the Club day in day out, and then the icing is the football, and that'll get sweeter depending on how successful we get. I think that's what I've been able to do."



Above: Robin Stanton-Gleaves and Manager, Andy Woodman, with the Play-Off trophy.

Right: Goalscorers Kamarl Grant and Michael Cheek following Bromley's first EFL win, away to Harrogate Town.

While creating a system that generates consistent revenue 365 days a year, the Bromley-born businessman has turned the Club into a hub for the local area, with initiatives designed for the elderly to gather for regular catch-ups and an artificial surface being utilised by youngsters several times a week.

And although results on the pitch will naturally take primary focus for most connected to Bromley, for Stanton-Gleaves, the Club's impact in the community is equally, if not more, important.

"I think it's our responsibility to engage with the community," he states. "Our fanbase has to be wider than those that come on a matchday and I think our engagement with the community has to be much wider, whether it's an under-6 or an over-65.

"The Football Club has a role to serve the community and we drive that through the Trust. We're quite new to it, but I think we're doing okay.

"We started an initiative a few years ago for single older people to come to the Football Club on a Thursday morning, give them a bacon sandwich, a cup of tea and some biscuits and just sit in a room and share their stories. When you talk to them, they say it's the highlight of their week.

"At the other end of the spectrum, we've got under-6s running around and getting active, with all academy teams and soccer schools using the artificial pitch.

"We also run an education academy with my old school, with 302 students studying a BTEC education course and playing football. From that, we've been able to develop the likes of Liam Vincent, Kellen Fisher and Ben Krauhaus, who have gone on to Clubs in higher divisions.

"I get a lot of fulfilment from the stuff happening alongside the football, and I think the more successful the Football Club becomes, I believe it'll drive greater engagement for the Trust."

On the pitch, Bromley made a perfect start to their EFL era, with a terrific 2-0 away win over Harrogate Town on the opening day before replicating that scoreline against AFC Wimbledon in the first-ever League game to be held at Hayes Lane Stadium.

But Stanton-Gleaves isn't getting carried away with their early success.

"We've got a really important couple of months, where we'll truly learn the landscape of League Two and make the adjustments that we're going to have to make in order to behave and perform as we wish to," Stanton-Gleaves assesses.

"If we've got it right, we're very lucky. I'm sure there are things we've got wrong, and we will have to identify those quickly and sort them out. I believe in feel-good factor and momentum, and we have that right now, but I'm not going to rely on that.

"We want to stay in the division, and I believe we have enough to achieve that. If we can do that, then next season we'll have the cash that's been spent this summer on our infrastructure available, which will allow us to enhance the squad and ultimately start to knock on the door of the League Two Play-Offs."





Andy Williamson OBE
1954-2024

The EFL was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of its former Chief Operating Officer, Andy Williamson OBE, at the age of 70 in June.

During his career, Andy was involved in several watershed moments for League football, including the introduction of three points for a win (1981), the League's first title sponsorship (1983) and the introduction of the Play-Offs (1986) – the Finals of which moved to Wembley in 1990, a decision very much driven by Andy's desire to further raise the profile of the Football League and its competitions.

Andy also provided leadership to the League and its Member Clubs in challenging circumstances, such as the Bradford fire (1985), the Hillsborough disaster (1989), the formation of the Premier League (1992) and the collapse of ITV Digital (2002).

In 2012, he was awarded an OBE in recognition of his outstanding contribution to football and, in 2016, was presented with the Contribution to League Football Award at the EFL Awards.

Trevor Birch, the EFL's Chief Executive, says: "Andy was a much-loved member of the EFL family, a fantastic individual who dedicated his working life to the game and he will be greatly missed by us all.

"It cannot be overstated the contribution Andy made to football in this country, the diligence he consistently applied to dealing with Member Clubs and the inspiring legacy he left. You only have to look at the many and varied areas of the EFL as an organisation and Andy's influence is there for all to see.

"Following retirement from his full-time role at the League, his involvement in shaping the future of the game didn't end and he played a significant part in the League's life-changing community work and the support offered to young and aspiring professional footballers.

"Andy, always a regular visitor to EFL events and Finals, was also a fantastic raconteur and his stories of league football will

live long in the memory for anyone who was fortunate to be in his company."

A life member of the EFL, Andy retired from full-time employment in 2016 after 45 years of unbroken service to The Football League.

Current Chief Operating Officer of the EFL, Nick Craig, worked under Andy for many years and had the unenviable task of following in his footsteps upon his retirement.

"It is Andy the person that we will miss the most," he says. "He was wonderful company, a great storyteller, and just a fantastic bloke who has left a brilliant legacy, respected widely throughout the game by people who worked with him, learned from him and developed under him.

"There are very few people who have played such a pivotal role in the development of the League. His assessments were spot on, and his moral compass was always pointing in the right direction."

Having been one of the most respected administrators in the football industry, Andy kept his connection with the game through his Board positions at EFL in the Community, the charitable arm of the EFL, and League Football Education (LFE), the organisation that oversees academic arrangements for apprentice footballers.

He cared passionately about those areas, and it is through his efforts to secure funding from the PFA and the EFL that LFE celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, during which time around 11,000 young people will have received an outstanding education alongside their football development.

LFE Chief Executive, Sarah Stephen, adds: "Andy was instrumental in creating LFE 20 years ago – he strongly believed in providing a high-quality education to the EFL academy players to support them in their development.

"Following his retirement from the EFL, Andy played an active part on the LFE Board and his commitment never wavered. It felt like he had LFE in his blood and he was proud of all the work done by the organisation. His legacy will continue to live on, while we will miss his dedication and his humour."

Additionally, Andy served the grassroots game for 18 years, having qualified as a Class One Referee in his 20s, before going on to officiate in local and semi-professional football up to the Northern Premier League. He was also a qualified coach and spent 10 years coaching and managing three local junior football sides at St. Annes Juniors FC.

As if that wasn't enough, his wider work in charity fundraising culminated in a trek up Mount Kilimanjaro in support of Marie Curie, alongside supporters and staff from a number of Clubs – an expedition which pushed him on to ever greater challenges.

"I had the huge pleasure and privilege of working with Andy on the Board of EFL in The Community," says Uma Cresswell, Senior Independent Director at EFL in the Community. "Andy's longevity of service and contribution to the football family was truly remarkable and he provided great wisdom, insights and professionalism to our Board meetings.

"He was incredibly passionate about the role of Club Community Organisations and the impactful work they deliver up and down the country. Never one to shy away from a robust discussion, Andy conducted himself with great integrity and professionalism – as well as being a critical friend to the Board when needed.

"On a personal level, Andy provided me with huge support and I always came away learning something new after every conversation. He was knowledgeable, charming, quick-witted and great fun to work with.

"Andy's knowledge of football and all his contributions will be missed by all of his EFL in the Community Board colleagues."



WORDS // **JACK WYLIE**

A Changing of the Guard

The EFL has gained a reputation as a breeding ground for young talent, with some of the country's biggest stars plying their trade in EFL competitions early in their careers.

And it's not just on the pitch where new talents are emerging, as an influx of young managers cut their teeth across the divisions.



JOHN MOUSINHO

Over the years, the likes of Simon Grayson, Ian Holloway, Mick McCarthy and Neil Warnock have delivered significant success, boasting a combined 16 promotions between them. However, in a recent changing of the guard, all have been out of contention for EFL jobs for an extended period.

While experienced campaigners such as Nigel Clough, Phil Parkinson and Paul Warne continue to excel, a new wave of managers are bringing a modern approach to dugouts up and down the pyramid.

In particular, Sky Bet Championship Clubs are identifying younger coaches to lead their pursuit of promotion to the top flight – at the time of writing, 16 of the 24 managers in post are below the age of 45, including eight in their thirties.

Last term, Enzo Maresca and Kieran McKenna – both in their first managerial roles – steered Leicester City and Ipswich Town, respectively, to promotion to the top flight, while Southampton's Play-Off success was masterminded by 38-year-old Russell Martin.

Midfielder Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall starred in Leicester's title-winning side and has since followed Maresca to Chelsea, after the pair developed a close relationship during their season together with the Foxes.

