

A Season with the Honest Men

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Introduction

AYR United fans are no different to any other group of passionate supporters; following their team through thick and thin, willing their favourites to score the goals that will win three points or see the team progress through the rounds of national cup competitions.

The ultimate goal in any season is for our captain to hold high above his head a league championship trophy, the Scottish Cup, the Scottish League Cup or even the Scottish Challenge Cup. There is also relative glory to be welcomed in the shape of promotion to a higher division and to be frank there is even a certain amount of satisfaction, if not pleasure, in avoiding relegation when things have not gone so well over the course of a campaign. If we achieve nothing in any given season, well, there's always next season.

Previous generations of fans were exposed only to the matchday experience, what they read in newspapers and highlights of matches on *Sportscene* on a Saturday evening or *Scotsport* on Sunday afternoon. In the 1960s and 70s we did have the occasional live match on TV which was considered a real treat but the modern-day football fan has access to wall-to-wall football, seven days a week.

For example, live matches are on Sky Sports, BT Sport, BBC, ITV and BBC Alba. Highlights can be found on a variety of TV channels throughout the day and night with programmes like *Match of the Day* and *Match of the Day 2*. The list is endless. Constant updates with breaking news can be found at the end of a remote control giving us all Sky Sports News's *Evening Report*, *Through the Night* and a host of other programmes to satisfy the addiction of football fans everywhere. Transfer deadline day coverage ensures that no fan will miss the latest comings and goings in world football.

As a result, supporters have a wealth of information about what is going on at every football club in the country and what is

more, we can all have our say. The phenomenon that is the internet has not only provided us with up-to-date information and news, instant results and commentary from players, managers, pundits and media journalists, it has opened up channels of communication for all.

Fans, who could previously only vent their spleen from the terraces, can now engage with like-minded people through internet forums. Whether it is a discussion among a group of Ayr United supporters on The Honest Page or wider debates with opposition fans on Pie and Bovril, the popular national website and fans' forum, everyone can have their say. Facebook and Twitter are two more of the sites that allow people to engage in debate, discussion, banter and in some cases abuse of one another. The fact is that you can attend a match, watch it live on TV or do neither but still air your views.

A good example of this followed the almost catastrophic recent events at Ibrox. In February 2012, a topic named 'Big Rangers Administration/Liquidation Thread' was established on the Pie and Bovril website and to date the number of pages runs to over 5,000. It shows the enthusiasm football fans have for engaging in debate about any aspect of our national game.

There are, of course, pros and cons to the introduction of the technology that has paved the way for fans to become involved in the game. Slow-motion replays from all angles have undoubtedly helped in bringing the action closer to paying spectators, settling arguments about what actually happened. However, this has placed enormous pressure on match officials as criticism of referees and their assistants has grown, with the expectation that they should get every decision correct, despite the fact that most of us have difficulty in reaching our conclusions after three or four replays of incidents.

The actions of managers, coaches and players can be scrutinised by staff at the club to plan and prepare for upcoming matches but at the same time the footage is being examined by some fans who then use the debating forums to criticise and abuse the very people they claim to support.

I have read disparaging claims about almost every staff member at Ayr United and I have to say, it usually has no basis in fact at all. The vitriol reserved for the manager, Mark Roberts, since he took the helm in 2012 has been both personal and offensive. The

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negative remarks made about his assistant, Davie White, have been made by people who know nothing about his contribution to the club. Then, of course, there is the biggest target of all, the chairman, Lachlan Cameron, who has been accused of everything from embezzlement to grand larceny.

Thankfully, it is a very small minority of people who engage in the campaign of abuse. The question is, how much do these people really know about the workings of Ayr United? How much do any of us know about what goes on at Tryfield Place?

Every Honest Man would love to know what really goes on behind the scenes at Somerset Park. We would all love to question decisions made by the manager. We would like to ask players about particular incidents. We want to know if the latest rumour is true. Are we going to make a new signing? Will our star player be sold in the next transfer window? Does the chairman have big plans for the club? Will the manager be given more money to spend on players? Is the club in financial peril? We can only guess and some people do just that.

In my 47 years as an Ayr United supporter, I've often wondered what it would be like to experience the atmosphere in the dressing room before a match, what it would be like to rub shoulders with the players, to hear the manager's team talk, to witness the reaction of the team to a win, draw or defeat.

