

JIM KEOGHAN

# HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

THE STORY OF OUR NATIONAL GAME



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# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	7
Introduction . . . . .	9
1. Jumpers for Goalposts. . . . .	13
2. Out With the Old, In With the New . . . . .	46
3. For the Love of the Game . . . . .	78
4. Giant Steps . . . . .	112
5. The National League . . . . .	152
6. Give Her the Ball and a Yard of Space. . . . .	192
7. Crisis Clubs . . . . .	224
8. The Big Time . . . . .	263
9. Football 2.0 . . . . .	297
10. Epilogue. . . . .	329
Bibliography. . . . .	339

## Chapter One

# Jumpers for Goalposts

**I**T'S a gloriously sunny September morning in the heart of the East Sussex countryside. On a pitch as manicured as a lawn tennis court, Spartak Rotherfield U10s take on their local rivals, Jarvis Brook Tigers. Both teams are resplendent in new kits (a long season of grass stains and machine washes yet to take their toll), supportive parents stand behind respect barriers and coaches in matching, club-coloured tracksuits pose questions in measured tones from the touchlines. It's like a scene from an FA promotional video.

The kids play with the levels of enthusiasm and hunger you would expect from those still in the first throws of love with the game. But there is technique and method there too. Some DNA might remain from those early days, when fledgling footballers taking their first steps in the game chased the ball en-masse, like a pack of animals hunting down its quarry, but it is a mere memory. Years of coaching, of Saturday morning sessions, of drills, games and instruction have moulded them, developed them,

## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

brought out the footballer within. The ball is moved with precision, players exploit space, positions are held.

The two sides are neatly balanced, with every outcome on the table. Rotherfield take the lead, Jarvis Brook level. Rotherfield pull away again, only for their opponents to haul them back. If the coaches and the parents are feeling the tension, they hide it well. The days of grown men screaming from the touchline seem consigned to another age.

You would expect the players to tire as the game progresses, for legs to become heavy. But it doesn't happen. If anything, as full time edges closer and the prospect of a narrow win becomes more tangible, they seem to find hitherto unknown reserves of energy. Although the outcome does not matter (we are still some way off points and league tables), this is like watching the closing stages of a vital cup tie. The players are throwing everything they have at each other, desperate to secure that telling goal.

In the dying seconds of the game, with the minute hand approaching 30 and the scoreline still even, a ricochet from the centre circle sends the ball high over the heads of the Jarvis Brook defenders. One of Rotherfield's wingers is the fastest to react, sprinting beyond them, just about controlling the ball with a half-decent first touch. He knocks it forward and bears down on goal, two defenders giving chase, gaining ground with every millisecond.

With time running out, the keeper advancing, his angles closing and the breath of the chasing pack on his neck, he decides to let rip. A rare bobble on the pitch lifts the ball up invitingly and he smacks it with everything he has; accuracy thrown to the wind. For a moment, it's as though time has stopped, the coaches, the parents, the

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

players frozen, with only the ball exempt. Both sides watch as its trajectory beats the despairing keeper's outstretched arms and ... smashes against the crossbar, ricocheting safely out of play behind. And then time unfreezes. Groans ring out amongst the home side's parents and coaches, a palpable sense of relief evident within the away contingent.

When the final whistle blows not long later, it's a mixture of handshakes and high fives all round and mutterings of 'well played' and 'good game'. The Rotherfield players trot back to their side of the pitch, gather round the coaches and collectively break down what's just happened. The white board comes out, questions are raised, answers given by the kids. The parents are there too, encircling what is going on, not just spectators but part of the process. At the end of the team talk, one will step forward and give their opinion on the game, a positive spin on everything that has happened, one last boost to the self-esteem of the kids.

For every player who makes it, and the millions who won't, this is where it usually begins. This is where an interest that began with watching football on the tele, kicking a ball around the back garden with your mum or dad, playing down the park with your mates, turns into something else. It blossoms into a love affair, one that will last longer than many marriages. The kids here today will likely not go on to realise their dreams of playing in the Premier League, but through football they will develop themselves, physically, emotionally and cognitively and at the same time form lasting memories.

For the kids playing at Rotherfield and the many others lining up to play for their teams on a weekend morning, football has always been about love. It's about longing to get on the ball. It's about counting the hours

## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

until the next game. It's about waking up on a Saturday morning, looking out the window at the horizontal rain and thinking, 'I can't wait to get to training'.

It's also an enduring love of the game which ensures that when those kids make it to that pitch, there are people and clubs there to welcome them. Because, more than anything else, junior football in this country is defined by its volunteers. Without the people who give up their time to run the administration of the country's many clubs, to coach the players, to even make the tea in the clubhouse, places like Rotherfield FC would not exist.

'I run the U10s and to do it properly can be a time-consuming job,' says Andy Garrett, who has been coaching at Rotherfield since 2014, getting involved not long after his son joined the U5s.

'I'd played semi-pro locally for years but had given it up when my son was born and had sort of consigned myself to a life without football on a Saturday. But that love of the game never really leaves you and not long after he began here, as I watched the kids from the touchline, I could feel the urge to get involved, like something was drawing me back. I asked them if they needed any help and they bit my hand off.'

What started off as a casual involvement for Garrett has, by his own admission, become something of an all-consuming passion.