Despite the Italian's lack of experience as a boss, he had no trouble commanding respect from the playing squad, according to Dewsbury-Hall.

"He played at the top level and he's worked under top Managers, so his pedigree is very high and whenever he says something, you make sure to listen," the Leicester academy graduate revealed in an interview with the EFL last December.

Elsewhere, Portsmouth Head Coach, John Mousinho, was still a registered player with Oxford United and had never taken charge of a senior game of football when the Club appointed him to take the reins in January 2023.

And yet, he delivered Sky Bet League One glory in his first full season in charge.

Speaking to the EFL late last year, he admitted: "It's fair to say it was a left-field appointment from the Club – I was really surprised that Portsmouth took the leap with me."

But for Pompey Chief Executive, Andrew Cullen, it was a case of identifying a Coach that the Club could establish and build a clear culture and playing style with, regardless of past experience.

He declared: "I am a firm believer that to achieve success, you must possess an open-minded approach. By simply doing the same things again and again, we only reduce the prospect of propelling the Club forward. That is why our Head Coach search embodied speaking to a wide and diverse range of candidates."

It is a strategy and mindset that

appears to now be a recurring theme across the EFL.

This summer, Norwich City hired 35-year-old Johannes Thorup – having only spent 18 months as a Manager for Danish outfit, Nordsjælland – to replace veteran David Wagner at the helm.

Canaries Sporting Director, Ben Knapper, explained: "Through all of our interactions, it was clear that Johannes aligns perfectly with our vision and values. He is a proven developer, with a clear and demonstrable playing style."

This ideology rings true further down the divisions, too. Lincoln City is one such example, having appointed former Leeds United Under-21 Coach Michael Skubala to their top job in November.

Given his first opportunity in the hotseat, the 41-year-old guided the Imps to a 16-game unbeaten run between January and April, narrowly missing out on a League One Play-Off berth.

Club Chairman, Clive Nates, said: "We see this as a progressive appointment – Michael shares our ethos on player development, style of play and ambition. He has a clear vision for how he implements this and a track record of developing talented young players."





More recently, Birmingham City put their faith in first-time manager Chris Davies – who has only previously been a First-Team Coach and Assistant – to lead their ambitious project.

"The goal was to identify a progressive coach, one who has demonstrated the ability to build teams and improve players in the squad," said Garry Cook, Birmingham's Chief Executive Officer. "Chris has done this at leading Clubs, being part of championship, cup and promotion winning teams, working with world class players and managers."

Even in League Two, young coaches are learning their trade, with Charlie Adam leading Fleetwood Town's attempts to make an immediate return to the third tier, while Mark Bonner (Gillingham) and Mat Sadler (Walsall) are still under the age of 40.

At the time of Sadler's appointment in May last year, Saddlers Co-Chairman Ben Boycott commented: "I believe in who he is and who he can become as a football professional, I believe in who he is as a leader and, most importantly, I believe in who he is as a man with high integrity, outstanding grit and determination, and strong personal values which match the culture that we are trying to build at Walsall FC."

It's also clear that there is a pathway to progress through the divisions as a young coach. The likes of Matt Bloomfield, Liam Manning and Luke Williams have all quickly boosted their profiles, while nine current Premier League bosses have previously been in charge of an EFL Club.

So, whether it's on the pitch or in the dugout, the EFL continues to provide an environment for talent to develop, with young players and managers thriving in the process.



The EFL's International Impact

WORDS // **JACK WYLIE & HOLLY HUNT**

This summer saw Gareth Southgate's England team make history at UEFA EURO 2024 as they reached a major final on foreign soil for the first time, before ultimately falling short against winners Spain.

In a campaign that generated last-gasp goals, decisive defending and penalty shoot-out tension, crucial contributions were made by EFL developed players on the big stage.



Most notably, ex-Birmingham City star Jude Bellingham's overhead kick was the catalyst for Round of 16 success over Slovakia, while Exeter City academy graduate Ollie Watkins sent the Three Lions into the final with a late strike against the Netherlands.

In fact, the EFL's influence was in evidence across the entire squad, with all 26 players having prior involvement in EFL competition.

Across the squad, they had played a combined total of 2,128 appearances in EFL competitions, 1,748 of which were divisional appearances, ranging from Ivan Toney's 254 outings to Kobbie Mainoo's five.

Whether it's in the Sky Bet Championship, League One, League Two, the Bristol Street Motors Trophy or the Carabao Cup, every single player in the squad has an EFL story to tell.


2,128
TOTAL EFL COMPS
326
EFL CUP APPS
54
EFL TROPHY APPS
1,211
CHAMPIONSHIP APPS
355
LEAGUE ONE APPS
182
LEAGUE TWO APPS

From Birmingham youngster to Real Madrid superstar, 21-year-old Bellingham showcased his supreme quality by producing some pivotal moments in England's road to the final.

The UEFA Champions League winner got Southgate's side up and running with the decisive goal in their tournament opener against Serbia, while his spectacular equaliser against Slovakia will live long in the memory.

Currently regarded as one of the best players in the world, he has developed into a talisman for Club and country, but it all began for the midfielder in Birmingham City's academy.

Former Blues academy coach, Mike Dodds – who was in interim charge of Sunderland AFC last term – first came across Bellingham in the Under-7 age group.

"What made Jude stand out initially when he came in was just his general enthusiasm for football," says Dodds. "He wasn't technically that far ahead of a lot of the boys, but he had a real appetite for the game.

"His general desire and application to be the best and be different was the thing that stood out.

"To watch Jude play for England now is still surreal because I still talk to him very regularly about normal things. I still see him as the young man that developed over 10 years at the academy; his demeanour and his personality hasn't changed one bit.

"I'm incredibly proud of him, but the way he conducts himself is my biggest achievement. He's such a humble human being. He hasn't and he certainly won't forget where he's come from."

Bellingham burst onto the scene in the Championship five years ago, becoming the youngest player to feature and score for his beloved Blues and scooping the EFL Young Player of the Season award.

Spaniard Pep Clotet was the man who integrated the then-16-year-old into the first-team fold.

"You could tell he was special straightaway," the former Birmingham Head Coach explains. "He was able to try things with a high level of confidence and he was able to be very committed on all the facets of the game.

"Out of all the young players that I've worked with, he's one of the most – if not the most – determined to become what he has become. He's always had a very high vision and demand on himself to achieve his maximum ability to perform at the highest level.

"To see what he's doing now, I feel very proud to have helped him to start his career. I follow him a lot and it doesn't stop to amaze me. I keep telling him he's achieving unbelievable things."

While Bellingham's special finish kept England in the mix at the Round of 16 stage, it was Aston Villa striker Watkins who grabbed the headlines with his own stoppage-time strike that sealed Semi-Final success over the Netherlands.

The 28-year-old has established himself as one of the Premier League's top marksmen, but it was in the EFL where he refined his craft.




Ollie Watkins

Despite having all the attributes to reach the elite level, it wasn't plain sailing for Watkins as he strived to force his way into the first-team reckoning as a teenager at Exeter in League Two.

"He had big potential, but he hit a wall when he turned professional and spent 18 months to two years in the reserves or on loan," ex-Grecians Manager Paul Tisdale reveals.

"I remember going up to Scotland for a pre-season tour; he would have been 19 at the time, and he didn't make our touring squad. Our left-back got injured and I said, 'you need to come along as a left-back, otherwise you'll have to stay here and train on your own', so he came along and played a couple of games.

"I remember him coming off really upset. He'd been thinking so hard about everything that he couldn't control the ball, so we sat down a month or two later and started again.

"In the next reserve game, I said, 'you need to make three headers, three tackles, three interceptions and recover three loose balls in the first half – that will be 12 touches'. I said, 'if you can repeat that in the second half, that's 24 moments', and the point was it changed the way he thought.

"It wasn't about what happened technically, it was about how he thought, and he played so well. It was enough to make me want to pick him for the first-team game, the derby against Plymouth. He played in the same position, which he hadn't played in before that reserve game, and he got Man of the Match as we won 2-0.

