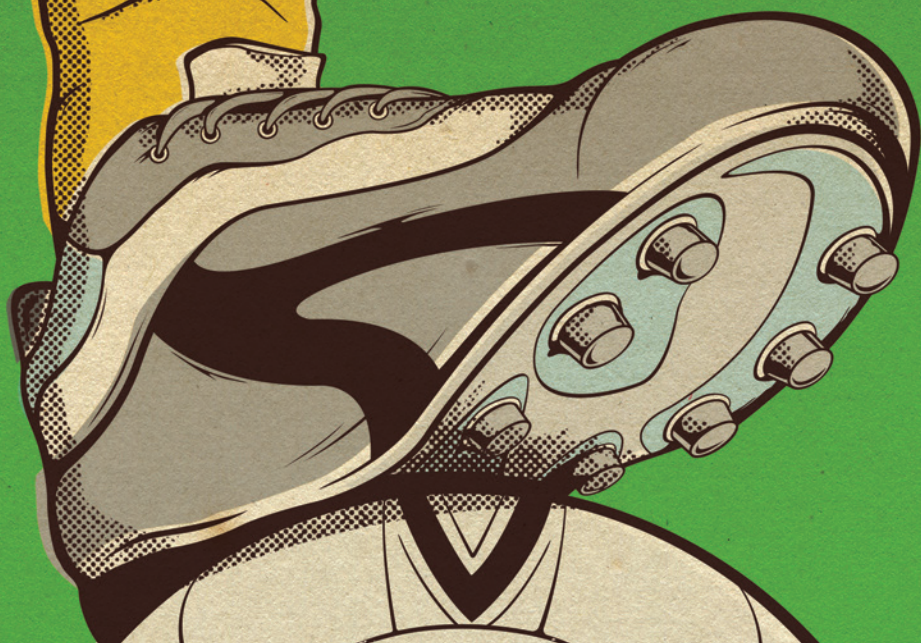


13



THE
Mighty
DELTA



ISSUE ONE | SEPTEMBER 2020

"THE DREAM WAS BACK ON! FULL-TIME FOOTBALL,
NAMES ON THE BACK OF OUR SHIRTS."

WELCOME

Welcome to the first-ever edition of 'The Mighty Delta', a fanzine devoted to the top four tiers of English football.

I'm Steve, the captain aboard this flagship and, if you can indulge me for a moment, I'd like to fling some fanzine love in the direction of an old colleague of mine, Andy Packett. Three or so years ago, he and I would survey the tumbleweed blowing across the Playmaker website and wonder how we would ever get people to notice we had a (more than) half-decent football database on our hands. We'd chucked a few emojis around on Twitter, but were pretty much twisting in the wind. Then, one fateful day, we decided to follow our shared passion for the EFL and something clicked. For his sheer enthusiasm and love of the game (not to mention his ability to shoot from impossible angles at futsal), I'd like to dedicate this issue to 'Packinfenua' and Team Packett. Nossaa!

I'll now quickly pivot to the incredibly important business of bigging up The Graphic Bomb, namely Darren and John, who have helped turn the Delta dream into a reality. You'll see for yourself that their design/illustration work is fantastic, and I know they've had to dig deep to make this happen. A massive thank you, guys - you know this already, but you're the...

Lastly, we'd like to put in print how much we appreciate the players (Nicky, Frank, Omar, Joe, Randell), coaches (Anthony), writers (Chris, James, other Joe), mascots (Glyn), photographers (Charlie), artists (Alex) and agents (Bruce!) who've given their time to this project.

We hope it's a page-turner; feel free to DM us any feedback on Twitter. Anyone interested in advertising etc in future issues, drop me an email on sgillett7@gmail.com



THE TEAMSHEET'S IN

xG	4	by James Tippet @xGPhilosophy
GOAL OF THE AGES	7	<i>The Graphic Bomb</i>
FRANK DISCUSSION	8	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
MODERN FOOTBALL ROMANCE	10	by Chris Taylor @LUFCDData
MASTER CLASS	14	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
CHARITY FOCUS	16	words by Stephen Gillett
VIEWFINDER	18	featuring Charlie Rose
THE MIGHTY INTERVIEW	20	by Connor Andrews
HISTORY LESSON	24	words by Stephen Gillett
THE DISTANCE	26	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
7EVENS	28	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
EVERBODY SHIRTS	30	interview/words by Connor Andrews
THE NEXT CHAPTER	32	by Joe Davis
DIARY OF A SECRET AGENT	34	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
MASCOT UNMASKED	36	interview/words by Stephen Gillett
CHEAP PANINI'S 5-A-SIDE	38	<i>Wonky Pics: No Score Draws</i>

Editor in chief
(captain)



Design and Illustration
(libero)

THE GRAPHIC
BOMB



The Subjectivity of Expected Goals



Football is not a sport that readily embraces change. One need look no further back than last season to see evidence of this, as the introduction of VAR caused an extreme backlash from fans, pundits and players alike. Football is a sport shrouded in tradition and entrenched in its ways – new forms of thinking tend to be met with suspicion and resistance.

As such, the recent popularity growth of Expected Goals might be considered surprising. Born from the brains of professional gamblers and football analysts, the metric otherwise known as “xG” has gained increasing traction over the past few months. When I started a Twitter account back in November 2019 that aimed to share Expected Goals stats, I would never have dreamt that it would reach well over 20,000 Twitter followers in under a year.

For the layman, the Expected Goals method is a way of more accurately measuring the ability of football teams and players. It strips randomness from the game, allowing a clearer image of what is happening on the field of play. In football, the worse team often wins and the better team often loses; a product of the low-scoring nature of the sport. The Expected Goals method remedies this by measuring the probability of each shot resulting in a goal, thus giving an idea of what you could have expected to happen when luck is accounted for.

In short, xG is an incredibly useful tool for those seeking to define and predict the true performance of players and teams. Bettors have used it to win millions in the gambling markets. Scouts have used it to recruit hidden gems for their football clubs. And fantasy football managers have used it to work out which players might bring home the most points in the next round of fixtures.

The Expected Goals method can be used to analyse football in many ways. For those interested, there is plenty of reading to be done online and in books. One of the simplest ways to analyse a player’s performance with xG is to compare the number of goals he actually scored to the number of goals that you would have expected him to score based on the chances that were presented to him.

For instance, Gabriel Jesus accumulated 21.09(xG) over the course of the 2019/20 Premier League season. This means that the “average” player would have scored around 21 goals based on the shooting positions that he found himself in. In reality, Jesus only managed 14 goals. This is a significant underperformance.

But how should we assess this data?

The most obvious conclusion to draw is that Jesus is a terrible finisher. He converted seven goals fewer than you would have expected him to, meaning he must not be a very skilled shooter. However, you might also question the role of luck. Surely players can go through spells of good or bad finishing as a product of nothing more than chance? Perhaps goalkeepers happened to make particularly impressive saves against Jesus? Perhaps he struck the woodwork on multiple occasions? These misfortunes are not accounted for in the xG data.

To what extent under-performance is a result of bad skill or bad luck is one of the greatest challenges that the Expected Goals method has encountered. How to assess over-or-under performance is a contentious issue that dominates the dialogue of online forums and Twitter threads.

“The beauty of xG is that it is objective in a sense; the data is cold and unemotional”

Let's look at another example. Liverpool stormed to their first ever Premier League title last season, scoring 85 goals and conceding on just 33 occasions. However, over the course of the season the Reds only amassed 74.48(xG) and conceded 41.53(xG). This represents an attacking over-performance of 10.52 and a defensive over-performance of 8.53. In short, Liverpool did not deserve to have as many good results as they did.

But how can we explain this over-performance? Again, we might credit the supreme finishing ability of the Liverpool players. The likes of Salah, Mané and Firmino are notoriously ruthless finishers, highly skilled at finding the back of the net. Surely they're likely to always outperform xG?

Well, this isn't quite the case. For one thing, Salah and Firmino actually under-performed their xG last season (19 goals from 20.44(xG) and 9 goals from 16.87(xG) respectively). This is crazy: in a team that so dramatically out-performed xG as a whole, two of their three dominant attacking players actually scored less goals than expected. In addition, not a single player outperformed their xG by more than 3.5. It turns out that Liverpool's over-performance came as a result of almost every player in their squad scoring only slightly more goals than expected.

This strengthens the argument that Liverpool were very lucky last season. To have so many players all out-performing xG by such small amounts suggests that random variability swung massively in their favour.


Others argued that Liverpool had found a way to “hack” xG. This argument appeals to the non-believers, those people with a pre-disposed scepticism towards analytics in football. Whether there is any truth to this claim is doubtful, only next season will tell whether Liverpool's over-performance is sustainable.

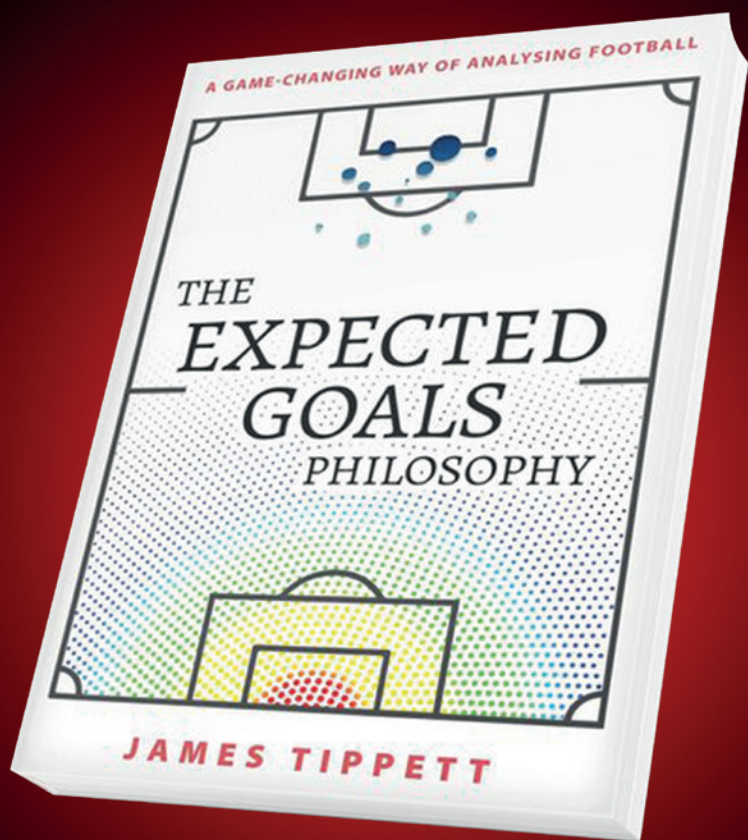
The beauty of xG is that it is objective in a sense; the data is cold and unemotional. But it's also subjective; there is plenty of room for different interpretations of xG, particularly when it comes to defining whether a disparity in performance and results is a result of either luck or skill. Is Gabriel Jesus a bad finisher, or will he regress to the mean this season? And will Liverpool continue to churn out wins, despite their xG suggesting that they should be dropping points more often than not?

For further reading on xG, The Expected Goals Philosophy is available to buy on Amazon [here](#).