'Coaching is a challenge. But I love it and want to do it right. We've got 31 kids here, across three teams, and I see it as my job to give them the best football experience possible. That means ensuring that training is as much fun as it can be, that it stretches them to become the best player possible and that they leave here on a Saturday feeling

good about themselves and wanting to come back. And to do that takes a lot of work. Planning sessions, tailoring player development, liaising with parents, it's very time consuming. In fact, sometimes my partner thinks it's too time consuming!

While a small proportion of the millions of children playing some form of football each week will receive their coaching from professionals within the academy system, the majority will undertake their football journey at clubs similar to Rotherfield – small, FA-affiliated community clubs staffed and run by volunteers.

'The whole system of junior football is completely dependent on volunteers, people good enough to give up their time during the week and at weekends,' says Garrett. 'Without these people,' he continues, 'and it's most often parents like me being persuaded to pull on a trackie and get involved, then the whole thing would collapse. And I don't think that's always appreciated by the wider football world. Without us, and the time we commit, the football journey our kids take would be very different.'

This emphasis on creating the best 'football journey possible' for kids currently lies at the heart of the FA's coaching philosophy, England DNA; a strategy that runs right through the development period of the game.

'One of the most important things for us, particularly in the Foundation Stage, which goes up to age 11, is to get children to fall in love with this game. We want them to have positive memories of playing football and to engage fully. And even if they decide that football isn't for them later on, we want to create sports people, people who will have a lifelong involvement with sport,' says Pete Sturgess, FA national development coach.



## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

The England DNA philosophy is tasked with bringing an end to the ‘command and control’ approach that many of us of a certain age will vividly remember from our youth, an approach defined by static drills, children being the pawns for the grand tactical vision of a coach, and it being OK to scream things like ‘Get Stuck In!’, ‘Play the Way You’re Facing’ and ‘Who Wants This?’ at nine-year-olds.

Thinking back to those days, it’s amazing how long some of us stuck it out playing junior football. I wince at some of the names players got called in the teams I played for, shudder at the advice we were sometimes given (usually centred around knocking it long and exacting revenge) and look back with frustration at how that environment limited us as players. It’s perhaps a testament to how alluring the game can be, that participating was still an attractive prospect.

‘Under the new philosophy, there is much more emphasis on giving the players ownership of the game. By this we mean encouraging them to explore as they learn, by us asking questions, posing challenges and seeing how they react and develop. We are trying to move away from coaches simply telling their players what to do. By making football a more collaborative experience, by giving players ownership, not only will you create better footballers, players who think for themselves, you’ll also have better odds of retaining kids because there is more chance of them being engaged with what is going on,’ says Sturgess.

Along with giving players more ownership, there is also a shift away from static drills, the kind of repetitive training that would often see children doing the same activity again and again.

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

‘We try to make our training “game related” practice as much as possible,’ says Andy Garrett. ‘The idea is to make what we do relatable to the matches they will play in and also to almost make them feel like it’s not a teaching environment. They get enough of that in school all week, so they don’t need it at the weekend too. I can remember from when I played as a kid, training could be really boring, because it was so repetitive. It’s not a surprise that some kids never bothered turning up and some ended up walking away from football. You’re asking for a big time commitment from them and if a part of that is tedious, you can’t be surprised if some aren’t keen.’

Key to initiating this new approach to grassroots football is the education of coaches. For those clubs seeking FA Charter Standard status (something that gives them access to funding from the FA), all youth sides need to have at least one FA Level One accredited coach for each team. And it’s through the Level One qualification that coaches are introduced to the England DNA.

For coaches, the qualification is more about ‘how to coach’ children, less about ‘what to coach’. It uses constructionist learning ideas, rooted in the thinking of PE guru Muska Mosston and his spectrum of teaching styles. The spectrum incorporates ten styles of teaching, based upon the degree to which the teacher or the student assumes responsibility for what happens in the lesson. It’s essentially a continuum where at one extreme is the direct teacher-led approach (command and control) and at the other end lies a much more open-ended and student-centred style, where the teacher only acts in a facilitatory role. What the spectrum offers is more choice, opening teachers, or in this instance

coaches, to different ways of learning, each with its own implications for development.

‘Under the new coaching environment, you are thinking more about how children learn,’ explains Rob Selby, a Level Two coach at Rotherfield. ‘When I played football as a kid I was just told what to do through seemingly endless drills. While there’s always a role for a bit of command and control, you’ve got to get the kids thinking for themselves. That’s what keeps them engaged, makes them better decision makers, and ultimately better footballers. So, we try and keep that in mind when devising sessions. Sometimes this even means getting the kids involved with what we are doing, asking them what went well, what didn’t work and what we could do better.’

Allied to these coaching methods, the new approach also takes into consideration the ‘whole’ player via the ‘Four Corner’ model. This breaks development down into four areas: technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social.

‘It gets you thinking that there’s more to a player’s development than just what he or she does with a ball,’ Selby continues. ‘It brings in other considerations to mind, such as how well they work with others, how well they deal with challenges, how they understand the game. After all, what exactly is a “good” player at this age? You can be good on the ball but a poor team player. You could need work on the ball but excel in other areas, like psychological strength or sportsmanship. Our approach is to take all four areas into consideration during the development stage, with the aim of making these kids the best they can be by the time that streaming might occur at a later age.’