"Ollie was brilliant that day, and that was his moment. All of the training was there, the coaching was there, but he needed to play with freedom. It's a good example of taking a player at 19 or 20 that was over-thinking everything, and turning it around."

After a 16-goal campaign in 2016/17, Watkins moved onto Brentford in the Championship, working under boss Dean Smith. Three successful seasons later – netting 26 times in his final year – the pair reunited at top-flight Villa.

"I was dancing around the apartment when he scored," Smith admits. "The amount of times I've seen him score almost that exact goal, I can't begin to count. He used to do that drill with one of the coaches, Richard O'Kelly, all the time at Brentford and Villa."

While established performers like Harry Kane, Jordan Pickford, John Stones and Kyle Walker – all beneficiaries of EFL action earlier in their careers – continued to be important influences, EURO 2024 was a new experience for some of Southgate's squad.

Jarrod Bowen, Marc Guehi and Ivan Toney all saw the field at various points, with the latter claiming an assist for Kane's winning header against Slovakia and then coolly slotting home a penalty in the Quarter-Final shoot-out victory over Switzerland.



JORDAN PICKFORD – **"The EFL is a great environment for a young player because it helps you massively. All those Clubs were great loan spells to get me to where I am today and that's definitely helped me in my career. Those Clubs were amazing for me."**


Ebere Eze

Another newcomer to the major tournament scene who made an impact was Ebere Eze – the latest landmark in a career that almost never happened.

As a youngster, Eze was released by Arsenal, Fulham and Reading before leaving Millwall without a professional contract at the age of 18.

Picked up by QPR in 2016, the tricky midfielder went from strength to strength under the stewardship of Paul Hall, Andy Impey and Chris Ramsey, developing into one of the most exciting talents in the country.

Former Rs Under-23s Manager Hall says: "Ebere arrived on trial and I remember immediately thinking, 'wow, this guy is good'. We knew he was a step above everything we already had, and to add to that, there's no better person than Ebere. I've never trained a better person than that kid.

"His spatial awareness, his first touch, his dribbling skills, his ability to play out of tight areas and his ability to put the ball in the back of the net – he always had those things in his locker.

"Ebere learned the game in the streets and in the cages – that's where a lot of the South London footballers learn. They're already polished with their individual skills, but they need to learn how to manage certain game situations and how to fit that into the professional game.

"You've got to understand risk and reward. Ebere had a reflection book, where we spoke to him about some of the things that other teams may have released him for and allowed him to get better at those things. The feedback he received was that he probably didn't want to work as hard, but we could see the hard work he was putting in, we just wanted him to work smarter."

Eze's journey to the top is testament to the importance of the English pyramid, having used a loan stint in League Two at Wycombe Wanderers as a catalyst for his meteoric rise.

Hall continues: "If I'm being brutally honest, he could've stayed at QPR and gone into the first team because he was the best player in the Football Club when he was in the Under-23s.

"But he showed a lot of humility to go out to Wycombe. He's got that openness to want to learn and he just accepted that going to Wycombe was part of his development pathway.

"He definitely came back with a different mindset. Gareth Ainsworth and Richard Dobson are great at developing the person, and they knew how to get more out of him – he just went and showed his qualities in that league.

"To then see him make his QPR debut was like watching my own son – that's the only way I can describe that feeling. We lifted him when he was low because he had all this talent and wasn't getting anywhere, we put the hours in together and we were out in the rain and the cold working on his game.

"One of the values that we spoke about at QPR was resilience, and he epitomises that. He comes back from setbacks very well and he learns from every experience, good or bad. Ebere is an example to anyone that it takes more than skill to be a successful player.

"To be included in the list of people he cites as influential is very humbling, and watching him in the European Championships made me very proud."

One Club whose influence over the Three Lions was particularly clear to see was Charlton Athletic.

The South Londoners had a helping hand in three members of the England squad's development – Joe Gomez, Ezri Konsa and Conor Gallagher, having all pulled on the red and white of the Addicks during the infancy of their careers.

It filled their former mentors at Charlton with pride to see Gomez and Konsa, who both came through the Addicks' academy, selected to represent their country alongside Atlético Madrid midfielder Gallagher, who enjoyed his first taste of senior football on loan with the South Londoners during the first half of the 2019/20 campaign.

In particular, neither Gomez nor Konsa have forgotten their roots and acknowledge that, without their football upbringing in South London, they wouldn't be where they are today, which was why they invited the Club's Academy Director, Steve Avory, to attend England's game against Belgium at Wembley as their guest of honour in March.

Avory recalls: "They both came over to me as I was sat there with my wife and my family, and I think my wife didn't realise at the time just how much I had meant to them in terms of their journeys."

Gomez first joined Charlton's youth system aged 10, and Avory quickly realised that the Catford-born defender was capable of playing above his age group, challenging him to go higher. In the end, the youngster bypassed the Under-21s and entered the first team at 17 years of age.

"I first met Joe when he was about 12," Joe Francis, Charlton's Head of Education, explains. "He was always so unassuming, polite and humble – he was such a down-to-earth kid with a quiet way about him. He had lots of pressures on him because he was fast tracked – he very quickly made the transition to the fringes of the first team."

His performances caught the eye of top-tier giants Liverpool and in 2015, Gomez was Merseyside bound. At Anfield, he's won just

about every piece of silverware up for grabs – including the Premier League title, the Champions League and the FIFA Club World Cup.

"I always called him 'Steady Joe' – that's what he was," Avory adds. "He was very dedicated and competitive – hard on himself at times and I had to manage that with him, but that taught me a lot about the desire that he had to become a better player."

Konsa's journey differed in comparison to Gomez's route to Charlton, although the current Aston Villa defender often found himself likened to the versatile Liverpool man.

Back in 2010, when Francis first arrived at the Club, Charlton established an innovative collaboration with a local school – the likes of which only the Addicks, Manchester United and Watford were testing – to coincide with the Elite Player Performance Plan.

"Ezri was in the first cohort," Francis remembers. "Ezri was a cheeky chappy – he had a great personality which stretched the boundaries sometimes. The Executive Principal and I used to speak a lot about Ezri every day – about managing his exuberance and his behaviour and balance it."

The 26-year-old clocked over 80 appearances for the Club, helping the Addicks to reach the League One Play-Offs in 2017/18.

After moving on to Championship outfit Brentford in the summer of 2018, it wasn't long before the Premier League beckoned as he made the switch to Villa Park.

Francis comments: "I was in the school at least two or three times a week and I'd have a weekly review. We had to have an honest chat when we offered him his scholarship and we said, 'Look, you're going to have to toe the line and with all this kidding around and joking, you need to get serious, otherwise there'll be consequences'.

"The transition from his school years to coming in as an apprentice was remarkable. He always knew the line with me – if I had to reel him in, he responded. There was a real respect because I worked with him, not against him."

For the best part of the last 20 years, Avory and Francis have worked closely to make the Club's academy a roaring success. The duo were well-acquainted with Avory – who worked as a PE teacher before joining the Addicks in January 2001 – having taught Francis during his own education.

Avory explains: "I've seen the fruits of my labour come through and that's motivated me to produce more and more. I get even more satisfaction when players like Joe and Ezri are selected for England.

"I was fortunate enough to manage at national level with the England Under-16s from 1991 to 1994. When I see that sparkle in players' eyes when they do get selected, I realise it just means so much to them."