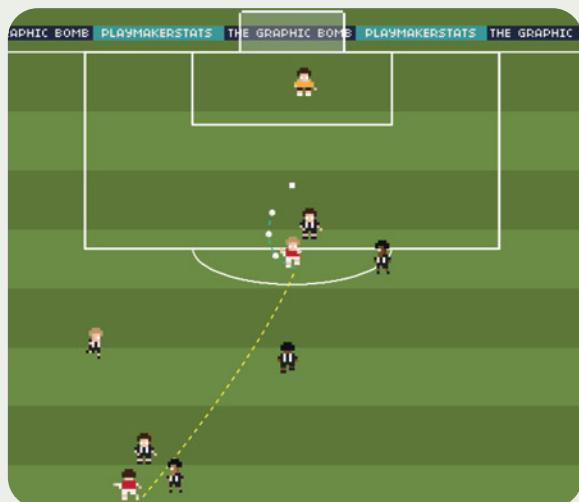
'THE EXPECTED GOALS PHILOSOPHY'

Available to buy on Amazon. Visit @xGPhilosophy on 



GAME-CHANGING.

GOAL OF THE AGES



BERGKAMP

"I got texts after that game. 'Did you mean it?' In my head, there was no question.

"The pass from Pires was slightly behind me and I was adjusting myself to the situation, because I wanted to go through on goal with one touch. I touched the ball, but my body was already turning the other way, so it looked quite good!

"For many goals, players just decide at the last moment what they're going to do. That was the same with me. I'm glad it looked like that, and that everyone is still talking about it today."

OWENS

"We lost the match because of that move, but at the same time, I say to myself I was fortunate to have participated in that, maybe in a negative way, but I will always remain an actor in this work of art.

"It's something you have to throw up your hands and say: 'Wow, it's pure beauty.' I will go down in history for that. It's one of the most beautiful goals in the history of football and you must admire it as such, just that. No shame at all. It's part of life, it's part of football."



BERGKAMP

VS NEWCASTLE UNITED





We're delighted that Plymouth Argyle forward Frank Nouble has signed up to do a regular feature for 'The Mighty Delta' - a massive thank you to him for getting involved.

The plan going forward is for Frank to talk with football professionals regarding their experiences and the current issues of the day. However, for TMD's maiden issue we caught up with the well-travelled striker (just the 17 clubs and counting!) to find out more about him.

Read on for more about his 'embarrassing' Ronaldo-inspired haircut, what he learned from Didier Drogba at Chelsea, and the Leicester City player who was the strongest he's ever faced.

FRANK DISCUSSION

Childhood idols

I always played up front as a kid and my hero was the Brazilian Ronaldo - he was the ultimate striker and the player I tried to emulate. He didn't really play up against defenders, but he'd get the ball to feet, run in behind, have a trick or two to beat a man and, for me, he was the perfect footballer. I had the same hairstyle as him for a bit, the little fro on top - which is a little embarrassing to look back on now! I even wear Nike Vapors to this day because of him. Ronaldo, John Barnes and Thierry Henry, they were my three.

Goals alone bored me!

I scored a lot of goals as a youngster at a local Bermondsey club called Red Lion, but in the professional game, my

numbers don't scream 'Frank scores a lot of goals'. Coming through at Chelsea, I was taught to link play a lot and I was never your traditional striker. I always tried to do something on the ball, produce something special or a beautiful goal. I guess I didn't realise back then that there are players who can make a living just from scoring goals...just doing that seemed a bit boring.

Didier the mentor

Coming through at Chelsea, I was lucky. We had Drogba, Anelka, Kalou, Malouda, Shevchenko and at Under-16 level I was training with them quite a lot. At the time you take it for granted because that is all you know, it's only when you leave you appreciate it more. I definitely picked things up from them and tried to apply them to my game - like how hard

a trainer Frank Lampard was, working like a train every day. Drogba is the best centre forward I've ever worked with and he taught me how to use my body in certain positions and how to strike it, he was an unbelievable striker of a ball.

Breaking bad...habits

As an attacking player, your job is about efficiency. In my earlier days, I was more concerned with looking good rather than being good. Sometimes I would hover outside the box and try to link play too much - when the important things are: Did you score? Did you assist? How much of a threat were you to the opposing team's goal? I needed to develop that mentality. Young players might concentrate on throwing stepovers or bits of skill, but if you look at the best players they are as efficient as possible: only use a trick when it's needed.

Defining moment

My first goal for West Ham convinced me I was good enough to score goals for a living. It was away at Derby in the Championship. I'd already played 10 games or so in the Premier League, but I hadn't scored - so it was a special moment. I remember everything: the ball got set back to me by Frederic Piquionne near the edge of the box and my strike took a slight deflection and went bottom corner. We lost the game, but it was a great day for me personally.

Defying drought

Not playing well affects me far more than not scoring. For some strikers scoring is everything, but I've always felt I'm more of an 'eye test' player; if you can see me playing well, most of the time my team will win. One of my longest droughts was at Ipswich, where I didn't score for 12 or 13 games. I was part of a front three with Daryl Murphy and David McGoldrick, who were scoring all the goals - but I didn't mind too much because we were on fire. It does depend a bit on the position you're playing: at Plymouth now my focus is more on scoring as I'm an out-and-out forward not coming in from wide.

Frightening goals

Over the past three seasons, at Colchester and Newport, at least seven of the 20 or so goals I have scored have been frighteningly good. I think I've picked up the knack of scoring great goals - and have actually won my club's 'Goal of The Season' award for each of the last three seasons. I'd say my goal from 30 yards out against Chesterfield on my home debut for Newport (in 2017) is probably the best goal I've ever scored.

Frightening defenders

Although you want to be friendly on the pitch, you also want to scare defenders. I pinch their arms to distract them, or swing my elbows a bit before a corner to let them know today's not the day to mess around. There are obviously other ways to gain an edge. Nile Ranger at Southend was very good at talking to defenders, making them feel comfortable and then, bang, he was gone. Simon Cox was a sneaky player too: he would disguise his strengths, never show his true speed or anything and then suddenly click

into gear and score. At Ipswich, Daryl Murphy would never speak to anybody on the pitch and gave off the impression he was totally crazy; which he wasn't actually - he was an excellent player!

The Lowe-down

I've only been at Plymouth a few weeks, but I'm already learning from Ryan Lowe. He's very hands-on with all the attackers. I obviously knew him from his playing career and what type of striker he was; you can see his class even now in our training sessions and he gives little tips about being consistent in your finishing. As an ex-striker he knows how to bring the best out of his forwards and, with two promotions in two years, his managerial record speaks for itself.

One to watch

Luke Jephcott's a great young player at Plymouth who has just been called up to Wales Under-21s. He has got all the attributes you need as a striker and actually reminds me of a young Jack Marriott, who I played with at Ipswich. Luke's definitely one to look out for.

Place it or smash it?

I've changed my tune a bit actually. In my early days I used to be more of a slide-rule finish guy, but over the years I've built up a lot of power in my legs and can really hit them. It depends. There's no right way to finish, as long as it goes in the back of the net. Every striker will have their preferences, but ideally you need to know when to use power and when to go for placement.

Most unbelievable save?

The best save I can remember, from me, was in my first-ever game for West Ham against Arsenal in the FA Cup. We'd taken the lead, and then I had a header that (Lukasz) Fabianski tipped around the post. I thought I'd scored at 17 on my debut, but he somehow made this incredible save and it's always stuck in my mind.

Toughest defender

I played Leicester the season they got promoted from the Championship, when I was at Ipswich, and Wes Morgan was the strongest player I've ever played against. I tried everything against him: I tried pace, he was quick enough; I tried to give him strength, he was strong enough; I tried to beat him in the air, he jumped higher - on that day, he was the hardest player I've ever played against.

Words of wisdom

Whatever you're good at, really work at that. You don't need to focus so much on what you're not good at - not everybody can be a Messi or Cristiano. It's obviously brilliant to work on your weaknesses, but master your strengths. I'd also tell young players coming through to be patient, the grass is not always greener. Football changes so quickly and, as much as everybody has their dreams, sometimes it's good to keep learning the game, keep applying yourself and let success come to you.



Marcelo Bielsa & Leeds:

MODERN FOOTBALL'S PERFECT ROMANCE

It will be talked about for decades to come. Housed alongside the golden Revie years and Sergeant Wilko's revolution, Marcelo Bielsa's 2020 Championship winners are now engrained in Leeds United folklore. One of modern football's greatest visionaries masterminded the most remarkable of campaigns in England's second tier and ended the club's sixteen-year exile from the Premier League.





It will be talked about for decades to come. Housed alongside the golden Revie years and Sergeant Wilko's revolution, Marcelo Bielsa's 2020 Championship winners are now engrained in Leeds United folklore. One of modern football's greatest visionaries masterminded the most remarkable of campaigns in England's second tier and ended the club's sixteen-year exile from the Premier League.

It was an audacious and fascinating high-risk club appointment, but Bielsa delivered what he had been brought to Elland Road to achieve. Leeds' highest-ever paid manager won the division outright by ten points and became the club's first head coach to win a league title since Howard Wilkinson in 1992.

The 65-year-old legendary icon became only the fourth league title-winning manager in the club's history after Arthur Fairclough, Don Revie and Howard Wilkinson. Esteemed company indeed. Marcelo will forever be engrained in the fabric of the club's successes.

Leeds' Championship title was no less than they deserved and a result of a phenomenal collective effort by everyone involved at the club. Bielsa was rewarded for his achievements by being named LMA Championship Manager of the Year, but in typically modest fashion devoted the award to his backroom staff and his players: "What makes the difference in our promotion was the capacity of our players. What really makes me happy is the fact that I was promoted with this group of players."

There is a pure love from within the club and the external fanbase for the mastermind behind the club's success that stretches far beyond the norm. Fans of Newell's Old Boys will understand, they love him so much they named their stadium after him. Leeds' promotion to the Premier League meant so much to so many, financially and emotionally, even more so with it coinciding with the club's centenary season. Bielsa will forever be immortalised in Leeds' hearts having broken the club's endless cycle of

disappointment since dropping out of the top flight in 2004, but it also happened to be Bielsa's first team honour since winning Olympic gold with Argentina the same year. Some things were just meant to be.

Following Leeds' promotion celebrations, Bielsa said he believed "love is what every human being wants in life. The supporters giving us back love is the greatest feeling." Marcelo has fallen in love with Leeds but has also won the hearts of the fans, many of whom now simply refer to him as 'God'. Bielsa's record at Leeds is certainly heavenly. He boasts the highest win percentage of any Leeds coach in the club's history (56%) having won 58 of his 104 matches in charge (as of 27 September 2020).

The Rosario-born cult hero insisted the opportunity to join Leeds was "impossible to turn down." It has since become impossible to imagine life at Elland Road without him. Leeds' two-year transformation under Bielsa has been nothing short of extraordinary. It is a whirlwind journey that started with the renowned coach inheriting a squad that had lost direction and limped over the line to an underwhelming 13th-placed Championship finish. For added context, the club had also hired ten different head coaches in the five years prior to his arrival.