But the new way to coach is not the only method by which the FA has sought to change the culture of the game

and make it more about ‘positive experiences’. There has also been a concerted effort to make Foundation level football (and sometimes also ages beyond) less competitive.

‘By this,’ explains Pete Sturgess, ‘we don’t mean no competition. Football is, by its very nature, a competitive sport. And children need to learn that. The overwhelming majority probably like that part of it too. But, what we don’t want to see is coaches running young sides for results. If that happens, as it often did in the past, then you just end up with needless streaming, kids being sidelined, kids dropping out and development coming a distant second to results. And that’s not doing anything to create positive memories for *everyone* involved.’

The Respect League in Manchester is the perfect embodiment of this new approach. Developed by local coaches, the league operates on a principle of development first.

‘The league has a set of guiding rules, which cover things like equal time for every player, silent sidelines, playing kids in every position and, perhaps most importantly of all, mixed ability. Everything is about long-term development and not about short-term results. The Respect League is great because it gives you the perfect environment to just let the kids play and have fun, which is what football should be about at this age,’ says Ben Hamilton, who coaches with Respect League member Hough End Griffins.

What the FA and initiatives like the Respect League are trying to do is effect a sea change in what it means to experience junior football in England today. And, as with any sea change, the transition has not come without challenges. Take the current Level One, for example. As

## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

good as it might be, acquiring one doesn't come cheap. The fee varies from county to county but can range from around £140 to £190. And for those who want to progress to the more sophisticated and in-depth Level Two, the cost can range from £350 to £420, depending upon which county FA you learn with. For clubs and coaches, there is no fixed way to pay for this. Sometimes local leagues contribute, other times the club pays everything and there are many times when the coach has to fund it themselves.

This inconsistency and the significant cost involved is part of the reason why, in a recent survey into the grassroots game undertaken by the FA, only 27 per cent of coaches had a positive view on their opportunity to progress along the coaching pathway.

'For a lot of clubs, money is very tight,' says Peter Edgar of MHS, a junior club based in Huyton, Merseyside. 'And finding hundreds of pounds to put a coach through even a Level One course is beyond them. Sometimes, I don't think the FA appreciates how financially challenging running a grassroots team is. The Level One is a great course, and for what you get it's probably good value for money. But it's still expensive. I had to put my hand in my own pocket to pay for my course. And I'm not alone in doing that.'

And when it comes to the more 'progressive' football environment, one rooted in development and less focussed on results, not every club is so 'on board' with the approach. I caught up with Andy Garrett several months later, as his side were completing their season on a sunny spring morning in the Kent countryside.

'You look at this game today and it makes you feel so positive,' he explains. 'Neither side is streamed, all the

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

kids are getting equal time and everyone is playing in lots of different positions around the pitch. Although the kids want to win, that's natural, development is still paramount. And, just as important, you saw there at the end that everyone left with smiles on their faces, irrespective of the result.'

He contrasts that with a game played a few weeks earlier that, despite the passage of time, still evidently frustrates him.

'We played a team, I won't say who, that did everything the opposite to what you see today; streamed, fixed positions, unequal time. They won the game easily. What upset me was not the result, but the fact that two of their subs barely came on. That's two kids putting in the effort to turn up and getting next to nothing back in return. And that's all just so the coach can get a win. How long are they going to stay in the game? We are meant to be creating an environment that encourages kids to want to come back, week-in, week-out. The look on their faces at the end of the match suggested to me two kids who were falling out of love with football.'

Rob Selby, who has had similar experiences, thinks that the problem is a generational one:

'People my age grew up with football being run in a certain way. It was results driven, quite tough and unyielding and, when it came to coaching, pretty reductive. I think a lot of people do the Level One because they have to but only pay lip service to the philosophy it preaches. I'd say that about half of the clubs we play stream at this age [U11], they put kids in one position and they play it long. They do this because the coach wants to win. And at this level, that kind of approach is brutally effective.

## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

You see on the touchlines just how much it matters to them. I've seen some coaches absolutely lose their shit at times, acting like they are Jürgen Klopp or something. To change that mentality might take years. You might have to wait until the kids we are coaching today become coaches themselves, kids who have been brought up in a different environment.'

Despite the changes that have taken place in the game, as much aimed at attracting and retaining players as they are about creating better footballers, keeping kids invested in football is increasingly a challenge for grassroots clubs. Although millions of children are still playing, and football remains the highest participation team sport in the country, according to Statista, since 2010, the number of five-to-ten-year-olds participating in football (including five-a-side) has fallen by four and a half per cent, and those aged 11 to 15 by five per cent.

Part of this is cultural. Children now spend less time outdoors than their parents did. Recent research by the National Trust discovered that children are playing outside for an average of just over four hours a week. This compares unfavourably with the average of eight hours that their parents played outside each week when they were young.

And while outside, today's kids are also playing less and less sport, with one in three children in England, on average, doing fewer than 30 minutes of physical activity a day – half the amount recommended by government guidelines.

This trend can be attributed to a number of factors, including parental fears, lack of green spaces and the lure of digital technology, all of which have collectively led youngsters to lead increasingly enclosed lives.

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

‘You can tell how much influence something like the Xbox has on kids by their goal celebrations,’ says Rob Selby. ‘When they are very young, and they score, they just leap about happy. By the time you get to our age group, it’s a celebration they’ve learned playing *Fortnite*, *FIFA* or some other game. It’s a huge part of their lives.’