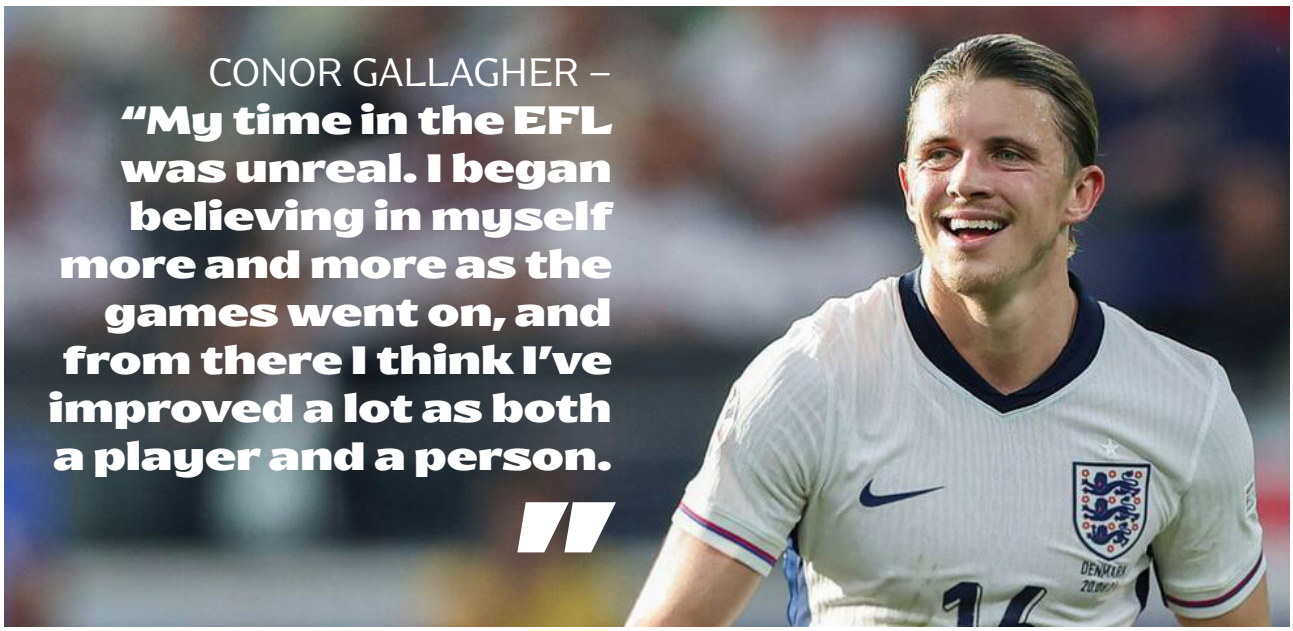
Indeed, both players tasted success at international level during the youth groups. Gomez was a part of the England team that were crowned the Under-17s European champions in the summer of 2014.

Konsa, meanwhile, won the Under-20s World Cup with the Three Lions back in 2017, alongside fellow Addicks Academy graduate Ademola Lookman.

The latter made the headlines most recently when the 26-year-old netted a hat-trick in the 2024 Europa League Final for Atalanta. Since bidding a fond farewell to the Addicks in January 2017 for Everton, the winger has gone on to have spells with RB Leipzig, Fulham, Leicester City and the Serie A side.

"Me and Steve often say that if we could put a squad out of our academy starlets, we'd be in the Premier League!" Francis says. "Both Joe and Ezri were Young Player of the Year at our Club. Joe was runner-up for LFE's Apprentice of the Year – we've had five winners of that award.

"It's great when you can talk about players like Joe, Ezri, Ademola, Karlan Grant and Alfie Doughty and a whole host of others that have trodden the same path. We're doing a lot of things right at our place. We've had a conveyer belt of talent and it's not letting up any time soon."




EFL
OFFICIAL MATCH BALL
FOREVER. FASTER.
ULTRA
FUTURE

EFL IN THE COMMUNITY



Clubs across the EFL contribute over £1 billion of social value to their towns and cities across England and Wales.

Clubs' charitable arms are hard-working, agile and knowledgeable local Community Organisations that engage with nearly one million people on an annual basis.

EFL Director of Community **Debbie Cook** talks through how the presence of Clubs in their community has never been more important.

Since I began leading the EFL's charitable arm – EFL in the Community – in early 2024, I've felt immense pride and excitement witnessing the impactful work being done by around 9,000 employees and volunteers across the network.

Clubs and their Community Organisations are perfectly positioned to assist those in the community who need support the most and to tailor that support to their specific needs.

During my time in my previous role as Grimsby Town Football Club Chief Executive, I witnessed the tremendous efforts of the Foundation and the Club, and saw first-hand how they build strong connections with members of the community through the power of the Club badge.

As we gear up for an exciting new EFL season on the pitch, we're thrilled EFL in the Community will feature on the back of every player's shirt across all 72 EFL Clubs. This branding will help to raise awareness of the incredible community work that takes place all year round.

"We're thrilled EFL in the Community will feature on the back of every player's shirt across all 72 EFL Clubs."



Clubs and their Community Organisations support nearly one million people each year aged from one week to 101 years old. Their impact on these people is huge, and we want to see that impact grow and help them to reach more people, adding even more value within their communities.

We're excited to develop further benefits for our EFL communities with our partners this season.

Following the extension of the Sky Bet title sponsorship of the EFL, we have worked together to create the Sky Bet EFL Building Foundations Fund, of which £600,000 worth of grants have been released to our charities across the country – just the first part of a £6 million commitment from Sky Bet to our communities.

We're also thrilled to develop our new system partnership with Sport England, that will focus on collaboration and continuous improvement across our network to ensure maximum impact in our EFL communities.

Simultaneously, we'll be unveiling the EFL in the Community Strategy for 2024 to 2029, focused on supporting our charities to be able to deliver more of what their communities need.

Together, we will continue to adapt and meet the evolving demands of the people within EFL communities, delivering lasting and positive impact.

In the past five years, the need to address health inequalities, community cohesion and barriers in education and employment has heightened our responsibility. Our network of charities has reinforced its role as key changemakers, both independently and through working with partner organisations.

We will unite this exceptional group of trusted charities, channelling their local impact into large-scale national projects, opportunities and policy activations to improve the lives of people in your communities.



Charlton Athletic Social Prescribing

In 2023, Charlton Athletic's Community Trust engaged 25,000 participants, with a societal value of £49.6 million*.

The Trust's health staff are integrated into the Queen Elizabeth Hospital discharge team, providing social prescribing and resolving practical issues to speed up patient discharge times and reduce bed blocking.

Charlie MacDonald, Director of Youth, Health and Inclusion at Charlton Athletic Community Trust says: "The hospital discharge programme helps to ensure patients are safely discharged and provides links to ongoing community support to try and minimise the chance of early re-admittance, which is both costly and damaging for long-term health outcomes.

"The programme delivers practical solutions like deep cleaning a patient's home, food shopping and delivering medical aids that help speed up and smoothen the transition from hospital to home, therefore supporting the NHS with its target of freeing up hospital beds as quickly as possible."





More than 7,400 cost-of-living support referrals were received from Charlton's Primary Care partners, leading to 11,222 outward referrals to support people in need.

*Validated by Greenwich University

Training Ground Launch

"A unique opportunity for young people to overcome barriers and unlock their potential."

That's how the EFL's Director of Community, Debbie Cook, described the newly launched Training Ground programme, which offers 16 to 24-year-olds the opportunity to gain key skills and experience, with the intention of finding meaningful employment.

The initiative provides practical support and training – including mentoring, workshops on life skills and money management – and work experience, while physical and mental health support is also available to enhance employability and overall wellbeing.

Funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the programme aims to improve life chances and community pride via 11 Clubs in Greater London – AFC Wimbledon, Arsenal, Brentford, Charlton Athletic, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Leyton Orient, Millwall, Queens Park Rangers, Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham United.

EFL Stronger Communities Cup

"My daughter is using football to make new friends and integrate with other young people in the area."

Those are the words of Saad El Anazi, whose daughter, Baneen, participated in the EFL Stronger Communities Cup, which connects young female refugees and asylum seekers with girls from EFL communities through football.

Supported by UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) and UEFA, the event promoted social integration among secondary school-aged girls and forcibly displaced young females.

The inaugural event – which took place at the Champions League Fan Park at Somerset House in London on the same day as the UEFA Champions League Final – featured teams from Blackburn Rovers, Preston North End and Sutton United.



EFL Clubs and Community Organisations support over 2,000 refugees and asylum seekers weekly through tailored programmes for social cohesion and access to local services.

Debbie Cook, the EFL's Director of Community, says: "Football is a universal language with the power to unite people from all backgrounds and that's the ethos behind the Supporting Communities Cup – bringing like-minded young people together through a shared passion of football."