Bielsa's infectious dedication, astounding attention to detail and demanding nature have transformed the club from top to bottom. One of the most revered tactical thinkers in modern football stamped his authority on the club and



has got them beating to his meticulous drum. Changes were made to the Thorp Arch training facility where sleeping pods, a running track and a new camera system for filming training sessions were all installed.

He is the sole architect behind the club's philosophy where fitness, work rate, concentration, rotation, mobility and improvisation have all shaped Leeds' fascinating style of play. Bielsa expects nothing less than his side taking control as the protagonist in matches. Leeds morph between 4-1-4-1 and 3-3-1-3 systems and have adopted a fusion of possession football, relentless high energy pressing, fast counter-attacking football, combination play, vertical passes to break through lines, and heavy use of the channels and overloading of the wings. There is a frantic interchanging of positions that poses problems for opponents, and instead of switching formations, minor changes and detailed instructions are given to individual players. Defensively, Leeds utilise a man-marking system and ensure they have six players supporting each attacking phase and four ready to defend at all times.

After his appointment in June 2018, Leeds spent just three match days outside of the top three league places in the Championship, 78% of them inside the top two and they never placed lower than fifth in the second tier during his tenure. Viral videos of the club's electric brand of vertical football and counter-attacking brilliance have been enjoyed by millions around the globe. Under his leadership, Leeds enjoyed a majority possession share in 96 of their opening 100 competitive games under him. A result of Bielsa demanding that his side takes control of matches and minimise opponents' time spent in possession. The Whites' exceptional show of authority after having scored the first goal in games is spectacular, having won 48 of their 53 matches.

Bielsa's obsession with attacking football saw Leeds register a string of incredible statistics prior to the 2020/21 season. The Whites created 570 chances overall, 50 more than any other side, and generated the most big chances (124),

registered the most shots on-target (251) and the highest expected goals value (83.1). Leeds also registered the most touches in the opposition box (1217) and most through passes (443) alongside the most deep completion passes (620).

Leeds' huge possession share had a dramatic impact on tightening their control of games by restricting opponents to having less of the ball and conceding fewer chances. Bielsa's side enjoyed the highest possession share in the Championship (64.2%) by any side in the last seven campaigns. An impressive share at any level, but Bielsa's side have shown they have possession with purpose.

Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds display one of the most aggressive and intensive pressing styles in European football. When Leeds lost the ball, they were the best in the division for winning it back. Bielsa's incredibly fit group of players are ferocious in turning over possession as quickly and as high up the pitch as possible. The club's defensive numbers during their title-winning campaign were scarcely believable. Bielsa is famed for his use of video analysis, and alongside his meticulous match preparation, he has a team of analysts working round the clock analysing, researching and feeding vital information and clips to coaching staff and players through one-to-one briefing sessions and WhatsApp groups.

Liam Cooper reinforced how significant running is for Bielsa. "He wants us to be able to run and make options. We attack, we attack, and we attack." Leeds are devastating on the counter attack, with numerous players breaking forward at speed and playing fast, vertical passes to break through the lines. Leeds made 112 direct attacks in 2019/20, no Championship side managed more.

"I DON'T EVEN THINK HE CHANGED THE SQUAD. HE CHANGED THE MENTALITY, THE SPIRIT"

Leeds' high-intensity approach produced the highest challenge intensity (8.9) in the division, having starved their opponents of the ball with an average possession against share of just 35.8%, the lowest in the division. The club also registered the lowest passes allowed per defensive action numbers (6.4) in the division. Leeds faced the fewest shots on-target (126), conceded the fewest big chances faced (36), allowed the fewest passes played into the box (255), registered the lowest expected goals against value (35.9) and conceded the fewest goals (35) in the second tier.

Leeds also kept 22 league clean sheets in the process, which was the most in a single season for the club since 1971/72, and a record only Slavia Prague bettered across any of Europe's top two divisions with 25 in 2019/20. Over the 46 league games, Leeds conceded just 19 goals from open play, and faced 40 fewer shots from open play than any other divisional side.

Leeds' devastating divisional performance ensured they broke a series of individual club records too including most points won in a single season (93), most league wins in a single campaign (28) and most away league wins in a single season (13). Bielsa used the fewest different starters in the league (21) of any Championship side throughout the campaign and also made the fewest changes to his starting XIs (48) in the second tier. Bielsa prefers to work with a

much smaller squad in comparison to rival clubs, which helps create a tight-knit group of players. Just 14 of his squad played over 1,000 minutes of Championship football in 2019/20.

Team spirit played a seismic part in Leeds' promotion. Gjanni Alioski touched upon how Bielsa played a vital role in maintaining team spirit: "I don't even think he changed the squad, he changed the mentality, the spirit." Bielsa deliberately keeps his distance from the players which creates a teacher-student environment and helps build respect. After suffering four defeats in five league matches, Bielsa held a crucial post-match team meeting following defeat at Nottingham Forest which proved fundamental to the team's turnaround in form, as they went on to lose just one of their last 15 games.

The former Athletic Bilbao manager is renowned worldwide for developing players and bettering them both as footballers and as individuals. During the club's initial negotiations with Bielsa for the Leeds job, Leeds chief executive Angus Kinnear stated that Bielsa had promised to transform three Leeds players into the best players in the division: "He said he would make Stuart Dallas, Liam Cooper and Calvin Phillips the best players in the league."

The former Chile manager was true to his word. Calvin Phillips recently made his England debut and is now valued in excess of £30m. Liam Cooper led the club to a Championship title and developed into one of the best defenders in the division. The Scotland international praised Bielsa and his staff for his development: "[Bielsa] has brought my game on in so many levels. I'm the fittest I've ever been and feel like I'm coming to the prime of my career. A lot of the credit for the call-up has to go to the manager and his staff."

The ever-versatile Stuart Dallas performed across a variety of positions and was rewarded with the Leeds Players' Player of the Year award after a stellar campaign. The Cookstown-born star was deeply appreciative of his development under the Argentine: "I'll never have any words to thank him for the transformation he's made in me." The Northern Ireland international had more touches (3283) and won more tackles (98) than any other Leeds player in 2019/20.

Phillips is arguably Leeds' most transformed player under Bielsa and now regarded as one of the best young holding midfielders in England. The jewel in Bielsa's crown hailed his manager as the best in football after winning the title: "He's the best manager in the world. There is no manager I'd rather be under than Marcelo Bielsa right now. At my age, developing, he's the perfect manager to have."

Bielsa's Leeds will be a different animal for the Premier League and are notoriously difficult to

play against, as Arsenal found out when they hosted the Whites in the FA Cup back in January. Gunners manager Mikel Arteta compared playing Leeds to "like going to the dentist. They are a nightmare for every team to play."

Charlton manager and former Leeds midfielder Lee Bowyer also reserved special praise for Bielsa's side: "I watched Leeds before he took over, and what [Bielsa's] done with that squad is unbelievable. There's not much difference between that squad and the squad now, so I've the utmost respect for him and his staff. Their fitness is unbelievable, I've not seen anything like it in this division."

Bielsa has always adhered to the "running is everything" philosophy, and his focus on physical preparation resulted in Leeds possessing one of the fittest squads in Europe. Double and triple pre-season training sessions and strict weight-loss programmes have since become the norm. Defensive midfield linchpin Phillips believes Leeds were "probably the fittest team in the league. That's important to [Bielsa]." Cooper also emphasised Bielsa's fixation with his players being in peak condition: "The biggest thing with the manager is fitness. One thing we know is that we are fitter than any team in the league and it's a great feeling to have."

Leeds boast having one of modern football's most influential coaches at the helm, and have adopted a playing style the club's fans and hipsters alike adore across the world. 'El Loco' has illuminated English football and delivered a Premier League return for Leeds United. He has become a hero at the club, but he would insist that team graft is the real superstar.

Bielsa is the modern Leeds head coach by whom all other future incumbents will be judged. His astronomically high standards and methodology have conquered England's second tier. Now his sights are set on imposing his exhilarating brand of football on the Premier League. Prepare to set those pulses racing. The world simply isn't ready to fall in love with Bielsa's Leeds, but it should be.

**"I WATCHED
LEEDS BEFORE
HE TOOK OVER.
AND WHAT
(BIELSA'S)
DONE WITH
THAT SQUAD IS
UNBELIEVABLE"**



MASTERCLASS

Fans love to wax lyrical on Diamonds, Christmas Trees, Gegenpressing and Tiki-Taka - but football's always simpler when you're on your third Guinness and using Scampi Fries and dry-roasted nuts to explain the finer points of the game.

This feature focuses on the professionals who know their onions, rather than their onion rings, and aims to shed light on the philosophies and tactics shaping modern football. For our first 'Masterclass', we had a cracker of an interview with Grimsby Town assistant manager Anthony Limbrick.

After his playing career was cut short by injury in 2006, Anthony moved into coaching and he has developed elite young talent at Southampton and West Ham's academies, as well as working at international level with England's Under-17s. Counting the likes of Nigel Adkins, Ronald Koeman and Mauricio Pochettino as mentors, the 'Austrian Mourinho' had a spell in charge of National League Woking and is now assistant manager to Ian Holloway at Grimsby Town.

Over to Anthony...

How would you describe your footballing philosophy?

A footballing philosophy isn't fixed. It adapts according to the club you're at, the players you have, your budget - and it evolves. One of my main aims as a coach is to make players better, and improve the collective performance of the 11 players on the pitch. My teams always press from the front, play a high-tempo and try to win the ball back high. Although these core values remain the same, you need to be flexible. With Grimsby, for example, we dropped back at times last season to improve our defensive organisation and played more on the counter-attack. A footballing philosophy also extends off the pitch and that's where things such as communication, man-management and linking with the community are really important.

What's your favourite formation?

The one I've played most is a 4-2-3-1. The two defensive midfielders give you a firm base and I like the movement of the front three: the 7, the 11 and the 10 and how they play off the 9. The system also gets my full-backs forward. I've also played 5-3-2, 3-4-3, and 4-4-2 in the past; the important thing is that your principles remain the same within whichever system you play.



What was it like working with Mauricio Pochettino?

I had never seen players train at the tempo and intensity of Mauricio's first season at Southampton and there's a story that has always stayed with me.

When I first joined the academy we had Calum Chambers - who went on to play for Arsenal - in the Under-16s. A couple of years later when Calum was around 19, he was with Southampton's first team and he'd told me pre-season with Mauricio was really tough - the pressing, the gym work, the high intensity double and triple sessions. Anyway, come the first game of the season, Calum made his Premier League debut against West Brom and I congratulated him the following week. I said 'That must have been the toughest game you've ever played?', but he replied 'You know what, it was actually a relief to be playing rather than training!'. For him, the training had been so hard, so physical that the game felt easy in comparison.

Pochettino had huge demands in training. Even on a rest day, where other clubs might do 90 minutes work at a slow tempo, he would get the team to go absolutely flat out for 20 minutes. Everything was done at tempo, the passing, the change-overs, the work around both boxes. It was fascinating. He was also a very good man-manager and his players would run through brick walls for him.

What has been your biggest 'Eureka' moment as a coach?

Honestly, I'm not sure there's been one. It's more a case of constant work and learning over time. Early into my coaching career, I realised that you have to put the hours in out on the grass. You can watch as many DVDs as you want, listen to as many top coaches as you like, plan session after session, but to get ahead I needed to do as much actual coaching as possible. It sounds a basic thing, but for me it was very important.