So, to follow up on my first published book, *One Honest Man, Four Different Perspectives*, I sought and received the approval of the club to go behind the scenes, to engage with the chairman, the manager, his staff and players to hear their views and witness incidents in their efforts to bring success to Ayr United. The story covers the trials and travails of the Honest Men throughout the 2013/14 season in League 1 of the SPFL.

Baptism of Fire For The New Boss

WHEN Mark Roberts agreed to take on the role of manager at Ayr United in 2012 he was under no illusion about how difficult his task was going to be. He knew there would be difficult times, challenges, disappointments and periods of self-doubt. There was no red-carpet treatment, no fanfare of trumpets, no wild celebrations when he arrived at Somerset Park as a player in 2009. After all, he was crossing the great divide.

The Ayr supporters have very little tolerance for anyone associated with the dark side of Ayrshire and Roberts, having spent eight years as a player with Kilmarnock, would have a very hard task convincing the Somerset Road End that his recruitment was wise.

However, Ayr fans can also be described as fickle and a good example of this was a similar situation in 1997 when Ayr signed ex-Killie man Andy Millen. There was moaning and groaning about the player joining Ayr but he soon showed a passion and commitment that won the fans over. In the same way, Mark Roberts was not deterred by the underwhelming welcome. He has gone on to become a fans' favourite, scoring more than 40 goals to date, including a hat-trick of penalties before being sent off in the same match.

The transition from player to player-manager was not going to be a smooth one. Brian Reid's reign as team manager came to an end after relegation from the First Division, the team having failed to negotiate the play-offs to stave off their demotion. Roberts was viewed by some as a new young manager capable of adapting the team's strategy to introduce a more attacking style of play. Others

offered their negative perception of a rookie boss, too close to the players and of course the regurgitated reference to his Kilmarnock connection.

One man who was confident that Mark Roberts was the right man for the job was the chairman of the club, Lachlan Cameron, and the relationship between the two men has flourished, as Roberts explained, 'I speak to Lachlan once a week at least. I have a great relationship with him and I consider him a friend as well as my chairman. I think other football club managers would be grateful for the type of relationship I have with Lachlan. I also have a lot of contact with Jim Kirkwood, a director I can talk to about everyday issues. Our system works well.'

The pre-season matches convinced many people that Roberts was the right man for the job. In particular, a 4-0 win, playing some lovely football, against a full-strength Motherwell side that had finished third in the Premier League, was all the encouragement required for a positive attitude to the season ahead.

In the very first competitive match however, it all started going wrong. The expectation of a comfortable win against East Stirling in the Challenge Cup was dashed when Ayr lost 3-1 with a poor performance. A draw and two defeats in the first three matches of the league season saw the favourites for promotion at the wrong end of the table and although the team flirted with a play-off place on and off during the season, Ayr completed the campaign in a very disappointing seventh place.

Some Ayr fans made Mark Roberts public enemy number one while others were prepared to take the view that he now had a season's experience to build on and he was still the right man for the job.

It's certainly true to say that Mark learned greatly from the experience of his first season in charge. 'When I got the job I was thrown in at the deep end. I was faced with working on a limited budget, trying to assemble a squad that would do a good job for me. It also meant telling some players that they were not having their contracts renewed. It was important that I hit the ground running and I don't mind telling you, the pressure was on.'

I asked him why he thought the early promise, derived from pre-season matches, didn't come to fruition. 'It's simple,' he said. 'I signed the wrong players.' He followed up his frank admission with another, 'I recruited players that I knew personally and who

I thought had the ability to take the club forward. I didn't take enough account of the characters I was signing and we suffered for that. I put a lot of pressure on myself and there were times that I took the stresses home with me. I've always had a winning mentality and when you are the manager picking a team that is losing it gets to you.

'My biggest fear is failure. I learned during last season that I need players who are strong characters, winners, for the younger players to emulate, to use as role models. Things are a lot better this season. Players like Scott McLaughlin, David Hutton, Alan Lithgow and Kevin Kyle are all winners and it's making a big difference to the spirit and attitude throughout the club.

'Another issue I had last season was the difficulty of playing and managing. Ideally Davie White and I would have benefitted from having someone else on board but the finances didn't allow for it so it was difficult for Davie and me to communicate while I was on the park.

'Bringing in Andy Millen has given me the flexibility to play without putting Davie under too much pressure on his own on the touchline. Andy has known me since I was 16 and we work well together. Davie has a lot on his plate with his responsibilities as head of youth with the Ayr United Football Academy and this has helped him too. Both Andy and I got a lot out of working with Tommy Burns at Kilmarnock and I do try to introduce some of the things I learned from Tam.'