But when it comes to football, the decline is also in part attributable to the experience on offer. As much as the FA has sought to improve the football journey of children through better coaching, the emphasis on enjoyment and the promotion of an environment centred on respect, the ability of so many clubs to attract and retain young players all too often falls down because of the facilities on offer.

To the casual observer, somewhere like Rotherfield, which is essentially a modest-sized community recreational field with five pitches (and a clubhouse attached) might not appear much. Yet, even something like the creation of this small, village football club has required years of continual hard work by the volunteers who run it.

Pete Ford has been involved, in some capacity, with football most of his life, playing and coaching with 13 professional and semi-professional clubs across Devon, Somerset and Sussex. His love of the game is apparent to anyone who talks to him for any length of time and it’s a love that has helped transform Rotherfield over the past 25 years.

‘I got involved with the first team back in 1992, eventually ending up as manager after I hung up my boots.’

Back then, the club and the ‘rec’ looked very different, as he recalls: ‘There was no clubhouse, very few facilities, the current junior pitches were basically one big lake in the winter and our second pitch was an unusable bog. We



## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

had no junior club and so we were essentially a handful of senior teams who played on one decent pitch.’

Motivated by a desire to improve the facilities, Ford, and others, set about changing the club. ‘First we added a junior section, something that helped us work towards FA Charter Standard status. Once we achieved this, it gave us access to Football Foundation funding, which was essential if we were to fulfil our plan of putting in better drainage.’

In 2006, ten years after it had begun the modernisation process, Rotherfield received £42,000 to improve the pitches from the Football Foundation, a funding body which uses money from the Premier League, the FA and the government to invest in grassroots football.

‘We had to find £22,000 ourselves, which wasn’t easy. It took a lot of hard work and fundraising. Once we had the full amount we could get started with “Operation Drainpipe”, which took about a year. With that achieved we were able to not just offer a better quality surface, we could also expand as suddenly we had so much more space. Since then, we have doubled the size of our junior section and now have around 200 kids.’

Although in a better position, the costs facing the club have increased as a result of the modernisation that has taken place. Along with the costs involved in building and maintaining new facilities for the expanded membership (clubhouse), the pitches require plenty of tender loving care, as Ford explains:

‘The annual costs for pitch maintenance are around £8,000, including equipment, grass seed, fertiliser, top dressing, verti-draining and pitch marking. We employ contractors to undertake some of this work, but the majority of the routine maintenance is completed by

club volunteers (average of five hours per week all year). Without our volunteers, I don't think we'd be able to keep our pitches in such good shape.'

When it comes to facilities at grassroots, worryingly, stories such as Rotherfield's are becoming less common, a trend perfectly illustrated by a match taking place on another autumnal Saturday morning, 60 miles north in Tooting, south London. Or rather it should have been. On the morning I arrive, at the last minute, the game has been called off due to the appalling quality of the pitch.

'The problem we have,' says Matthew Pennington, U10 coach with Tooting Park Rangers, 'is that our facilities are not really for football at all.'

Tooting Bec Common is one of many open spaces that populate this part of the capital, a much-needed oasis of greenery amidst the urban sprawl. With indoor and artificial pitches limited, and often prohibitively expensive, it is, for many of those who want to play football locally, the only realistic option available. But, according to Pennington, it's also one that is rarely attractive.

'What you have here are just areas of the common that have been marked out. These are not fenced off football pitches. We share this space with the community, so that means anyone can walk over it. The result is that it is chronically overused, poorly maintained and totally unsuitable for football. Both matches and training are frequently cancelled and when they do take place, this is not a surface conducive to attractive football. In fact, it's safe to say that if Andrés Iniesta and Xavi were born in Tooting, they'd probably be fucked.'

Pennington is describing a football experience that will be familiar to many whose kids play the junior

game. Across the country, grassroots football at this level is plagued with tales of postponed matches, of grass surfaces like quagmires, of sloping pitches, of molehills, of bumpy pitches, of crumbling facilities, of no facilities, of disappearing touchlines, of wonky touchlines, the list goes on and on.

‘And don’t forget the dog shit,’ adds Tooting Rangers U7 coach Mike Quigley, ‘lots and lots of dog shit.’

Was it always like this? I remember playing junior football in Liverpool during the 1980s and can recall some abysmal pitches. There was one near the Mersey in Speke that was so sodden in the winter that you’d need to adopt front crawl in the 18-yard box. Grassroots football in England has been poorly funded for as long as most people can remember. And for much of that time, it was sort of accepted. Football, from the top to the bottom, had a rough-and-ready quality about it. Just a casual look at some of the quagmire-like top-flight pitches from clips of *Match of the Day* in the 1970s and 1980s reveal that the gap between park football and Division One was not as big as it should have been.

But the telling difference for many coaches, when comparing today with the past, is the volume of postponed games.

‘I’ve coached around Liverpool for decades, a city that gets its fair share of wet weather. But whereas in the past games might be called off now and then, in recent years you’re getting games called off week after week, with kids sometimes not playing for over a month. And even when the kids do play, the surface is often shocking,’ says Kenny Saunders. In his day, Saunders was a classic number nine, an old-fashioned target man who scored

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

twice on his only appearance at Anfield for Liverpool Reserves, and then spent the remainder of his playing days regularly scoring for fun at an array of local non-league clubs. He also spent many of those days, and the ones that followed retirement from playing, coaching around south Liverpool.