What are the wackiest tactics you've ever implemented in a game?

Probably the most original were when I worked with Michael Jolley, the previous Grimsby manager. Michael used a tactic in the Carabao Cup against Crystal Palace and it was a stroke of genius actually.

We effectively went man-for-man against Palace across the whole pitch, 11 v 11, the plan being to only allow their centre-backs time in possession. We had a man sent off after only five minutes, but we stuck with the tactic and it really frustrated them. It was crazy at one point, as Palace's wingers, Wilfred Zaha and Andros Townsend, went on the same wing and both our full-backs were marking them touch-tight literally right next to each other. We lost 1-0 in the end to a late goal, but it was a great night against a Premier League side and we almost earned a replay.

Is VAR's introduction changing how professional coaches think?

It's going to have a big impact on offside, as teams can confidently hold a much higher line. Before, the benefit of the doubt was with the attacker, but VAR is helping defenders as a fraction of a toenail is now offside.

Man-marking in the box will become far more difficult for defenders though. In League Two, at the level I coach, it's very physical in the box and marking is very tight. However, with VAR, I believe more and more teams will go zonal in the future, especially when it comes to defending free-kicks and corners, because any kind of shirt-pulling, tugging etc is likely to be pulled up.

In your time as a coach, what have been the most notable tactical shifts in the English game?

There's been an obvious move away from 4-4-2 and traditional wingers, where right-footers are on the right, left-footers are on the left. There's been a shift during my time as a coach towards inverted wingers that cut in on their stronger foot, with full-backs overlapping them. There's more rotation in the backline too, with central midfielders dropping between their centre-backs, or even becoming 'false' full-backs when their full-back is pushing on.



League Two is often portrayed as physical and direct with less emphasis on tactics. What's the reality?

There are direct teams; Northampton, for example, were really successful last season squeezing teams up the pitch, playing direct and putting lots of long throws into the box. Keith Curle did a fantastic job there.

However, last season there was tactical variety. You had teams like Forest Green, who are a real 'Total Football' side and Crewe who played great football and were a very good counter-pressing side. Ryan Lowe's Plymouth were really interesting too; they played a 3-5-2 with three centre-backs who pushed forward.

What's it like working with Ian Holloway - what have you learned from him?

Ian has taken two clubs (Blackpool and Crystal Palace) into the Premier League and enjoyed a lot of success, so it's great to draw upon his experience. He's coming towards 1,000 games in management and is clearly a fantastic man manager. He's also very good tactically, though. We played a 4-2-3-1 for much of last season, but Ian also introduced a 3-4-3 formation, with two 10s playing off a number 9 and aggressive full-backs pushing on. I learned a lot from watching him implement that.

You had a short stint working with England's Under-17s, how much has the standard of coaching in the English game improved over the past decade?

I know there's some great work going on, in terms of developing players and coaches. It's actually really good to see more young players going abroad to develop: I've worked with the likes of Arsenal's Reiss Nelson - who went to Hoffenheim - and it's great to see players like Reiss gain that experience and then come back and establish themselves.

There are some really good technical English players coming through: flair players, dribblers, creators - and it's great to see these types of players being developed perhaps more than they have been in the past.

Left footed

Centre back

Watch Nelson

4-1-4-1

Weak right
Press high

Zaha mark





HOW THE BEAUTIFUL SAVE A MAGNIFICENT

'The Mighty Delta' has been a labour of love for all of those involved (a huge shout out to Darren and John at the Graphic Bomb for making it happen!), and no issue is complete without an attempt to unify people who love football and channel the game's potential to enact positive change. So, please, join our crusade!

Playmaker recently linked up with the Wild and Free Foundation, a conservation project aiming to decrease poaching of the African rhinoceros, and we chatted with WFF co-founder Matt Bracken to find out more about the situation – and how football fans worldwide (including you, esteemed Reader!) can support their efforts.

Hi Matt – just how bad is the poaching situation in southern Africa?

"It's a real problem and we believe the approach to solving it has to drastically change.

"The sad fact is that poaching is rapidly causing the extinction of the rhinoceros in Africa. With 85% of the continent's rhinos living there, South Africa is the epicentre of conflict between conservationists and poachers – with 90% of rhino poachers crossing the border from southern Mozambique.

"The sheer number of lives lost is staggering: with over 7,000 rhinos killed in South Africa, and over 800 young men from southern Mozambique losing their lives at the hands of anti-poaching forces since 2008.

"Rhinos are being wiped out. Human lives are being lost; families torn apart. What's more, local communities are turning against conservation."

Tell us more about WFF and 'The Rhino Cup'...

"We firmly believe that killing/arresting poachers is not the long-term solution to protecting rhinos.

"In search of alternative solutions, we travelled to the rural villages in Mozambique where a high percentage of young men were being arrested, killed, or simply disappearing trying to poach rhinos. We asked a simple question, "How can we help?" – and their answer was "Football!"

"Football's so much more than a game, it crosses cultures and binds people together, so we listened.

"In 2017, we started the Rhino Cup Champions League (RCCL) – the idea being to address the driving factors that lead young men to become poachers: boredom, idleness and poverty. In April 2017, the RCCL kicked-off its inaugural season with 12 men's teams representing nine communities – and, by 2020, the league had grown to 24 teams with the addition of a Women's League."

How big an impact has the Rhino Cup had on the situation?

"With more than 600 players, coaches, and managers now involved, the League is literally transforming communities one game at a time.

"Following the 2019 season, statistics from the South African wildlife authorities



indicated that the RCCL was responsible for saving the lives of 10 rhinos per month, while statistics from government officials in Mozambique showed that – during the season – the league was responsible for a 90% reduction in the number of deaths and arrests of young poachers from the villages with football teams. Those numbers convinced us that we are moving in the right direction and we estimate that we have saved the lives of over 150 rhinos and 250 young people since we started.

“The project is also having a positive effect economically, with 67 jobs created since the league was founded.”

So, how can ‘The Mighty Delta’ and its readers help?

“First off, give us a follow on social media, the more we raise awareness of the situation, the more people will hopefully get involved.

UL GAME CAN NT ANIMAL...

“Second up, please help us buy equipment! The RCCL is 100% donor funded.

“Boots (which wear out ridiculously fast on hard dirt fields) and balls (which often puncture) are our most expensive items on an ongoing basis...and if anyone reading this could help us kit out each team/player in the RCCL we would be over the moon.

“Please follow the link to make a donation... your support can make a huge difference.”

www.wildandfreefoundation.org/donate
www.kitandbone.com/category/wild-free



WILD KITS

Love football kits and want to support the fantastic work of the Wild and Free Foundation? Well, it's probably time to get yourself a Rhino Cup Champions League (RCCL) jersey.

Exclusively designed by Kit and Bone, the 14 teams competing in the RCCL have their own unique shirts, and the full collection – including those of the Leopards, Zebras and Rhinos below – is available to buy.

Fresh from becoming the WFF's first official lifestyle clothing partner, Kit and Bone founder Matt Pascoe is “thrilled” to be part of the project.

“The Rhino Cup stopped us in our tracks. The competition's concept is so wonderfully simple, but its impact is nothing but life-changing for both the rhino and the communities faced with decisions and conflicts many of us simply couldn't imagine,” he said.

The WFF's co-founder Matt Bracken, meanwhile, explained how such initiatives are crucial to the Rhino Cup going forward.

“The RCCL is saving the lives of both people and rhinos and, as a donor funded league, everyone who purchases an item from this partnership will be directly contributing to its operation and survival.”



*Beauty is in the eye of the camera. TMD will be showcasing those who make the beautiful game even more attractive and, this issue, we asked Plymouth Argyle snapper **Charlie Rose** for three of his favourite shots.*

Follow him [@charlierose1992](#) [pafcharlie](#)

Bygone Era: A symbol of changing times at Home Park: one of the last seats from the old Mayflower Stand.



V
E
W
F
I
N
D
E
R



AIK: The first game of the season in Sweden is a biggie for AIK; all the fans gather to welcome the bus with a silly amount of flares.



El Capitán: Adam Randall looks on after being named the gaffer's first captain in pre-season.

THE MIGHTY INTERVIEW

WORDS: Connor Andrews

randell williams



Regular Football League watchers got used to a familiar sight last season coming out of the South West. Whenever League Two teams headed down to Exeter, or the cameras headed that way on TV, a ponytailed number 11 undoubtedly caught the eye, jinking past defenders with ease before laying the ball on a plate for a league-leading 14 assists.

Randall Williams' start to life in Devon was far from easy, being benched and even missing out on squads, but the former Tottenham, Watford and Crystal Palace youngster buckled down and made his name with a break-out 2019/20 campaign - and now even his own manager, Matty Taylor, admits the Grecians will be lucky to hold onto him.

As Williams explains, it's not the first time he's had to come through adversity, and his path to establishing himself as one of the hottest prospects in the EFL was as much about hard work as it was his undoubted talent.

"I've always played men's football since I was 13, and when I went to Tower Hamlets I just found it more enjoyable to play men's football, when you're playing for something. In academy football it was good in terms of the quality of the training, but the competitiveness in terms of the games wasn't serious enough, so going to play men's football I think you learn so much more than at an academy."

A slight winger with deceptive power and searing pace, Williams' expedition into non-league football may have been unorthodox, but it has forged a steeliness and a work ethic that continue to serve him well. As he's shown, there's more than one way to make it in the game, and perhaps one essential ingredient.

"I think there's a very fine line with the words 'hard work' because I know lots and lots of footballers that say they work hard, but I've seen it with my own eyes where it just isn't the case. For me growing up I didn't have the luxury of an academy system where you know all the boys and you're comfortable there and you're getting paid well. Any money I got was from my mum that I kept aside for a £2 chicken and chips or whatever.

"I would get up at five o'clock, go to the gym, then straight from there to college, to a Watford academy scheme in Borehamwood, and straight from college we would train, and then shoot off to my local club that I played with and train again. And after that I would either do a private session, or go and do another gym session and get home at midnight and straight to sleep, so I'd be on four hours' sleep if I was lucky, which I think my mum got quite worried about because I would come home so knackered.

"When you don't have much and you know what it takes to get where you need to go, there are certain sacrifices you have to make to get to that point. Of course talent is part of it, and I think luckily I've been blessed with a lot of athletic talent, maybe not size but in terms of jumping, speed and power, and I've been able to train myself to take that much load on, so when I went to places like Watford and Crystal Palace I felt like the boys there didn't really appreciate that side of it and thought they had already made it.

"For me, when you're at under 23s level or whatever, you're not a football player. I understand you have a professional contract, but you're not playing in front of fans, and you're not getting paid to get three points, so there's still such a long way to go.

"I just couldn't understand it, it wasn't important for me to have all the money in the world and come in with nice clothes and drive fancy cars. When you can afford it, of course you should enjoy yourself, but when I see guys like that say they worked hard and then turn up late for training and not train properly - and think it's enough to just come in and play well and not work on yourself physically - for me that's not working hard, that's just doing the job you've been given.