Sport England – We Are Undefeatable

One in four people in England live with a long-term health condition, making them twice as likely to be inactive.

With 15 million people suffering across the country, the We Are Undefeatable campaign, supported by Sport England, has been launched to offer a lifeline to those who are socially isolated or struggling to get moving.

EFL Clubs have provided support through specific health programmes and general health and wellbeing initiatives, like FIT FANS and Extra Time Hubs.

One such example is Wigan Athletic, with their Extra Time programme giving a "new lease of life" to people like Dennis Heaton – a 68-year-old living with Parkinson's disease.

"Having Parkinson's disease has curtailed me a little bit," the retired welder admits. "It got me down – it makes life slower and obviously more difficult and I worry about what people will think.

"But after going to my doctor, I was told about the Extra Time programme. On my first day, I was a bit nervous about meeting new people because you wonder how they're going to react to you.

"I was made welcome with a cup of tea, a biscuit, a game of dominoes and straight away I just fitted in like a glove. It's really boosted my confidence; I feel a lot better, and I love coming.

"There's always somebody who'll come and sit with you and there's always something to do, whether that's a game of pool or the air hockey. I enjoy the walking football, badminton and I've even done rock climbing.

"I look forward to it every week and would say if anyone is thinking of coming then just come, enjoy it and give it a try – you'll be surprised at how much it can change your life."

The Kids in America

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**

"Why didn't we do it sooner?" That's the question Carlisle United Chairman **Tom Piatak** asks of himself, nine months on from his Castle Sports Group completing a takeover of the Club in November last year.

The family decided the time was finally right to fulfil their ambition of owning a Football Club and, after careful consideration, the "history and tradition" of the EFL won out over rival leagues across the globe.

Alongside his wife and children, the Piataks attended their first game in May 2023 when Carlisle travelled to Bradford City for the first leg of the Sky Bet League Two Play-Off Semi-Final. They were also in attendance at Wembley as the Blues overcame Stockport County under the famous arch to win promotion back to League One. It was the perfect introduction to English football.

"English football, with its rich history and passionate fanbases, offers a unique opportunity for American investors," he explains. "The sport's global appeal, coupled with the potential for significant growth and development, makes English Clubs particularly attractive.

"The ability to merge the deep-rooted traditions of English football with innovative strategies from the US can create a synergy that drives both sporting success and commercial growth.

"We're from Jacksonville and the big sports club we have is Jacksonville Jaguars. They've been around now for 30 years and we've been a huge supporter of them and will continue to be, but we don't go back 130 years. Once people come over to England and feel it, it's in their blood. There's something about the competition – every match matters and every goal matters."

Although their first order of business was to organise their affairs in Cumbria, tapping into the American market was always a part of the plan of action.



And Piatak – who maintains an open dialogue with other American owners across the EFL and the Premier League – sought advice from his counterparts, who advised him about the "importance of authenticity and consistency in building connections" with the US market.

He continues: "Establishing strong ties with the USA was a core component of our strategic vision when taking over at Carlisle United.

"We recognised early on that the growing interest in football – or soccer – in the US, particularly among younger audiences, presents a fertile ground for building a loyal international fanbase.

"This not only helps in expanding our brand, but also opens new commercial avenues and partnerships that are crucial for the Club's long-term sustainability."

One of the ways in which they plan to do this is through a sister link between Carlisle and the city of Jacksonville in Florida, where the family's Magellan Transport Logistics company is based.

The collaboration could open doors for pre-season tours, joint training programmes, youth development camps and cultural exchanges between the two cities in the future.

"Jacksonville and Florida in general has a huge football – or soccer – background," Piatak indicates.



"By creating a strong connection with Jacksonville, we can build a local fanbase that becomes a direct link to Carlisle United.

"We want local residents to say, 'a local family owns this Club – they're here in Jacksonville and they've built their businesses in Jacksonville, so what better team to support?' I think we'll see a lot of that in the Jacksonville market, but our plans are to expand it further throughout the US."

The benefits of forming links with the USA are "multi-faceted", according to the Club's owners, who are establishing official supporter groups in the US, beginning with Jacksonville.

In addition, there are plans to align with the Noel Soccer Foundation – an organisation which uses the sport as a tool for social change, focusing on youth development and education – while exploring other commercial avenues when it comes to partnerships.

"Commercially, it provides access to one of the largest sports markets in the world, with potential revenue streams from sponsorships, merchandise sales, and broadcast rights," says Piatak.

"From a marketing perspective, it allows us to position Carlisle United as a global brand, appealing to a new and diverse audience.

"Partnerships with American businesses and organisations, such as the Noel Soccer Foundation and soon to be additional organisations, further cement our presence and foster community engagement on both sides of the Atlantic. This international outreach can also attract new talent, investment and fan engagement, ultimately strengthening the Club at all levels."

Earlier in the season, the EFL announced an exclusive, multi-year, multi-platform rights deal with CBS Sports to offer the widest distribution of EFL matches ever in the United States.

Under the terms of the agreement, the broadcaster will air at least 250 EFL matches each season across the Championship, League One, League Two, Carabao Cup and Bristol Street Motors Trophy. It's a deal that Piatak described as a "gamechanger" for Carlisle.

"Most League One and League Two matches are on at around 10am Eastern on Saturday mornings," he notes. "What better way to wake up and enjoy a competitive match during a late breakfast when very little American sports are being televised?

"Increased accessibility to live matches is crucial for building a fanbase in the US. You're taking a rich, historical, global brand and opening it up to all these new markets. This exposure allows fans to follow the team's journey in real-time, creating a deeper connection with the Club."

Not surprisingly in the current landscape, social media will form a "cornerstone" of the strategy, leveraging different platforms – including X, Instagram and TikTok, where the Club already have a presence – to reach new audiences.

"We plan to create dedicated social media channels for US-based fans where we can share tailored content, including match highlights, behind-the-scenes footage and stories that highlight the Club's connection to the US," he reveals.

"We're working closely with the Club's media and marketing departments to develop targeted campaigns that resonate with American audiences.

"We're also exploring the use of influencers and partnerships with American sports media to increase our visibility."

Merchandise is another tool Carlisle can utilise, working with US retailers and online platforms. And it's something they have already capitalised on. During one of their last visits to the UK, the family purchased 250 shirts from the Club shop to distribute to their employees.

"There's a picture that somebody posted on one of the social media sites of the Jacksonville office of Magellan Transport Logistics with everybody wearing the kits," Piatak explains. "Every Friday, in our offices, we go from business casual to casual wear and now every Friday, half of them are coming in wearing that Carlisle kit!"

The family have started to down roots in Cumbria after purchasing a residence in the area. At the beginning of September, Piatak returned to the States – having touched down in the UK in August for the beginning of the 2024/25 campaign – but plans to fly back later in October.

Carlisle and Jacksonville – two cities separated by some 4,000 miles and the small matter of the Atlantic Ocean that have never felt more united, both by name and by nature.

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JAMESON LAUNCHES CONNECTS FC

During the 2023/24 season, Official Partners of the EFL, Jameson, launched a vibrant new community-based programme to connect fans through football, named 'Connects FC'.

With over 25 million people across the UK, from all walks of life, reporting instances of feeling disconnected from society, the initiative leverages the transformative power of football to create a community of like-minded people, spanning multiple generations.



The first Connects FC events took place at Gillingham, Notts County and Stockport County – occasions where lovers of the game shared stories and connected over a morning brew.

At the very first event, Gills legends Matt Jarvis and Andy Hessenthaler carried out a Q&A session with local people at Priestfield Stadium.

"We have to get out there, the community is so important to us," said Hessenthaler. "It's about the fans. They've always been behind us."

In addition, ambassador and EFL legend, Clinton Morrison, joined the Connects FC team. The former Republic of Ireland international jumped into the thick of it by chatting with fans, stirring up banter, fostering connections and sharing his own personal stories about the beautiful game.

"Football has always been about bringing people together, no matter the level," Morrison declared. "It's a shared passion for the game, your Club, your fans.

"The highs and lows of being part of something together, something bigger, something meaningful – these are the memories that stick with you as both a player and a fan. What Jameson is doing with Connects FC is so important to local communities like the one in which I grew up. I think it's brilliant and I can't wait to be a part of the Club and play my role."