‘Through my years of coaching, I’ve got a first-hand perspective on what’s changed. In recent years the situation has definitely deteriorated. You have kids around here, a lot of kids, who are playing on pitches that the Dutch wouldn’t deem fit for grazing cattle. You have clubs who have no facilities for changing or storing equipment and you have kids having to piss in bushes because there aren’t even toilets available. Against that, you have a top division in this country that has never been wealthier. Combined, the players at one club, like Manchester United, earn more in a year than we invest in grassroots football over the same period. How is that fair?’

Saunders’s solution to the problems that clubs are facing is to take the money from those who have it, namely the Premier League.

‘The campaign I launched is called “Save Grassroots Football” and it calls on the government to impose a five per cent levy on the Premier League’s TV revenue, which is currently around £9bn for its most recent three-year deal. We have a petition on Change.org where we are trying to get 100,000 signatures of support in the hope of getting this issue talked about in Parliament.’

For Saunders, and his supporters, the juxtaposition within English football, the fact that a game which has never been wealthier is also suffering from chronic under-investment, is something that should not be tolerated.

## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

‘The Premier League blew well over a billion pounds in this summer’s transfer window alone, so the money is there. All we are asking for is a tiny slice to ensure that the footballers of tomorrow have a much better football journey than they do today. In towns and cities across the country how can it be right that you have incredibly wealthy clubs and then often right next to them, kids playing football on fields that are basically useless?’

In its defence, the Premier League *can* point to the money it has given over to the grassroots game.

‘Kicks is just one example of the great community work we do,’ says Alistair Bennett from the Premier League. ‘This programme uses the power of football to connect with young people in some of the most high-need areas of the UK. The youth outreach programme began ten years ago, with the aim to create safer, stronger and more respectful communities through the development of young people’s potential, whilst providing access to facilities, coaching and mentoring.’

In its first decade, Premier League Kicks has engaged around 205,000 young people in weekly football coaching sessions held at local community centres across the UK. The programme is now run in 776 venues.

Alongside this it has also provided millions in infrastructure investment via the Football Foundation, which was established back in 2000. Since it was launched, the Football Foundation has awarded £1.5bn in funding to help improve around 3,000 grass pitches, to aid in the construction of over 800 artificial pitches and to assist in the building of around 1,000 changing rooms and pavilions – projects such as that wonderful pitch at Rotherfield.

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

‘The money that we received from the Football Foundation was transformative. For small clubs like ours, raising the kind of money you need to make substantive changes to pitches and facilities is a real challenge. To do that without investment from the Football Foundation would, for many clubs, make the job even harder, and in many cases likely impossible,’ says Pete Ford.

As was the case with Rotherfield, the Football Foundation typically does not provide all the funding. Although this approach is partly fuelled by limited funds compared to demand (and therefore a desire to make what cash is available stretch that bit further), according to Rory Carroll from the organisation, there is also the belief that asking clubs and communities to contribute has a long-term benefit to the facility provided.

‘We have found, from our experience, that those who raise money to invest in pitch improvement or improvements to the facilities better appreciate the investment and tend to take better care of it. When the money is just handed out and no work is involved, do people have the same understanding of the value? We don’t think they do.’

But not everyone agrees with the current funding strategy. Dave Horrocks is the academy development officer for Fletcher Moss Rangers, the little club tucked between a housing estate and a dual carriageway in the south of Manchester, where the likes of Marcus Rashford and Cameron Borthwick-Jackson first kicked a ball.

‘We’re in the process of trying to buy and then rebuild the facilities we have here off the council. At the moment they serve a purpose but they are not fit for purpose. We’ve got a leaky roof, not enough space and the whole

building is looking tired to say the least. We could apply for Football Foundation funding, but even if we got it, that would mean the club having to raise a huge amount of money ourselves. For a club whose kids come from the less affluent areas of the city, that is going to be a challenge. When you think about how much money there is in the Premier League, and then consider how little they invest back into grassroots, does it seem right that the burden to invest is falling so heavily on clubs like ours?’

And the figures are stark. When it comes to fixing many of the problems facing junior football, for which the Football Foundation is the principal medium for change, for the financial years 2016–19, the Premier League invested around £71m. This equates to less than one per cent of the television deal for roughly the same period.

‘These Premier League clubs are benefitting from our coaching too,’ says Horrocks. ‘It’s clubs like ours who first develop young talent. And when the time comes for them to move on to a pro-club, those clubs get these kids free of charge. Pro-clubs do not recompense grassroots clubs. They effectively rape and pillage without any consideration for the future of grassroots clubs at all. They don’t care how it affects our season or acknowledge the role we have played.’

Demands for elite football to provide greater support to grassroots have become widespread in recent years. Former FA chairman David Bernstein has called for a tax on the Premier League to improve grassroots facilities. Richard Caborn, the former sports minister, has suggested the establishment of a new formula for redistributing more of the top flight’s television income. And the Labour Party,

should it ever be elected, is committed to holding the Premier League to a promise, made back in 1999, that it would invest five per cent of its profits back into the grassroots game.

But to date, despite plenty of media attention and numerous campaigns on the issue, such as ‘Save Grassroots Football’, and ‘Save our Game’, a manifesto launched by *The Telegraph* back in 2018, little with regard to the Premier League has changed. And so the focus and frustration of many involved in football at this level has inevitably shifted instead towards the FA, the self-appointed guardians of the grassroots game.