"I love football and I wouldn't play football if I didn't want to be the best, that's my mindset, and obviously everyone's not like that, but that's the way I see it."

Williams was with Tottenham as a youngster, but decided against signing a contract where many would, a decision he believes has made him the player he is today.

"I just stopped going as I was doing so much, I was playing for three teams, Tottenham, Chapel Boys and Westwood, and doing athletics and gymnastics. I wasn't getting paid by Tottenham, as I turned down the contract as I wanted to do so much when I was a kid, but they said I could stay there and train if I wanted to.

"It wasn't so much a choice between careers, I just loved doing everything when I was a kid, and I knew once I was contracted to Tottenham I wouldn't be able to do anything else other than play for them."

Williams continues to punch up since his non-league days with Tower Hamlets and, now at Exeter, the experience he gained in his teens from playing against men twice his age and size means the 23-year-old is not easily fazed.

"At the back end of last season teams were starting to double up on me and I had three players marking me at once in certain games. It was difficult, and playing wingback I would have to pick the ball up deep to run half of the pitch, but you've got to deal with the situation in front of you. I think I'm good enough to go past two or three players, and although obviously you can't do it every game, it's a case of picking and choosing the right moments."

Williams, a traditional winger, found his place in Taylor's side further back, and although it's not his preferred position, it's becoming an increasingly important one in the modern game.

"I think if you're a dominant team like Liverpool, it's easier to go and be an attacking wing-back or full-back, especially for two players like Trent and Robertson who are allowed to just bomb forward, with players like Salah and Mané who can play inside. But when you dominate so much of the ball at that level, it's easy to do. In terms of League Two, there's no real definition in terms of better quality teams and anyone can beat anyone.

"I don't particularly like playing wing-back, as I don't think I'm the greatest of defenders, but it has worked out well for me so I've got no complaints. But I'd like to be more of a winger and get into attacking positions so I can put up bigger numbers"

Talking of stats, do Williams' league-leading numbers matter so much?

"I think any player likes to get involved stat wise, and for me, in the era that we're playing in now, you have to produce, as sometimes just playing well isn't enough. Stats are so important in football now."

Statistical analysis is here to stay, as are football agents - and Williams believes the latter, despite their bad press, are essential nowadays from a player's perspective.

"I didn't have an agent until I was about 18 or 19, but everyone needs an agent now.

"At that time, an agent called Robert Codner was fantastic with me and helped me get fit. He told me that technically I had to get better, but the priority if I was going to go to an academy was to be fitter than everyone there - because if you're only as good as what clubs have already got, there's no point in you being there: you have to be better.

"Academy players had been training together for six or seven years, and I had to make sure I was fitter than everyone there, that I could run harder than everyone

there. That philosophy helped me get back into the system, because I knew once I got there, with the way I work and train, I would get to that level."

The bottom line is that Williams has had to put in the hard yards to get where he is today. Just how tough is it being a slight winger in a league renowned for rough and tumble though?

"For a player like me, I'm not very physical, but of course I'll compete. You look at players like Ryan Bowman who are a lot more physical and dominant and can bully players, but for players like me I have to be a bit smarter and not get into battles that I'm not going to win.

"There are ways around it and everyone has their own attributes, if someone's fast you've got to outmanoeuvre them and be clever and more tricky, if someone's physical you've got to learn to play on the shoulder and try to draw them out of the space. I think football can become so simple when you understand it, but it's about having that willingness to understand it and learn the right things to do."

While Williams acknowledges that his journey to date may be unique, the decisions he's made in his career have made him one of League Two and the EFL's most sought after players, and his last two coaches at Exeter and Wycombe have played a huge part in that.

"Gareth Ainsworth is one of the best managers I've ever worked with, especially with the type of person he is. He was someone you could go and talk to and was more than just a manager, he was fantastic, and what he's achieved with Wycombe is unbelievable. He's someone who really brings the whole club together and it was a pleasure to work under him. When you make an entire football club a family it's so much easier to work as everyone's happy. At the end of the day football should be enjoyable, it's a dream job.

"With Matty Taylor for me it was a hard start, I wasn't playing and there was a period where I didn't even make the squad and that first six months was tough. But obviously last season I really grew into the role that





*For me, in the era
that we're playing
in now, you have
to produce, as
sometimes just playing
well isn't enough*

was given to me, and me and Matt have a really good relationship today and I think we did really well to get into the play-offs.

"We should have done a lot better in the play-off final (Exeter lost 4-0 to Northampton) but these things happen in football and you just have to move on and go again"

This season, the goal of promotion is the same again, but as you can probably tell from this glimpse into Williams' high-performance mindset, he wants Exeter aiming for the very top after years of play-off heartbreak.

"Automatic promotion is where you want to be, but for me I want to win the league, automatic isn't enough."

A Premier League youngster with experience in the third tier, even his current coach, Taylor, knows Williams is destined for big things saying, "Randell will go to a higher level and we know that, but for the time we have him, we've got to keep working with him. He isn't the finished article yet, and we still want more in terms of that end product, but if he starts adding goals then he is going to be a hell of a player."

Last season was a breakout campaign for the 23-year-old, but judging by his character, things are only going to step up now everyone knows his name.

His 14 assists last season may have spoken volumes, but perhaps his first-ever goal in an Exeter shirt best encapsulates Williams' outstanding progress and potential.

Far from being over-awed by his first Devon derby, Williams sparkled in a 4-0 win over rivals Plymouth Argyle. Having already contributed a trademark assist to put the Grecians two up, he intelligently drifted off the right flank before surging at the heart of the Pilgrims defence. On the edge of the box with just the keeper to beat, the options were endless: should he take it round Alex Palmer? Hit and hope? Go for the nutmeg? As it turned out, Williams kept his composure and perfectly executed the classiest option: the dink.

Followed by a Nani-esque flourish of acrobatics, it was more than an eye-catching moment - it was years of hard work paying off.

HISTORY LESSON

THE RABONA

RABONA

/rə'bəʊnə/

noun SOCCER

'A method of kicking the football whereby the kicking leg is wrapped around the back of the standing leg – effectively with one's legs crossed.'

The English may have invented the beautiful game, but it's striking how some of its silkiest skills were honed elsewhere. There are plenty of mesmerising moves and fabulous feats (often without an anglicised name!) whose origins trace back to footballing galaxies far, far away from Blighty – and our regular 'History Lesson' aims to chronicle them.

A classic footballing manoeuvre that, in our opinion, should be pulled out of the bag far more often, the story of the Rabona begins over 70 years ago in South America.

Rabona in Spanish means to play hooky, or truant at school: the name deriving from its first documented performance by Ricardo Infante in a game between Argentinian teams Estudiantes de la Plata and Rosario Central in 1948. The football magazine 'El Gráfico' published a front cover showing Infante dressed as a schoolboy with the caption "El infante que se hizo la rabona" ("The infant plays hooky").

Another supposed origin for the name is that Rabona is derived from the Spanish word 'rabo' for tail, and the move resembles the swishing of a cow's tail between or around its legs. In Brazil, the move is also known as the 'chaleira' (kettle) or 'letra' (letter). The first filmed rabona was performed by, you guessed it, Pelé in the São Paulo state championship in 1957.

A thing of beauty when performed correctly, a great Rabona requires touch, timing and a bucket-load of nonchalance. Although there are a few long-range exhibits out there, a classic Rabona is not blasted but clipped, warping time and space as it floats toward its target. A mistimed Rabona, meanwhile, is a source of great comedy.



NA

'Rabona'
**HALL OF
FAME**

Eric Cantona
Ronaldinho
Sean Geddes
Eran Zahavi
Erik Lamela
Gerardo Masini
Ricardo Quaresma
Paul Gascoigne

Special mention
David Dunn :)





Omar Beckles The Distance

One of the great joys of looking at a well-travelled player's Wikipedia page is skimming down the sidebar to check out all the teams they've played for. This feature looks at players whose careers have taken the scenic route - with Glenn Hoddle Academy graduate Omar Beckles, now at Crewe Alexandra, the first under the microscope.

Millwall (2008/10) I was scouted by Millwall at Under-16 level playing for a Sunday team called Interwood, who had the likes of Colin Kazim-Richards and Bradley Johnson in different age groups. I made my debut in a trial against Arsenal and did really well. I was around the first team and it was an incredible experience. The youth manager Scott Fitzgerald was class with me and so was Richard Shaw, who was transitioning from player to coach. Millwall gave me a proper foundation and helped me learn my trade as a centre-half.

Jerez Industrial (2010/11) After being released by Millwall, I went on a Glenn Hoddle Academy trial, got picked and went to Spain. Ikechi Anya (who joined Sevilla via the academy) was the poster boy at the time and the academy was class - the likes of Jordan Hugill, Sam Clucas and Mickey Demetriou were there. It was amazing for my development. Glenn Hoddle wasn't always there, but his attention to detail was incredible; his technical ability was a joke. There was a huge emphasis on being two-footed, which 100% helped me later in my career.

Every team we played seemed to have a free-kick specialist, who would rap one top bins. I was familiar with the tiki-tika side of Spanish football, but was less prepared for the fouling and diving, and we encountered quite a lot of racism too. The funding dried up, but it was pretty epic for us young boys living abroad.

Boreham Wood (2011/12-12/13)

This was my first experience of non-league football and some senior players were quite harsh with me, which was a shock. I only made a few cameos.

Kettering (2012) It was only three months, but what an experience! I played under John Beck and the football was so direct. We played these small-sided training games where you had to pass forward, you couldn't pass sideways or back; it was mad. John had a really clear philosophy. He even had this thing where he wanted to go all the way up the pitch just with throw-ins: throwing it so close to the line each time that the other team would have to head it out. You'd literally go all the way up the pitch with throw-ins...and then we'd do a long throw into the box!

Billericay (2013) A period of rough, scrappy football as a centre mid. I lost my head a bit and fell out with them.

Histon (2013/14) They were a young team playing good football and it was like Glenn Hoddle's Academy all over again. I was made captain and it was going really well before they couldn't pay our wages.

Margate (2014) I played around 20 odd games, but was starting to get a bit demoralised. I'd been chasing the dream and, turning 23, I felt like I had nothing to show for it.

Hornchurch (2014) I decided to go local. I had mates playing for them and I concentrated more

seriously on my coaching. I got my UEFA B license and set up my own business, which made me some extra money and also helped me understand the game better as a defender. I enjoyed my time there and actually scored quite a few goals!

St Albans (2014/15) Jamal Lowe is probably the best player I've ever played with and he was there. He just has something natural and special about him, a bit of extra quality.

Aldershot (2015/16) The dream was back on! Full-time football, names on the back of our shirts. Going full-time I came on leaps and bounds. The pitch was lovely - Chelsea U23s played there - and I played almost every game winning Player of the Year.

Accrington (2016/17) My highlights reel actually helped me join Accrington. They invited me up for a chat and I signed then and there. The manager John Coleman and his assistant Jimmy Dell had a clear philosophy - and we had a great understanding of the way we wanted to play. Billy Kee was class. He wasn't the biggest or the quickest or the strongest, but he was a great finisher and just had this know-how. He had a knack of being able to pick up the flight of the ball, which is so hard to teach, but came naturally to him.