From the 2024/25 campaign, Connects FC will see Jameson – with the support of EFL in the Community, the EFL's charitable arm – bring to life a series of vibrant and passionate events in the heart of football communities up and down the country.

Jameson will donate £2,500 to each EFL Club Community Organisation who participates in the Connects FC programme. The fund is in place to support and empower these Clubs to develop further community outreach programmes and events that bring people together.

Debbie Cook, the EFL's Director of Community, said: "The EFL network of Club Community Organisations work with people across EFL communities in England and Wales 365 days a year, every season, interacting with and supporting around one million individuals.

"The power of football brings people together and gives them the opportunity to forge new friendships and share experiences while finding out more about all the great community support our Clubs give beyond a matchday."

Josh McCarthy, Brand Director for Jameson UK, added: "'Nothing brings people together like football, especially here in the UK.

"That unifying force of football aligns perfectly with our Jameson brand values of togetherness and fun and, through Connects FC, we can't wait to bring those to life."



He's a Keeper

When Lee Carsley's Young Lions were crowned champions of Europe in July 2023, Wigan Athletic's Sam Tickle had just one solitary league appearance to his name.

The majority of the 22-year-old's minutes had come in the Latics' reserves side while he patiently waited in the wings as an understudy.

Even he couldn't have anticipated that just two months later, he'd catch the eye of the England Under-21s Head Coach, with his breakthrough season in Sky Bet League One still in its infancy.

WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**

In doing so, the shot-stopper became the Club's first homegrown player to receive a call-up for England's U21 side since former Wigan and Everton defender Leighton Baines, who was selected to represent his country at youth level in 2006.

"He's not a bad player to be in company with!" Tickle smiles. "It's all come out of the blue really. I've been chucked in at the deep end and it was sink or swim.

"I got a text from this number saying, 'you're available to be selected'. I text my agent saying, 'is this a wind up?' I came in the next day, got called into the gaffer's office and he gave me the good news. He said to me, 'go and show them you're the best one. You're not there just to make up the numbers'."



His debut came later in March this year when he made his bow in a 7-0 victory over Luxembourg at Bolton Wanderers' Toughsheet Community Stadium. Among those players also making their first appearance for Carsley's team that same night was Crystal Palace midfielder Adam Wharton, who secured his place on the plane for UEFA EURO 2024.

"After 25 minutes, I thought, 'I'm not even going to get to touch this ball'," he jokes. "Harvey Elliott gave me my first touch from the halfway line when he booted it back and I was buzzing!

"The standard of training was unbelievable. You came off the pitch thinking, 'I'm rubbish here'. The goals that were going in, the ball went past you before you'd even seen it! That's the level you've got to get to day in, day out. It shows it's not that far away. There's definitely a pathway there to the top, especially for the goalies in the EFL."

"After 25 minutes, I thought, 'I'm not even going to get to touch this ball'!"

The young keeper – who spent his childhood admiring the likes of Edwin van der Sar and David de Gea as a boyhood Manchester United fan – joined the Latics at the age of 10. He was in the stands at Wembley when Wigan netted a last-gasp winner against Manchester City in the 2013 FA Cup Final and hasn't looked back.

"You don't really choose to be a goalie, it just sort of chooses you, doesn't it?" he says. "I played down two years at one point because I was absolutely tiny.

"I used to go to goalie school once a week on a Wednesday and a guy there, Sean Bradley, worked at Wigan. He said, 'we'll try and get you trials at Wigan and Liverpool'. I said, 'I'm not going to Liverpool – I'm a United fan!'"

However, his playing career to date hasn't been without its hurdles. After being released by the Club in 2018, Tickle spent a season with non-league Pilkington at the age of 16 and his performances saw Wigan reverse their decision and eventually offer the youngster a well-deserved scholarship.

He recalls: "I remember in the car, I was trying not to cry in front of my dad. The Wigan goalie coaches would come down and watch the games to see how I was getting on. About November time, I got offered a scholarship. I'd like to think I proved quite a few people wrong."

Indeed, the Latics' youth setup is brimming with talent, as Tickle can attest. The promising gloveman has played alongside Thelo Aasgaard, Joe Gelhardt – now of Leeds United – the returning Jensen Weir – who re-joined Wigan from Brighton & Hove Albion – and Tottenham Hotspur's Alfie Devine.

"I'm closest to Thelo – it's nice when you go out onto the pitch and you see one of your best mates going out with you," Tickle continues. "Gelhardt was a different class in the mini-games. I remember the first time he was up with the first team and he just ran rings around everyone.

"When we were playing league games, if we ever lost a game, there was a massive inquest into what's gone on. The age groups when I was coming through were really, really good."

Loan spells with Nantwich Town and Warrington Rylands – along with a cameo in the EFL Trophy against Crewe Alexandra – gave Tickle senior experience, but the sporadic nature of his opportunities meant he couldn't quite find his rhythm.

He admits: "It is hard and sometimes it can be frustrating because I always thought, 'why not just give me a shot?'

"I'd played a full season at 16 and after that, I'd not played more than 10 or 12 games a season, especially when I was just playing in the academy. I was just a trainee keeper put to the side."

The arrival of Shaun Maloney, who was appointed as the new Latics boss in January last year, was "perfect timing" for Tickle. Maloney, who clocked close to 100 appearances for the Greater Manchester outfit during his playing career, handed the youngster his debut on the final day of the 2022/23 campaign as his side played out a goalless draw with Rotherham United.

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SEGA



Once I got the number one shirt, I thought, 'right, let's get going'

The former Celtic star transformed Wigan from a team who fielded the oldest team in the Championship in 2022/23 to a side who rewarded their academy graduates with more minutes on the pitch than any other Club in League One during the 2023/24 season.

"The first thing he said to me was he's heard a lot about me!" says Tickle. "Everyone wants to work for him. He's pretty much made my career, hasn't he? I don't think I'd have played without him.

"Before games, I normally come in before the outfielders and it's just me and him in the changing room. He says, 'we're going to need you to save us again!' We've built a relationship from there."

The 41-year-old has heaped high praise on the keeper – who managed 18 clean sheets in 52 appearances across all competitions last season – proclaiming him to be the best gloveman in the whole of the EFL.

Not surprisingly, the Warrington-born youngster was named the Club's Player of the Year at the end-of-season awards – becoming the first keeper to claim the accolade since Ali Al Habsi 13 years ago – while fellow academy graduates Charlie Hughes and Scott Smith finished in a close second and third.

Tickle says: "Once I got the number one shirt, I thought, 'right, let's get going'. After Derby in the first game, that whole corner at Pride Park was singing my name. I just thought, 'it can't get better than this'.

"In that first game, every corner was on my head and everyone was surrounding me because I was young, but after four or five games, everyone thought, 'there's no point putting it there because he'll just come and get it'.

"Around March time, I was thinking, 'I need the end of the season to come here because I'm battered!'"

With a first full season firmly under his belt, Tickle is well equipped for what's to come in 2024/25 as Maloney's men look to tackle the division head on.

And they can do so safe in the knowledge that one of last year's standout performers will be the first name on the teamsheet after the stopper put pen to paper on a new long-term deal – perhaps the Club's best piece of business in the summer transfer window – as he targets success with the Latics and, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, a place between the sticks for England.

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CLUB EDUCATION HUB

The EFL has established a new Club Education Hub to assist Clubs in meeting the growing challenges of modern football, both on and off the field.



Building on the development of the Together Education programme, which saw over 16,000 of collective hours undertaken by staff within Clubs over the past two seasons, the Education Hub will look to support a greater number of roles within EFL Clubs – led by Ellie McGoldrick in the newly created Club Education Manager role within the EFL's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion department.

The Education Hub's mission is to provide 'real world football learning' and will have three key objectives.

- **To be a leading provider in football-based education.**
- **Provide streamlined education provision (for both EFL staff and EFL Clubs) to ensure a more consistent approach to education being delivered under the umbrella of the EFL.**
- **Design and deliver a planned curriculum of learning.**

The Education Hub will structure its provision across four key delivery areas.