Over the past few decades, it would be fair to say that when it comes to this guardianship, the FA has something of a chequered record. As recently as 2014, it lost £1.6m of public funding because it had done little to tackle a decline in the numbers of those playing football in England. While the sum was a small fraction of the FA’s annual turnover, it was nevertheless a very public telling off.

For some of those who have been involved with grassroots football for many years, there has long been a sense of disconnect between the FA and the game at this level.

‘I can tell you a story that perfectly sums this up,’ recalls Dave Horrocks. ‘A few years ago I was at an FA event and Trevor Brooking was there. Back then, Brooking was the FA’s director of football development. So, we got chatting and I asked him, “can you do us a favour Sir Trevor, can you tell us what’s your definition of grassroots football?” Without hesitation, he responded, saying it was, in his opinion, “academies and schools of excellence”. I was gobsmacked.’



## HOW TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

For Horrocks, it was a moment that perfectly captured the FA's attitude. 'It revealed a total misunderstanding of what junior grassroots football is. As far as I am concerned, grassroots football is a dad and lad kicking a ball about in the backyard. Then mum tells them to piss off and get to the park because they're ruining the grass. At the park they dodge round dog shit, burnt out cars and all sorts. As they're kicking a ball about a couple of other kids come along, and then a little game starts, next thing a little team gets made, then they join a league. That's grassroots.'

In the FA's defence, its approach to this level of the game *has* been characterised by a great deal more activity in the last few years and a growing realisation that its 'guardianship' extends further than 'academies and schools of excellence'. Alongside the revolution that has taken place in coaching (underwritten by investment in qualification provision and coach mentoring by the FA), there has also been an attempt by the organisation to try to tackle some of the problems that have beset grassroots football. Of late, the FA has become far more engaged with its responsibilities and far more willing to put its money where its mouth is.

'So now,' says Kelly Simmons, who was director of development at the FA from 2012 to 2018, 'we have increased levels of investment, in addition to our commitment to the Football Foundation. With this we have been able to develop an ambitious programme that is delivering meaningful change, such as improvements to more than 2,000 grass pitches across the country, creating 600 mini-pitches on school and club sites and a continued and sustained effort to significantly increase our national stock of 3G pitches.'

This greater level of commitment is best encapsulated in the FA's flagship 'Parklife' programme, part-funded by Sport England and the Premier League. Launched a few years ago, the initiative intends to establish a more accessible, sustainable model of grassroots football across 30 English cities and towns.

'Our "Parklife" hubs will provide floodlit 3G artificial pitches – which can be used all year round – new grass pitches, changing facilities and community spaces. They will be financially self-sustainable, open to all and flexible – catering for football activity, other sports and also other programmes such as education, health and wider community development initiatives,' says Simmons.

Despite the increase in investment, back in 2018 there appeared a tacit acceptance by the FA that more was needed. The organisation's attempt to remedy this shortfall was a bold one: the sale of Wembley Stadium to Shahid Khan, owner of Fulham FC and the Jacksonville Jaguars (of the NFL). The controversial plan, which was opposed by many involved in football, was thought to be worth around £600m, a significant part of which would form part of an ambitious long-term investment programme into grassroots football. Ultimately, the deal fell through, leaving the grassroots game no better off than it was before but with perhaps a more acute awareness of just how large the investment deficit in the sport is.

Irrespective of the shortfall, for an organisation that is frequently maligned, the FA has responded encouragingly and positively to its public wrap on the knuckles of a few years ago. There are hundreds of clubs around the country who have benefitted from its greater levels of investment, and long-term problems, such as a lack of

artificial pitches and poor levels of coaching, are being addressed.

But for all the good it has done, despite the organisation's achievements, there is a sense that the FA is swimming against an increasingly difficult tide. And it is one powered by a singular telling statistic: the fact that 80 per cent of amateur football in this country is played on council-run grass pitches. And in the recent economic and political climate, that is a serious problem.

The reason for this can be summed up with one word: Austerity. The sustained reduction in public spending, which first began under the coalition government in 2010 and which has remained UK government policy under the Tories until very recently, has radically altered the public sphere right across the country. So severe has the programme been that a recent report by UN special rapporteur Philip Alston claimed that the UK government has inflicted 'great misery' on its people with punitive, mean-spirited and often callous austerity policies. These are policies that Alston claimed have driven millions into poverty, breached four UN human rights agreements and threatened the very fabric of society.

Although the cuts have touched almost every area of public spending, they have fallen particularly heavily on local authorities, largely through dramatic cuts in the Revenue Support Grant (money provided to local councils by central government). This, combined with a council tax cap (which has only been moderately relaxed in recent years) and rising demand for local authority services, particularly adult social care, has meant that many local councils have had no option but to slash their spending in 'non-essential' areas – areas, such as parks.

Overall, in the first six years of austerity, 92 per cent of park budgets were cut by local authorities in England, and some dramatically. Warwickshire County Council slashed its parks and green spaces budget by 87 per cent, Newcastle's has been cut by over 90 per cent and in 2018 Bristol City Council, which had already savagely hacked at its allocation for green spaces, flirted with the idea of making its parks budget cost neutral (eventually backtracking after public hostility to the plan).