Shrewsbury (2017/18 - 19/20) We reached the play-offs in my first season under Paul Hurst. Everybody was humble, there were no big names, no one

Born
Kettering

➔
109
miles



➔
1714
miles



➔
1726
miles



➔
88
miles



➔
115
miles



➔
72
miles



➔
130
miles





had played in the Champ and we all had a point to prove. The standards were really high. Prior to Shrewsbury, I barely sprinted in games, let alone training, but things like that were demanded and I developed good habits. We were winning week in, week out and the team spirit was ledge.

Dean Henderson was on another level that season: he looked England-ready then! Keepers very rarely, especially in a physical side, tend to come and get crosses, but he has this spring and would claim crosses for fun. It was no surprise we kept so many clean sheets, especially with 'Toto' (Aristotle Nsiala) playing so well at centre-half, and me being voted into the League One 'Team of the Season'.

My last two seasons there were more challenging. After Toto left for Ipswich, I expected to be a regular at centre-back and wasn't - and I got sick of playing out of position. I contributed, but never got the regular game time in my position that I wanted. Last season, we were solid, but didn't always convert our chances - and without Dean Henderson in goal 0-0s can easily turn into narrow defeats.

Crewe Alexandra (2020/21 -) I'd proved I could play at League One level, playing well over 100 games in the last three seasons. It was definitely time to leave though. I'm sure a lot of people were thinking 'How does a guy turn down two years at a club he's already been at, when he's got nothing? But the time had arrived where I needed to find the right setting to flourish. It's about being the best you can be: I'm a strong believer that you shouldn't stay where you're tolerated, you should go where you're celebrated. Now I'm looking forward to getting started at Crewe and enjoying this season. The dream never dies!

Many thanks to Omar for this interview; for further information regarding his community projects with Hub365Foundation, please visit @Hub_365 on Twitter.



83 miles



44 miles



64 miles



299 miles



119 miles



48 miles



4611 total miles

7Evens

Each issue, *Playmaker* asks a well-known EFL footballer to pick an all-time '7-a-side' team bursting with character. In our debut issue, Northampton winger **Nicky Adams** talks us through his 'Magnificent Seven'...

Nick Pope **"The Cat"**

He came in for us at Bury at a time when we really needed a goalkeeper to take the pressure off us defensively. He'd make hard saves look easy. Sometimes he'd just effortlessly stick a hand out and stop the ball dead, so I started calling him 'The Terminator'. He was very, very good and a big part of us getting over the line (for promotion from L2) that season. His all-round game has got better and better since then and he's superb now - for me he's England's number one. Burnley are obviously a big club, but I think he could go on again, join one of the really big ones.

Steve Howard **"The Handful"**

I was at Leicester with him in my first year when we got promoted from League One, but even when we got up into the Championship, he was an absolute man mountain. He was a big lad, but used to work so hard for the team. If you didn't put the ball in the box for him, he'd let you know about it and I learnt a lot from him. He was the first centre-forward I played with where I thought 'this guy's on the next level'. He and Matty Fryatt together were unplayable that year and that team was too good for League One; we won it at a canter. We made the Championship play-offs the following season and every centre-half who came up against Steve did not want to play against him. I used to give him a load of stick for wearing these old school Puma Kings, but he didn't do too badly in them, that's for sure.

Richie Wellens **"The Technician"**

His passing was fantastic: he could see a pass, play little ones around the corner, he could do everything. I remember when we went to Blackpool and everyone was rightly raving about Charlie Adam, but Richie was outstanding. Charlie Adam obviously went on to play for Liverpool, but Richie was a top, top player and, in my opinion, should have played in the Premier League. Technically, you could see he had played with really good players coming through at Man Utd and for a time at Leicester, he was





frightening – really, really good. He's a good friend of mine, and it's great to see him doing well in management now. To be fair, I was lucky when I came through at Leicester as Matt Oakley and Paul Gallagher were also there and they were excellent technical players too. In my second season actually, we also had Nobby Solano at Leicester, and practising crossing with him every day certainly stood me in good stead.

Ricky Holmes **"The Maverick"**

Off the pitch, Ricky's loud, brash and you always know he's there – on the pitch he was just the same and he was always likely to produce something out of nothing. He's an out-and-out number ten with that knack for scoring goals and would regularly stick one in the top corner out of absolutely nowhere. As soon as he got half a yard anywhere around the box: bang, goal. He had a spell a couple of years ago where he was absolutely on fire banging goals in from everywhere, but injuries have got in the way more recently unfortunately. Ricky's a typical Essex boy and looks a bit like Martin Kemp, so we called him 'Spandau Ballet' – though he didn't have much of a voice!

Aaron Ramsay **"The Galactico"**

I played for Wales at Under-21s and he was special, a really special player. He was a very quiet lad, but when you went out for training or on the pitch, you could just tell he was different. At any given time, he had that X-Factor. We played England Under-21s in qualifying and he was the best player on the pitch by a mile, and obviously he went on to play at the very top level. When you were playing: you would think 'Wow, this guy...', obviously at that level we were all very good players, who could all produce special moments, but players like him produce them almost whenever they need to and that's why they go to the very top: they can just repeat the extra special: do it and do it and do it. It's just an honour to play with those sorts of players.

Clint Hill **"The Warrior"**

One of the nicest guys you will ever come across off the pitch, but on it you knew he was not shirking out of anything. He was getting towards the end of his career at Carlisle, but even in training there was no messing around, he gave 100% every time even when he trained. People probably thought he wasn't the quickest, but he read the game so well and you don't get to play in the Premier League like he did unless you're a top player. It was actually weird on set-pieces, because Clint's not the tallest, but he was so good in the air and so fearless that the other team's biggest marker would always pick him up. Danny Grainger was the captain at Carlisle, but Clint was a captain in his own right too, he really led by example. He was a manager's dream, you'd want him in your team every day of the week.

Ryan Lowe **"The Goal Machine"**

I've played with some really good goal scorers in recent years like Marc Richards, Charlie Wyke, Danny Nardiello and Nicky Maynard, but I'm going to go for Ryan Lowe, as he was an absolute finisher. He was a real fox in the box – a wideman's dream. You knew if you were putting the ball in, that he was going to get on the end of it. I think as a striker you have to have that attitude, that selfishness and he was an out and out finisher: if someone had a shot and it was trickling in, he'd go and kick it in anyway. One goal really sticks out, we were away at Pompey and he'd just missed one which I'd put on a plate for him and I thought 'That's not like him'. But it didn't phase him one bit: just before half-time I've volleyed the ball across and he's somehow found his way in between three defenders and banged one in. He was a really top finisher: he didn't worry if he missed one, he was on the next one.

EXTRAS...

Chris Wilder **"The Tactician"**

My last three managers have been Chris (Wilder), (Ryan) Lowey and Keith (Curle) and I think they're all really good tactically. The one who's up there at the moment in the Premier League is obviously Chris Wilder. Him and his assistant Alan Knill are very good together. Tactically, Chris got it right a lot, but he and Alan were also excellent with the lads and knew what the lads needed. I think that's a big part of why they are where they are. I do actually see similarities with Keith and his assistant Colin West, and Lowey and Steven Schumacher – even though they're a lot younger. We'll go with Chris as he's at the top level now, but hopefully the others can get there too.

Leighton Baines **"The Opponent"**

Being a winger, I'd have to say the best was Leighton Baines when he was really coming through at Everton. He was so good on the ball, and never stopped going forward. When you thought you'd closed him down, he'd just shift the ball and go – so most of the time you ended up chasing him back the other way! Last season at Bury, we were fortunate enough to play Liverpool pre-season and Andy Robertson played, and he was very good, but I'll go for Baines, as that was a proper game against Everton and he was unbelievable.

EVERYBODY SHIRTS

If you like football, you'll like Joe Jacobson.

The Wycombe Wanderers captain has been with his side for six years now - joining the Gareth Ainsworth revolution back in League Two. Jacobson made a name for himself with a string of talismanic displays from left back, not least in last season's play-offs, where he netted two crucial goals. The set piece wizard not only netted the penalty that sent the Chairboys to the Championship for the first time, in the final against Oxford, he also scored what's quickly becoming his trademark, a goal direct from a corner against Fleetwood in the semi.

With a storied EFL career, we thought who could be better than the man himself to kick-off a regular feature - Everybody Shirts - where players guide us through the four kits that have inspired them the most.

CLUB FANTASY...

Tottenham Away, Adidas, 1999-2000

So, I was obviously a Cardiff fan growing up but I was also a Spurs fan. Cardiff were the equivalent of League Two when I was in my early teens, and it must have been 1999-2000 when Tottenham had an away Adidas Holsten kit. It was yellow and navy and I absolutely loved it.

Tottenham played Cardiff in a cup game one evening and I was sat in the Cardiff end, but before the game I'd actually bought a Spurs shirt at the club shop. I loved it so much. I had to put it on under all my clothes so none of the Cardiff fans could see it!

WILDCARD...

Milan home, Adidas, 2000-2001

Ones I've always loved are the Milan club's kits. Those two always stood out when I watched football on a Sunday on Channel 4's *Gazetta*. You just saw them and knew they were on a different level. Just thinking, can you imagine playing for a Milan or Inter and wearing that kit?





I have to go with Milan because you just see red and black and instantly know who it is. Seeing Maldini and Nesta play in it, and the first ever game I remember watching was the final of the '94 World Cup with the Baggio penalty miss. There was something special about Italian football and the kits.

COULDN'T TAKE IT OFF...

Wycombe Home, O'Neills, 2018-2020

The recent Wycombe ones that we've had over the last two or three years have been my favourites, just because of the style. They're so ridiculously tight fitting! I remember when we were given them and trying them on, the kit man was saying 'look, you can't have a good summer now, you've got to come back in trim shape otherwise everything's going to ping'.

This is going to sound a bit weird but I wear long sleeves a lot and I'm really particular about the cuffs and the sleeves. The previous Kukri ones were really baggy but these are hard to get on and off so you don't even have to wear an undertop or anything like that.

The style of it too, no one really knew too much about O'Neills beforehand and now they make all our training kits and everything and it's all really nice stuff.

I like the ones that are a bit different but still iconic and unique to that club. I've played for a few clubs, but Wycombe and Bristol Rovers with the quarters, have got their own thing.

INTERNATIONAL CLASS...

Wales Home, Kappa, 2004-05

Kappa made the tightest fitting kits ever! Even when they give you an XL it was still difficult to get in, but I loved it. I really really liked wearing all the Wales kits during the time they had Kappa. They were a nice fit and had great-fitting sleeves and cuffs again. Putting that shirt on was always a dream.

I played about 15 games for the U21s and kept all the kits and loved them, but when I came through to train with the first team they changed to Champion and they weren't as nice.

I remember Wales getting close to the Euros in 2004 and Giggs and Bellamy wearing those tight Kappa kits always made me think 'those look amazing'. I think Kappa were the first to do that while everyone else was still wearing baggy kits.

[On national duty] No I'm not retired and I'd love it if it came about, but it's not something I'm holding my breath for. They've got some very good players in at left back with Neil Taylor and Ben Davies, so it's not an area they're struggling for, but if it came about it would be amazing.