- **Role-specific Education: Upskill staff members in football specific roles in which no formal qualification is available. For example, Inclusion Leads, Disability Access Officers, Head of Football Administration, Safety Officers, etc. These will take the form of EFL-provided qualifications, role-specific education series or guidance documents.**
- **Education and Learning Sessions; Building on the Together EDI Education programme, these sessions will look at Club wide education which can benefit various areas of the business and are not specifically designed for a specific member of staff.**
- **Pipeline Projects: Looking towards staff of the future, the EFL will work with organisations and appeal towards people looking to work in the game and provide education provision to ensure they are fully aware of the opportunities and possibilities. The Pipeline Projects will initially aim towards current and former players, media students, internships and executives from other industries.**
- **EFL Diplomas and other providers: Over time, the EFL will look to provide Diplomas within key roles of EFL Clubs, as well as work with other academic institutions to ensure relevance within qualifications and the football industry, ensuring graduates are able to make a lasting impact within the game.**

The Club Education Hub will kick off in 2024/25 with role-specific education for Heads of Football Administration, the continuation of the Together EDI Education programme, Pipeline projects for current and former players and media personnel, as well as the Women's Development and Leadership programmes. The Club Education Hub will also spend 2024/25 developing curriculums for additional role-specific content and connecting with other education providers across the football industry.

The EFL looks forward to sharing details of the Head of Football Administration provision along with the other content for the 2024/25 season in the coming weeks and months.

BEHIND THE SCENES

A SCOUT'S HONOUR

For most individuals working in football, the start of a new season signals the time when months of planning is put into action.

But for Lincoln City's Chief Scout, Marc Tracy, attention immediately switches to 12 months' time.

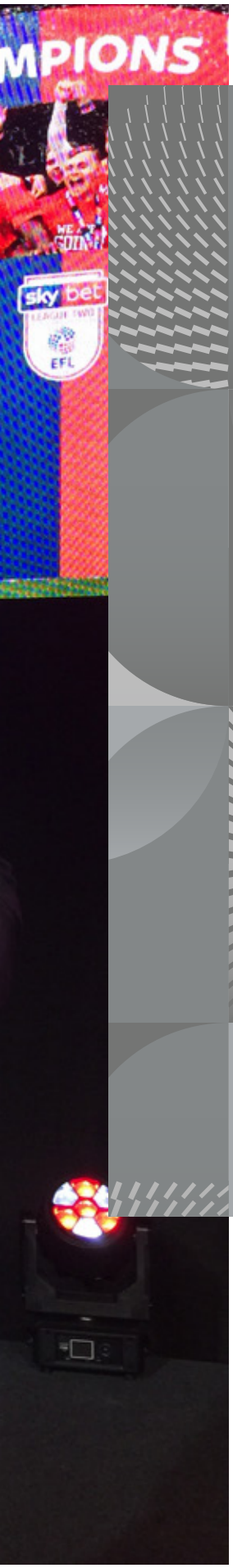
WORDS // **HOLLY HUNT**



He says: "The moment the season kicks off in August, that's when the recruitment for summer 2025 actually starts – it's an endless task!"

One of two full-time members of staff at the Sky Bet League One Club within the department, Tracy – who is better known, affectionately, to those in football by his nickname, 'Ginge' – is supported by volunteers across the country, but it's still no easy endeavour.

"Recruitment is one of the hardest things in football," he affirms. "Everyone wants the best players, and they want them today. I have a template of what the Club would like their footballers to look like and that can differ. The Club then employ a Head Coach or Manager that has similar views, so we're all on the same lines. It makes life a bit easier.



"When I go out to watch players, it's not who I personally like, it's players that the Head Coach, the Club and the Director of Football want. As much as I'm trying to identify the best players, I've got to make sure the finances fit for the Club as well – and it's no secret that the player I like is also liked by various other Clubs."

The role that EFL Clubs play in the next generation is never more pertinent than it is now. Across the England squad selected to represent the Three Lions at EURO 2024, Gareth Southgate's players have made a total of 2,128 combined appearances in EFL competitions – 1,748 of which were divisional appearances. And it all starts with people like Tracy.

He continues: "You see a lot of success stories at EFL Clubs where people are playing in the Premier League Club or for their country, but they've started at Lincoln or Rochdale or Accrington and those Clubs play a big part in the way football is operated in our country.

"There are some really promising players in the EFL, and it brings us so much satisfaction for what can come in the future.

"You've got to find the potential to see if you can make it into something good and then that comes from the whole staffing structure at your Club to make sure that we're all believing that we can make that player be the best they can."

Having first come across former Imps management duo Danny and Nicky Cowley during their time at non-league Braintree Town, Tracy linked up with Lincoln in the summer of 2018. He made the switch from Cambridge United, where he'd spent the best part of the last decade heading up the Club's recruitment team.

In his first year, Lincoln clinched the League Two title and for the last six seasons, Tracy has been using his unique set of skills to help the Imps compete at the level they find themselves and stretch their potential.

"First and foremost, they have to be able to play and compete at the level that we are because we've got to try and win games of football," he states.

"There are different types of ingredients to make a cake and it's no different to a football team. You can't just have 11 silky footballers – you're going to need the warriors on the pitch and the artists who are going to be creative and score the goals. I've got to make sure I see a whole mixture of players at all different levels and Clubs."



Often found in the stands taking in a game – or five – travelling is part and parcel of Tracy's role. In fact, he rarely gets to see the fruits of his labour in action, but, as he is fully aware, it comes with the territory.

He quips: "If I'm at Lincoln, the question is 'what are you doing here?' We know what's already in the building, so it's about what we can find to add to the building. On a busy week, my role would be watching two games on a Monday in the Premier League 2 or the Professional Development League, two games on a Tuesday and maybe one on a Wednesday.

"I'm back out on the road again on a Friday and Saturday. You'll often find me at games in League One, League Two, the National League, Scotland, Ireland and a few other countries."

There are some really promising players in the EFL, and it brings us so much satisfaction for what can come in the future.



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Tracy's story is one that has taken on more twists and turns than most. At 14 years old, the late Chris Turner – former Peterborough United Manager – took him under his wing. The teenager – who spent the season trying his hand at every role possible, including making tea and coffee for the players on the team bus – even watched the Posh's 1992 Third Division Play-Off Final at Wembley from the bench with the squad.

From there, he moved into coaching, taking up positions at Cambridge, his beloved Luton Town, Southend United, Colchester United and Rushden & Diamonds. It was at the latter where he worked with the likes of Simeon Jackson, Lee Tomlin and Tom Shaw – Lincoln's First-Team Coach, who he was reunited with at the LNER Stadium.

But it was his knowledge of the game, key contacts and a keen eye for identifying talent that saw him make the transition into recruitment.

"I have a little notebook of players I recommended and it's fascinating to see where they end up," Tracy explains. "I've had players that I've recruited from park pitches that have gone on, not only to play professional football, but some of them have gone on to play in the Premier League and for their country.


Ben Chilwell


Jack Collison

"Jack Collison was someone I saw play on a park pitch as a nine-year-old. He made his Premier League debut for West Ham at Arsenal and he went on to play for Wales. When I was Rushden & Diamonds' Head of Recruitment, Ben Chilwell was in my Under-9s team. Todd Kane was the same at Chelsea.

"Just before I left Rushden & Diamonds, I went to a tournament in Milton Keynes and had my eye on this player who really intrigued me and I thought, 'he's definitely got to be signed for a big Club'. I wasn't sure whether to approach the manager, but that person was Dele Alli!"

It fills him with pride to play a small part in a player's journey, following the trajectory of their career with a vested interest, and if Tracy's track record is anything to go by, Lincoln could be on the right path to unearthing some of the EFL's hidden gems.



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ACADEMY PROGRAMME REVAMP

The role played by the EFL, and its Clubs, in developing young players has never been more prevalent.

In 2023/24, 215 academy developed players made their debut in the EFL, while a further 59 players on loan from Premier League Clubs also made their senior professional bow.