A recent Freedom of Information request undertaken by *The Guardian* also revealed that in addition to slashing park budgets, many local authorities have been selling park football spaces to balance their accounts. The figures obtained showed that there were 710 fewer local-authority-owned or operated football pitches in the financial year 2017/18 than there were in 2009/10 – before the Tories' austerity project began. In England, the worst hit region was the north west, which lost 164 pitches during that period. Other heavily affected regions included London (54), Yorkshire (76) and the West Midlands (84).

'I completely understand why councils prioritise care for the elderly over something like parks. Some areas deserve priority. But that still leaves our parks bearing the brunt of the cuts. The problem with austerity is that it has meant that local authorities have been presented with choices that should not have to be made, choices like should we sacrifice the health of a town's or city's kids to pay for the care of a town's or city's elderly residents. It's a disgrace that those kinds of decisions have had to be taken,' says Kenny Saunders.

On the ground, the reality for those coaching junior football can be quite depressing, as Paul

Owens, who coaches girls' side Costello Vixens in Hull, explains:

'You have long grass or grass that's been cut and is just left on the pitch. You have slopes and parts of the pitch that are basically unplayable. Sometimes you don't really have markings, or markings so old that they are basically pointless. But perhaps worst of all is the fact that you simply don't have games. In the winter months games are just cancelled week after week. We had six cancelled in a row at one point. The surfaces aren't maintained properly, so the drainage simply isn't good enough.'

Every initiative brought in by the Premier League and the FA is laudable and the investment in infrastructure undertaken by the Football Foundation is welcome. But set against the unavoidable reality that so much grassroots football is played on pitches of poor quality and with facilities that are often dire or non-existent, it's questionable how effective it can be, something that Kelly Simmons acknowledges:

'In other European countries, such as Germany, the provision and maintenance of local sporting facilities is written into statutory law. By law, the local councils within these countries are expected to cater for the sporting demands within their communities – and are granted the funds to do so. That isn't the case here. So, our parkland has been hit. And that's frustrating for us because we are trying our best to improve the game in the face of an increasingly testing environment.'

Despite holding an iron grip on the country for the past decade, signs that austerity is nearing its end as a political force are now apparent. At the recent 2019 General Election, all the major parties (although some significantly

more than others) expressed a desire to throw off the hair-shirt of the recent past and increase public spending.

Yet, depressingly, recent research by the New Economics Foundation revealed that at the current rate of change, it could take as long as a decade to return spending to 2010/11 levels. And even within this, there is no guarantee that local authority spending will necessarily recover completely. Much will depend on who governs and what their spending priorities are.

And locally, adult social care, a politically sensitive spending priority, will continue to consume more and more of available budgets. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it is predicted to need billions in additional funding in the years to come, an outlay that might mean the continued squeezing of other services, such as parks.

Worryingly, the hostile environment that austerity has created over the past decade has not just resulted in poor quality pitches and facilities. It has also produced an environment that has become more costly for participants too.

One method employed by local authorities to shore up their park budgets has been to raise the prices for those that use park facilities, a trend that has afflicted football clubs right across the country in the form of increased pitch fees. In Birmingham, for example, some junior clubs have faced inflation rates of 45 per cent. In Wokingham, the figure has reached 60 per cent. And in Tunbridge Wells in 2018, some pitch fees for the town's junior clubs rose by nearly 70 per cent.

The historical context of just how much more expensive football is to play today compared to a generation ago was revealed by an *ITV News Central* investigation into the issue

back in 2016. The broadcaster looked at the experiences of Sporting FC, who play in the Central Warwickshire Youth Football League. Back when the club was founded in 1994, it cost around £800 to hire its playing pitches for a season. In 2016 that figure stood at just over £10,000, with the cost rapidly escalating in recent years. Had the cost followed the rate of inflation since 1994, the figure should have been around £1,500.

And it's not just local authority playing fields that have been affected by this trend. School playing fields are often used by grassroots clubs, both as a place to play and train and as a place to run lucrative spring and summer fiestas. But increasingly less and less space is available at a reasonable cost as schools, under pressure to ease their own budget constraints, are either selling fields off or handing them over to private management companies (who appear to have no problem maximising profit from this asset).

One club who found out just how costly this trend can be was Ormskirk West End FC. For over a decade, the Merseyside junior club had been running an annual summer tournament for thousands of children on the playing fields of the nearby Ormskirk School. But in 2018 the school outsourced the letting of its facilities to School Lettings Solutions, including the field used for the tournament. When confirming the booking for its tournament in 2018, the club was astonished to find that the price had been increased from the previous year by over 400 per cent. Despite pleas from the club, School Lettings Solutions refused to reduce the price. The increase meant that the club had no option but to cancel its tournament, denying local children the chance to participate in a

fantastic sporting event and costing Ormskirk West End a significant amount of its annual budget.

‘Football is definitely becoming more expensive,’ says Peter Edgar. ‘All in, at the moment, to cover our costs, which include things like league fees, training session fees, refs’ fees, equipment and kits, parents of players at our club are paying £30 per month. I think that’s a staggering amount of money when I think back to what my parents used to pay when I played as a kid. Even with that money, it’s been common for me to chip in from my own pocket to make up shortfalls when we have them. And I know for a fact that there are some parents who haven’t been able to afford to pay what it costs to send their kids to play at this club. As a result, their child has had to walk away from the game. Which, in this day and age, is an absolute disgrace.’