THE NEXT CHAPTER

In the eyes of many, lower league football is the heart and soul of the beautiful game, yet the stringent budgets, salary cap proposals and squad restrictions have left it in a precarious position. Contracts are short and opportunities meagre, resulting in a plethora of footballers seeking employment at the end of the season. The manager's office is where those cut-throat decisions were made; where contracts were signed and terminated; where disagreements were ironed out.

From someone who walked away from the game last year, here's my experience of knocking on the manager's door...

Having spent ten years on the rollercoaster of professional football, I know all about the frustrations of sitting on the bench, the fury of not making an 18-man squad and embarrassment of seeing the substitute board go up after 31 minutes. I've been involved in fiery exchanges, training ground bust-ups and crisis meetings. Despite that, it was inside the manager's office that I was at my most vulnerable; it was the place where bad news was broken and where I found out I was being shipped out on loan and transfer listed. It was also the last room I sat in before calling it a day.

Being somebody who naturally eschews confrontation, knocking on a manager's door wasn't something I ever got a kick out of.

'How will he react?' ...

'Is it justified?' ...

'Should I leave it?' ...

The more questions I asked myself the deeper my self-doubt grew, and so my usual reaction to being left out of the team or hauled off at half time was to keep my head down, my mouth shut and 'go again', as they say. "You need to pull him to one side tomorrow morning..." my friends and family would urge.

In my younger days, the thought of having to call a one-to-one meeting with Micky Adams – my first manager at Port Vale – would have given me sleepless nights. He was the type of 'gaffer' that patrolled the corridors swinging a stopwatch with a whistle tied around his neck – the quintessence of old-school leadership you could say.

However, as I became more experienced it was clear that my conflict avoidance was hindering my progression as a footballer; it had made me an easy target, the one to drop if there was ever a selection dilemma because of my reluctance to bang a door down.

At all seven clubs that I turned out for, I was never the most gifted player but I applied myself in ways that made up for any technical or tactical deficiencies. I was often praised for my professionalism, my commitment, my willingness to put others first. But whilst those characteristics look pretty on a curriculum vitae, in the cut-throat world of football they were my downfall.

Voicing your discontent is a trait that can be the difference between success or failure, progression or regression, especially within such a dog-eat-dog industry.

At my most recent club, Port Vale, the manager traditionally loitered within an office adjacent to the first team dressing room, along with several other members of staff. The proximity of the rooms always meant lowering the

The Next Chapter - Joe Davis

volume when discussing sensitive topics, particularly if it involved management or a night out. The main issue with that office though, was the amount of people that gathered within it, making a 'word in private' feel more like a public tannoy announcement. After capturing the gaffer's attention we would then be led down the corridor to the yellow door marked 'managers office'. Show time.

Sometimes we would be asked to wait on an old black chair directly outside, the coffee stained fabric suggesting it had accommodated plenty of disgruntled players over the years. "All the best," people would mutter as they walked by.

I found that when approaching a manager, it was helpful to understand the type of person you were speaking to, as different managers required different approaches. Uwe Rosler for example, was an extremely intense man who liked to control every conversation and someone who didn't appreciate being interrupted. He was a master of manipulation, making you feel as though you weren't doing enough, as though you were slacking off and needed to up your game. Numerous times I entered the meeting room at Fleetwood Town to express my dismay and left feeling as though I was letting him down. He would reel off running statistics and body fat percentages to leverage his point. "How can I play someone who only ran 5 kilometres in training on Thursday...it isn't good enough!" Genius.

Steven Pressley on the other hand, was the polar opposite. The Scotsman was affable and easygoing off the field, but a man possessed once his feet touched a technical area. Sitting down with Steven was like having coffee with an old friend, talking unreservedly about life, feelings and football. He took great pride in making me and anyone in his presence feel at ease so that those awkward 'why am I not playing' meetings were much less hostile.

It does, however, take time to form relationships. Whenever a newly appointed manager walked through the dressing room door, nobody knew where they stood. It is during their first few days that everybody got an indication of whether they were the approachable sort. Some oozed confidence while others were introverted; some stopped to talk as they passed, others looked down at the floor.

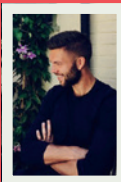
They all proclaimed that "the door is always open" and that if we "have any issues we know where to find them." We politely laughed at each pleasantry, pretending that we hadn't heard the same 'it's great to be here' speech ten times over. I always found that the novelty of an open door policy wore off rather quickly, usually once the manager's feet were firmly under the table.

Now that the boots are hung up, I often reminisce about certain moments in my career. Writing this piece has reminded me of the managers I enjoyed working under and those that I didn't, managers that played a positive part in my career and those that hampered it, things that I miss about being a footballer and things that I don't.

I miss the crowd, the rush, the pressure.

But the one thing I don't hanker for is knocking on the manager's door on a Monday morning demanding answers - honest answers; answers without the clichéd bulls**t.

Boy, that I don't miss.



Joe Davis is a former professional footballer who retired from the game in 2019, at the age of 25, to become a sports writer and BBC Radio commentator.

His 10-year football career began at Port Vale, where he spent four years, before he moved to Leicester City. He subsequently enjoyed a spell in League One with Fleetwood Town before rejoining Port Vale.

He is currently studying towards a BA honours degree in Professional Sports Writing and Broadcasting at Staffordshire University and writes regularly for the Blackpool Gazette, the Stoke Sentinel and Port Vale's official website.

As a co-commentator, he also regularly covers games for both BBC Radio Stoke and BBC Lancashire.

Please contact Joe via email (josephsdavis6@gmail.com), or mobile (07528168108) with any enquiries.



DIARY OF A SECRET AGENT

Whatever you think about football agents, you don't get near the top of our industry without the same blend of skill, tenacity and professionalism that makes the elite players we represent so sought after.

Jorge Mendes, Jonathan Barnett, Mino Raiola and co have earned their superstar status by mastering the art of the deal; yet what is applauded on Wall Street - or even in the White House - is somehow conveyed as grubby, ruthless and money-grabbing when football agents are involved.

Sir Alex Ferguson famously 'despised' us (he once labelled Paul Pogba's representative Raiola a 'shitbag') and we're constantly getting stick from all quarters. However, the truth is that modern day footballers need us.

From haggling over contracts, bonuses and image rights to managing frail egos and great expectations, the role of the football agent is an important one - and the profession is often vilified for the wrong reasons.

Let me introduce myself. I'm writing this incognito, but every covert operative needs a codename (and it's important for football agents to be on first name terms). So, you can call me Bruce.

I work for a football management agency headed by one of the world's 'super-agents'. Our agency closes 100s of multi-million pound deals each year and we're in the thick of the action in the current transfer window.

We may often get a bad press, but the purpose of this regular feature is not to fight the corner of all agents - there are plenty of us and our methods and standards can vary wildly. I guess my real aim is to shed some light on what we actually do; illuminate the reality rather than the fiction people read on a daily basis in the tabloids.

So, let's get cracking. I thought we'd start by outlining three tenets espoused by any agent worth his salt.

1. Negotiate from a position of strength.

When I was younger, I fell into the trap of overplaying interest in my players - telling clubs there was interest from all over the place. The thing is:



"The chief exec laughed his head off when he read the clauses"

clubs talk to each other, quickly realise you're playing one off against another and - pardon my French - you're fucked.

It's important, therefore, to have some form of leverage. Whether it be your player's scintillating form, interest from another club or a dwindling contract, you need to find some negotiating power from somewhere.

A good example from this window concerned an established Premier League player I represent.

I was contacted by a top flight club with Champions League aspirations regarding the potential availability of this player - who is a Home Nations international and a senior player for his club. Talks with this third party progressed, but it became increasingly clear that my player represented a back-up option rather than a top target. The enquiring club's sizeable budget and the profile of the other players they were linked with suggested the chances of a deal going through were slim.

Rather than sit on my heels waiting for the unlikely to happen, I saw an opportunity to improve my player's position at his current club. I sat down with their chairman and confirmed that, although there was genuine interest from elsewhere, we were open to an improved longer-term deal to end the speculation. It made sense for the player, as he could get his head straight ahead of the new season, and it made sense for the chairman, who didn't have to worry about a disgruntled player marching into his office on deadline day asking for a move. We eventually agreed an extra year on the player's contract worth in the region of £1 million.

2. No, no. No, no, no, no. There's a limit.

Rewind 30 years and our famous critic, Alex Ferguson, knew how important it was to build relationships with the parents and families of promising young footballers.

Ryan Giggs may be synonymous with Manchester United, but if Ferguson hadn't paid a visit to his former fledgling's family home when he was 14, then one of the Red Devils' greatest-ever players may have unthinkably stayed on the books at Manchester City.

That personal touch is so important and, in Giggs' case, the rest is history. Nowadays, it may be agents rather than managers doing the house calls, but I'd say that dealing with parents is essential for anybody serious about attracting the best young players.

To be honest, it may have been easier in Ferguson's day. Over the past ten years or so the attitudes of parents and young players have noticeably changed. It's a constant case of 'Take, take, take' and the mentality is almost always to ask for more. I know of agents who have paid parents fortunes to represent a teenage player - which is obviously completely illegal, but it does happen.

What I've learnt is that you have to say 'No' early. When I pitch a potential client and his family, I make it clear that I'm not going to be booking them tables at nice restaurants or buying tickets for concerts. If they want that kind of agent, fine; if you want one to help with your football and your contract then I'm your man.

I had to set my stall out with a young player, on a six-figure salary, who recently moved to England from overseas.

We already help him out with new boots and we regularly get his Mum over to visit, as we appreciate he needs to settle in. However, the other day he texted me saying that all the lads at his club were coming into training wearing a well-known brand of clothing...and he asked me if I could sort him out some too! I politely told him he should wait - and buy them himself with his next (sizeable) paycheck.

3. Smallprint, big bucks.

The additional clauses you insert in a contract can be massive money spinners: they're so often overlooked, but it can be the smallprint that makes all the difference.

A case with a client of mine illustrates this perfectly. Now an established international, the player in question had only just broken into his Premier League club's first team squad five or six years ago. The club were delighted with his development, but he was still not a guaranteed starter.

Anyway, his form merited a new contract, so I met with the club's chief exec to discuss an improved deal. The proposed contract was fairly basic given his limited first team experience, but given his talent and the rapid progress he had made, I included a bonus for an international call-up and another for if his team qualified for Europe.

The chief exec laughed his head off when he read the clauses. He said 'I admire your ambition and your faith in your player, but those numbers can be whatever you want!'. So I took him at his word.