Whether it's in the Championship, League Two or the Bristol Street Motors Trophy, a bright future in the game can happen for any of those young talents, as proven by England's UEFA EURO 2024 squad, with every member of Gareth Southgate's side having played in an EFL competition at some point in their careers.

The journey for each individual begins long before their professional debut, however, with significant work being done in academies across the country, as well as a structured fixture system at various levels and age groups.

Darren Wassall, the EFL's Head of Youth Development, oversees the work of the League in this area. Appointed to the role in August 2023 following over a decade working as Derby County's Academy Director, Wassall and his team have remodelled several aspects of the academy games programme for the 2024/25 campaign.

He explains: "The idea of all the changes is to provide our academy players with more competition and a variety of formats, to enable them to test themselves against new opposition across all levels of academy categories."

Here is a look at the new formats.

Youth Alliance Leagues

The format of the Under-18 Youth Alliance has been modified for the new season, with a simplified approach.

Previously, there were four regional divisions – North East, North West, South East and South West – while the new structure sees one league covering the North and one covering the South, with teams playing each other home and away.

Winners of each section will then play in a North v South Final to determine the national champions.

Youth Alliance Cup

The Youth Alliance Cup has also been revamped, with the South moving away from its prior straight knockout structure.

Instead, both Northern and Southern sections will be split into regionalised groups, with two North West, two North East, two South West and two South East groups.

The top two teams from each will progress to a Round of 16 stage (not regionalised), then to Quarter-Finals, Semi-Finals and a National Final, which is to be played at one of the finalists' first-team ground.

U17 Floodlit Cup

Having been strictly for Category 3 academies, the Under-17 Floodlit Cup will now form a cross-category competition, with the inclusion of Clubs from the Category 2 U17 PDL Cup.

Where possible, 13 groups (52 teams) will be regionalised, with the winner of each – as well as two best-placed runners-up – progressing through to the U17 PDL Cup knockout stages.

Meanwhile, the next best placed 16 teams will join the U17 PDL Trophy, with both competitions consisting of a Round of 16, Quarter-Final, Semi-Final and Final.

Schoolboys

The games programme for schoolboys has been refreshed in various ways, expanding on the previous system of regionalised leagues for Under-9s to Under-15s, with teams playing each other three to six times a season.

The new format sees Clubs play each other a maximum of three times, while tri and quad fixtures with Category 1 and 2 Clubs is a new feature for 2024/25.

EFL Festivals will include Category 2 Clubs moving forward, and a select number of EFL Category 3 Clubs will participate in the inaugural Premier League U12 Cup.

Elsewhere, the Youth Development team successfully piloted a Futsal competition for Under-10s with 24 Category 3 Clubs last season, culminating with the Finals being played at St George's Park. This will now be rolled out across three age groups – Under-9s, Under-10s and Under-11s, and will also feature Category 2 Clubs – seeing the number of events rise from four to 21, and the number of entrants doubling to 50 teams per age group.

PRE-SEASON TRAINING:

INSIDE THE RIGOROUS PREPARATION OF AN EFL REFEREE

WORDS // **MEGAN RUMSEY**

Following the close of the football season in May, many fans swapped their Club shirt for an England shirt and turned their attention to UEFA EURO 2024.

For EFL referees like **Ollie Yates**, however, this period marks the beginning of a meticulous pre-season training programme designed to ensure peak performance ahead of the 2024/25 campaign.

A QUICK BREATHER...

"When the season finishes, I try to ensure I get a bit of downtime," Yates explains. "I enjoy watching the Play-Offs and tournaments like the Euros.

"This initial period of rest is essential for recovery before the intensity of pre-season training begins."

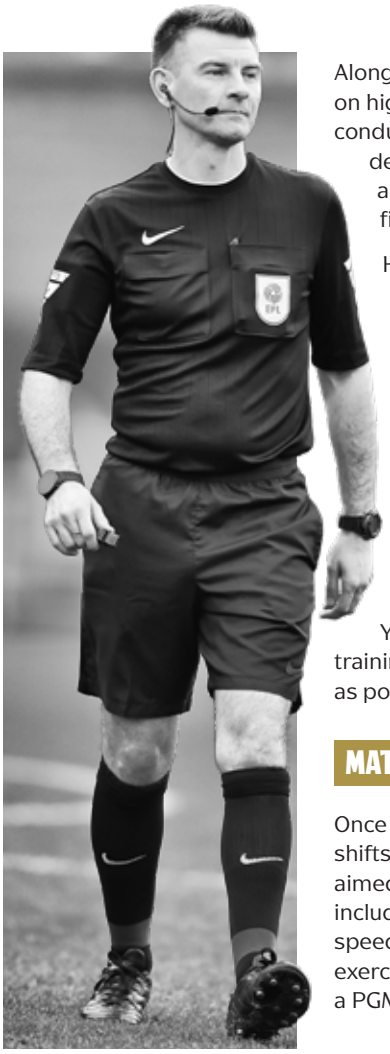
COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING PLANS...

PGMOL provides a robust pre-season training plan for its officials across the various leagues. These plans usually commence in June and continue right through until the start of the season, including preparation for fitness tests that take place across the summer.

"As well as test preparation, the training plan includes sessions centred around match fitness and sharpness," says Yates. "This is crucial for making sure we're ready once the season kicks off."

BUILDING A FITNESS FOUNDATION...

In the weeks leading up to the fitness test, Yates' training consists of longer runs in order to maintain a solid base level of fitness.



Alongside this, Yates also focuses on high-intensity speed sessions conducted on a running track. These are designed to replicate the demands and format of the upcoming fitness test and matchdays.

He notes: "The longer runs are really important for establishing endurance. I also incorporate strength and conditioning work in the gym, which I do in the evenings or at the weekend, while running and track sessions are usually during the week."

FINE TUNING...

As the fitness test approaches, Yates integrates practice runs into his training plan. "This ensures I'm as prepared as possible going into the test," he adds.

MATCH READY...

Once the fitness test is complete, Yates shifts his focus to pitch-based sessions aimed at getting him match ready. This includes speed sessions, high-intensity speed endurance and match-replication exercises, which are accessed through a PGMOL-provided training plan.

EXAMPLE TRAINING WEEK FOR OLLIE WHEN BUILDING MATCH FITNESS:

Monday	Strength session and Core session
Tuesday	Pitch speed endurance session
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Strength session Upper body session Anaerobic bike session
Friday	Pitch speed session
Saturday	Match replication session
Sunday	Recovery session

EXAMPLE OF WHAT OLLIE'S DIET MIGHT LOOK LIKE ON A HIGH INTENSITY TRAINING DAY

Breakfast	Three handfuls of bran flakes with berries 200ml of fresh fruit juice Two boiled eggs
Lunch	Chicken breast in a pasta salad (two handfuls) Cherry tomatoes One tablespoon of low-fat mayo
Dinner	Green Thai chicken curry with sticky rice
Snack 1	Nakd bar Handful of dried fruit and nuts
Snack 2	One packet of skinny popcorn
Pre-Bedtime	200g of 2% Greek yoghurt Handful of dates or apricots One piece of fruit

EARLY BIRD...

Summer's longer days and lighter mornings provide Yates with the opportunity for early-morning training sessions.

He says: "I like to get up at 5am to get a session under my belt before the day begins. I usually aim for four or five sessions a week, supplemented by strength and conditioning workouts."

NUTRITION AND REST...

"I keep my diet sensible, ensuring I'm getting all the recommended nutrition and proper hydration so I can put the maximum effort into my training sessions and meet the demands of matches once the season starts," Yates continues.



"Alongside this intense training plan, it's also really important to ensure I'm having adequate rest, both physically and mentally, so that come August, I'm in top form and ready to go."

EXCITEMENT AND ANTICIPATION...

For Yates, the anticipation of a new season is just as exciting as it is for any football fan. He reveals: "There's always an eager anticipation, refreshing my emails the week before the season starts to see what my first appointment will be!"

These training plans and disciplined preparation ensure Yates and other match officials are ready to hit the ground running once the season kicks off in August.

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THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ENGLISH FOOTBALL LEAGUE

ISSUE TEN • SUMMER 2024