There is a fear amongst some that even those well-meaning attempts to ‘improve the game’ could exacerbate the problem of rising costs. Take ‘Parklife’ for example:

‘Inevitably, because you’re talking about a high-end, artificial football experience, something like “Parklife” will cost more than a normal, local-authority-owned, grass pitch. If you rang up today to hire a full pitch for an hour in one of Liverpool’s hubs, it would cost £180. Of course, for that, you’re paying for reliability and quality. Games won’t be called off very often and the surface you play on will be “perfect”. But there is a worry that the hubs will start to just cater exclusively for those clubs and individuals that can afford it while those without the means will be priced out,’ says Kenny Saunders.

There is a danger that the installation of ‘Parklife’ hubs, however welcome, creates something of a two-tier system locally, where the elite pay to play on high-quality surfaces



and the rest are forced to remain on deteriorating park pitches.

‘And how is that fair?’ says Saunders. ‘A big part of what the FA have done in recent years is to try and improve the football journey that kids experience. But there is a danger that what we are creating today is one fantastic experience for the better off and one inferior experience for those kids from poorer areas. How is the sense that you are getting a second-class experience going to encourage kids to stay in the game? Creating more artificial pitches is a good thing. But it needs to be done hand-in-hand with investment in our existing stock of grass pitches. At the moment, that just isn’t happening.’

Focussing on artificial football runs further risks too. A huge amount of the football played by kids is informal, a kickabout on the school fields after the end of the school day or a bit of three-and-in down the local park on a weekend.

‘There’s a danger that with something like “Parklife”, you’re saying that football provision is covered, and increasingly local authorities can keep selling off park land and schools can keep selling off their fields. Everybody gets excited when a new artificial pitch opens up, but that is sort of negated by the fact that a lot of the open playing fields that we all grew up on aren’t available anymore,’ says Jen O’Neill, editor of *She Kicks* magazine.

Football has long prided itself on its accessibility. It might have become a turn of phrase that seems to mark its user as some misty-eyed romantic, rooted in the past, but ‘jumpers for goalposts’ perfectly summed up the simplicity of the game. Give them a ball and a few jumpers and kids could do the rest themselves. And even as their

involvement became more sophisticated, with teams and kits, the barriers to entry were reassuringly low. But, for many that appears to no longer be the case. In Austerity Britain, the people's game does not apply to all the people.

'Over the weekend, I was watching games on other pitches and three teams – under-12s, 13s, 14s – only had nine players on the pitch; not even the full quota and no substitutes. And this is in Liverpool, a city that lives and breathes football. Even before the end of this season, in our junior grassroots game, thousands of kids will walk away from the sport and teams will continue to fold. Rising costs will play a part in this. As too will the quality of the pitches and the facilities on offer. Under investment is killing the game for these kids and these clubs,' says Kenny Saunders.

Since he founded 'Save Grassroots Football' back in 2014, Saunders has launched several petitions and has yet to reach his target. 'Which is frustrating,' he admits. 'It worries me that a lot of people are paying lip service to the campaign but not following through. This is a serious issue that is afflicting the football journey of our kids. And so, we need the government to act.'

But even if his campaign's efforts come to nothing, and no national action takes place, 'should we as fans not be saying to the clubs we support, "why aren't you doing more?"' he asks.

'Take this city,' he continues, 'we have two massive clubs in Liverpool, each with great community foundations. So for a while we've been asking them to do more. You're talking here of a game that brings with it all kinds of benefits to the community, which produces their stars of tomorrow and which is actually related to what they

do as clubs week-in, week-out. A few million quid, for example, is nothing to the likes of Everton and Liverpool. But for the grassroots game on Merseyside, having that amount invested each year would be transformative, revolutionising the football lives of thousands of kids in the process.’

And there are signs, in that city’s case at least, that clubs are starting to listen. In November 2019 it was announced that Liverpool and Everton were committed to investing £75,000 a year into a Grassroots Football Development Fund, done via their respective community foundations. The investment would be there to provide equipment, training opportunities and pitch-time for clubs, leagues and families who may face financial barriers.

‘I think it’s definitely a step in the right direction,’ says Peter Edgar, ‘one which all Premier League clubs should be participating in with the amount of money being thrown about. Hopefully it can be put to good use and get more pitches playable during the winter, get more kids involved in football, help those parents who can’t afford for their kids to play and also improve the quality of the kids coming through the system in years to come.’

Football, at all levels of the sport, is dependent on the junior game. It is from its ranks that the players of tomorrow will emerge, whether that’s those turning out for sides in the glamorous top flight or the millions who play Saturday and Sunday football. But more than just those who play, it is also from their ranks that future coaches will emerge, future referees, and those who administer the game, whether at leagues or at clubs. Junior football is the production line for adult football. And it is one that needs to be affordable and attractive to those participating.

## JUMPERS FOR GOALPOSTS

But, increasingly, for many it's not, turning instead into something of a lottery.

'And that shouldn't be the case,' Saunders argues. 'There is enough money in the sport to ensure that every kid in this country who wants to play football should be able to do so at an affordable price, on decent pitches and be taught by well-qualified coaches. That isn't the reality though. And unless something changes more and more kids are going to drop out of the game and more clubs will fold. I think people look at the Premier League and just assume that English football must be in good health. But down at the bottom, the game is sick. And it needs help desperately.'