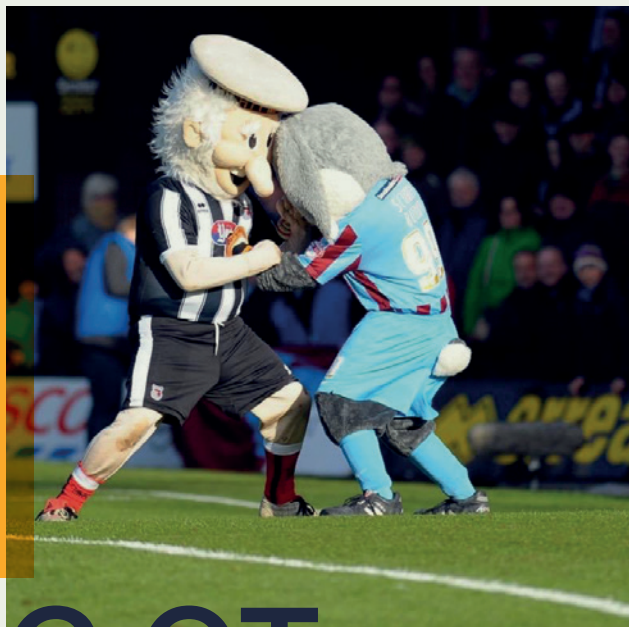
Obviously, both things have since come to pass and these two small clauses earned my client a whopping £500,000 - let's hope his chairman can still see the funny side of it!

Bruce
xxx





From Wigan's Crusty the Pie to Cambridge's Marvin the Moose, the world of club mascots is a surreal one well worth exploring. In the first installment of what will be a regular feature, 'The Mighty Delta' chats with Glyn Sparks aka Scunthorpe United's 'Sunny Bunny'.



MASCOTS UNMASKED

1. How did you get the gig? I took over by chance really in 2010 from a guy called Gerry Mahoney, who has been everything from kit man to mascot for Scunthorpe. I originally wanted to borrow the Sunny Bunny suit to run a marathon and raise money, but they needed someone to fill in for Gerry and I stepped in. My first game was live on Sky Sports against Burnley!

2. What are your trademark moves? Running around like a lunatic! To be honest, when I started I just used to walk around the pitch, but I'm a lot more animated now. I've always fancied myself as a goalkeeper, so I often go in goal for challenges at half-time...and I take it seriously: if you're over five or six years old, I'm not just letting you score!

3. What's the secret to being a great mascot? Picking and choosing your moments, I'd say. Obviously, being expressive and energetic is important, but there's an art to knowing when to give high fives to all the kids, when to interact with the away fans, when to goof around with a celebrity. I always try and pick out specific groups of people around the ground to interact with.



4. Your best day in the suit? Running the London marathon on two occasions has probably been my highlight so far. I'm a keen runner and have raised over £50,000 for charity during my time as mascot. The marathons have been gruelling though. My personal best without the suit is 3h 28m...but it's taken me over five hours as Scunny Bunny. I lost 11 pounds in weight during the last one!

5. ...and your worst 'Scunny Bunny' experience? We were playing Millwall and at half-time I went in goal for the 'Iron Triathlon' where rival fans try to score directly from a corner, then hit the crossbar and then score past the keeper after getting dizzy running around a post. For the last one, the Millwall fan has only gone around the post, like, four times instead of 10 and then cheated by trying to walk the ball past me in goal. Well, my competitive edge has come out a bit and I've smothered the ball to stop him scoring and put us both on the floor. Next thing I know, he's punched me four or five times in the ribs and is literally ripping my head off! I slammed him to the floor to the great amusement of our fans, who started chanting 'You'll Never Beat The Bunny'. It was kind of a lowlight/highlight!



99 problems and a Mariner ain't one

6. Most memorable celebrity? There have been a few actually. Mel C would be up there, and I've met most of the Emmerdale cast. I'd say Robbie Savage though when he was captain of Derby. He was by the halfway line before the game and was looking at me out of the corner of his eye as if to say 'Leave me alone, you', but I've gone up to him with my arms open for a hug and fair play he went along with it, which the crowd loved. The funny thing is that a year or two later I met him again when I ran in the Scunny Bunny suit at the Great North Run. I was waiting to go to the toilet before the race when he came out of the cubicle; he saw me - obviously - and said 'Not you again!'.

7. Rival mascot you'd most like to smackdown? Grimsby are our biggest rivals and the Mighty Mariner is therefore my natural nemesis. We actually get on brilliantly though - their current guy James is a top, top lad and has raised thousands for charity already in his half-season with them and I'm the first to put a like on his Facebook posts. I got on really well with the previous Mighty Mariner, Andy, too - although there was one incident where we had a playful grapple before a game, but later got ticked off by police for potentially inciting a riot.

8. Who are your mascot idols? One of the legends of all time is Captain Blade from Sheffield United. He's a top character, hilarious, brilliant to know. He adheres to all the mascot rules (like no speaking), he gets involved with every event going; you can't fault him. We meet up for events with Nickelodeon, there's a real bond between us all.

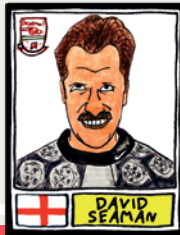
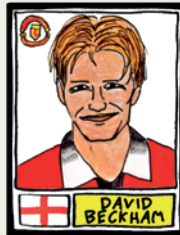
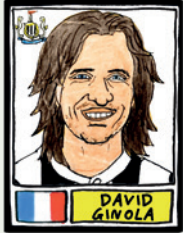
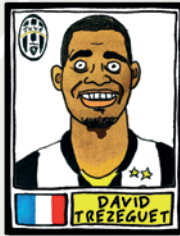
9. Are Scunthorpe shaping up well for the 2020/21 season? Yes, we are - we have a new management team made up of two old legends (Neil Cox and Mark Lillis). After a disastrous season last season, we're hoping for top ten. We've signed six or seven players already and have a lad on loan from Bournemouth called Frank Vincent who looks very good. I just hope we don't lose (young striker) John McAtee, as he's been linked to Newcastle.

10. And finally, who's your all-time favourite Scunthorpe player? Paul Musselwhite. I adore the bloke. He's the goalkeeping coach now. I remember his impact when he returned to Scunthorpe as a player a few years ago (2004) when we were one point from being relegated to the Conference. Mussy, Andy Crosby and Ian Baraclough came in, saved us from relegation and then we went and won promotion the following season.

Many thanks to Glyn for his time; any donations to Team Verrico (www.teamverrico.org) and Prostate Cancer (prostatecanceruk.org), two of the charities he raises funds for, would be much appreciated.



NO SCORE DRAWS 5-A-SIDE ST. DAVID FC



TREZEGUET: Plenty of oohh la la, but nicknamed 'Rien Man' because he never passes the ball. Ever.

GINOLA: How does he not sweat? That hair is staying perfect - and the shirt's coming off at every opportunity.

BECKHAM: Guarantees goals from inside his own half. And a ceaseless supply of groupies.

UNSWORTH: Packing on timber by the week, but widely regarded as the best body-checker in the business.

SEAMAN: As affable as a seal pup, but likely to perforate your eardrums with his booming voice. Always liable to be lobbed.

SUPER SUBS/TURNED UP LATE: Silva, Batty (I'm not telling him he's not starting), Busst, Dunn (on strict instructions to lay off the rabonas)

With football slowly eeking back into our lives, it's time to dust off the astros, unleash the Deep Heat and stretch those creaking groins for some 5-a-side action. With the help/hindrance of those wonderful guys at @CheapPanini, we've dreamt up a motley crew of opponents who you'd hate to face on a wet Tuesday night...



For more wonky drawings, follow No Score Draws on Twitter (@cheappanini). You can buy your team's wonky madness in poster form at www.etsy.com/uk/shop/PaniniCheapskates.

MOST ASSISTS KEVIN DE BRUYNE



ASSISTS

MCI	KEVIN DE BRUYNE	20
WBA	Matheus Pereira	17
BPL	Liam Feeney	14
CRE	Charlie Kirk	14
EXE	Randell Williams	14
LIV	Trent Alexander-Arnold +2	13

MOST GOALS OLLIE WATKINS



GOALS

BRE	OLLIE WATKINS	26
FUL	Aleksander Mitrovic	26
SWI	Eoin Doyle	25
PET	Ivan Toney	24
LEI	Jamie Vardy	23
ARS	P-E Aubameyang +1	22

MOST CLEAN SHEETS EDERSON



CLEAN SHEETS

MCI	EDERSON	16
MIL	Bartosz Bialkowski	16
BRE	David Raya	16
BUR	Nick Pope	15
LEE	Kiko Casilla	15
WIG	David Marshall +2	15

KEY PASSES

MCI	KEVIN DE BRUYNE	136
WBA	Matheus Pereira	116
MIL	Jed Wallace	99
NTN	Nicky Adams	99
WED	Barry Bannan	98
PVL	David Worrall	98

SHOTS ON TARGET

PET	IVAN TONEY	66
BRE	Said Benrahma	65
LIV	Mo Salah	63
FUL	Aleksander Mitrovic	61
LEE	Patrick Bamford	56
BRE	Ollie Watkins	55

PASSES COMPLETED

FUL	TIM REAM	3003
LIV	Virgil Van Dijk	2903
SWA	Matt Grimes	2458
MCI	Rodri	2396
WBA	Romaine Sawyers	2361
MUN	Harry Maguire	2183

SUCC. DRIBBLES

WOL	ADAMA TRAORE	184
CRY	Wilfred Zaha	163
BRE	Said Benrahma	140
QPR	Eberechi Eze	136
NOR	Emiliano Buendia	121
REA	Ovie Ejaria	112

TACKLES WON

SWA	MATT GRIMES	132
MUN	Aaron Wan-Bissaka	129
LEI	Wilfred Ndidi	128
BRE	Christian Norgaard	122
FUL	Joe Bryan	121
HUD	Lewis O'Brien	120

INTERCEPTIONS

LEE	BEN WHITE	116
BAR	Mads Andersen	101
OXF	Rob Dickie	87
BOU	Diego Rico	84
MIL	Shaun Hutchinson	82
LEI	Wilfred Ndidi +1	80

playmaker

THE DIRECTORY

This labour of love couldn't have happened without the following people, please give them a follow and support these small businesses/freelancers (if you can) during these weird times.

THE GRAPHIC BOMB www.thegraphicbomb.com @thegraphicbomb @wearethegraphicbomb

PLAYMAKER STATS www.playmakerstats.com @playmaker_EN / @playmakerstats

LUFC DATA Chris @LUFCDATA

XG PHILOSOPHY James @xGPhilosophy

THE STATS DON'T LIE @TheballdontlieT

FRANK NOUBLE @FrankNouble

ANTHONY LIMBRICK @ALimbrick1

WILD AND FREE FOUNDATION @WildandFreeFDN

KIT AND BONE @kitandbone

CHARLIE ROSE @charlierose1992 / @pafccharlie

RANDELL WILLIAMS / EXETER CITY FC @officialECFC

OMAR BECKLES @BecklesOmar

HUB365 FOUNDATION @Hub_365

NICKY ADAMS @nickyadams10

JOE JACOBSON @joe_jacobson

JOE DAVIS @JoeDavis6

BRUCE (Classified)

SCUNNY BUNNY @99scunnybunny99

NO SCORE DRAWS @CheapPanini

PLAYMAKER WOULD ALSO LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING EFL CLUBS FOR THEIR ONGOING SUPPORT IN 2020/21:

Brentford, Millwall, Huddersfield Town, Accrington Stanley, Plymouth Argyle, Portsmouth, Carlisle United, Exeter City, Forest Green Rovers, Oldham Athletic, Walsall.

LOVE PRINT?



ORDER TMD HERE