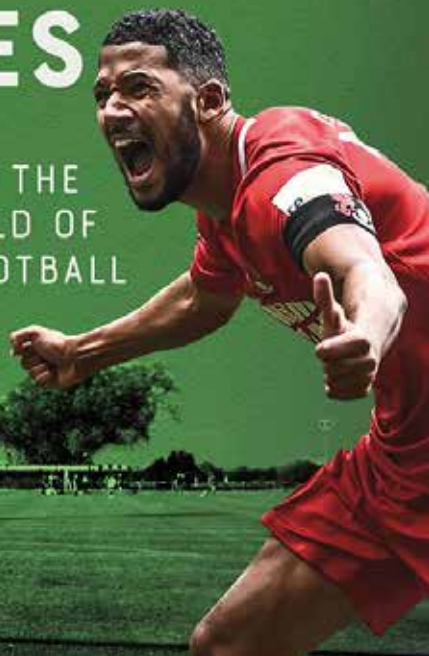


AARON MOORE

FIELDS OF DREAMS AND BROKEN FENCES



DELVING INTO THE
MYSTERY WORLD OF
NON-LEAGUE FOOTBALL



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Null and Void

THE DECISION by the Football Association to null and void the 2019/20 season hurt many clubs. The coronavirus outbreak was declared a global pandemic weeks before football was suspended, but once it was, the FA took the rash decision in voiding the season while also wiping any trace from their records. This meant that the campaign was ended with immediate effect, but there was no conclusion to it, putting promotion, relegation, and the domestic cups up in the air. While many teams were close to achieving promotion, two had mathematically secured it – Vauxhall Motors and Jersey Bulls. These clubs were hit the hardest.

It made the FA look more out of touch with the lower leagues than they already were. Originally, a decision had been made for the Premier League, English Football League and National League, but the lower tiers were left to their own accord. A decision on how the ‘elite’ leagues should end wasn’t reached straight away, with the prospect of promotion, relegation and play-offs being done on points-

per-game, but non-league was kicked to the kerb without regard. The hard-working part-timers were not classed on the same level as the 'elite' players, and it made the decision even tougher to take. The leagues were sensible. Many, when left to make their own decisions, postponed fixtures until further notice, while the National League continued to play their games. The Football Association's decision to allow individual leagues to decide their own fate was an incredibly risky move, although many complied with the Government's advice. There was no immediate decision to ban sporting events, so for the safety of all involved, leagues implemented guidelines and began to postpone leagues.

Vauxhall had played out one of the small amount of games on 14 March, just before all fixtures were postponed, and it was an important win. The celebrations echoed around as the club celebrated one of the first promotions of the season. The vital three points against West Didsbury & Chorlton meant that, even if they lost their remaining seven games, they would still finish fourth and in a promotion spot, but they didn't have that on their mind.

'It was a difficult decision to take. I think it was a rash decision and one that needed more time. I am actually angry. The boys did incredibly well this season, but it has been taken from them. A decision out of our hands,' said Vauxhall manager Mike McGraa.

Not much was known about the virus in the early stages, so it was difficult to know what the best solution was going forward. Mike knew that a decision had to be made, but he questioned why decisions were made quicker on the lower

NULL AND VOID

leagues compared to the National League and above. What was the harm in waiting?

‘I think they could have delayed everything. The decision to expunge the results means the season was never in existence. I think they could have waited another two or three weeks and gone down any number of different routes rather than null and voiding the season.’

There was a lot of talk about decisions being made on an average of points gained per game across the fixtures already played. When matches were postponed in March, many clubs had played the majority of theirs and only had nine to play out of a 36- or 38-game season. That meant that a decision on points-per-game would give a fair indication of a team’s season.

‘Points-per-game was the fairest way to do it. I know it would have upset those who missed out on going up and caused some to go down, but if you look at the season as a whole; if you’re in the bottom three, you are there for a reason. It’s the same if you are in the top four,’ said McGraa.

Although many clubs had games in hand due to the harsh winter weather and cup runs, not many leagues would change. Ascot United sat top of the Combined Counties Football League Premier Division, and although Spelthorne Sports had a game in hand, they couldn’t have overtaken the leaders. Instead, Spelthorne were just a single point ahead of Knaphill, who had three games in hand over them. The North West Counties League Premier Division was a different story. 1874 Northwich, Warrington Rylands and Bootle sat in the three promotion places, with Charnock

Richard trailing behind. Although Charnock were level on points with third-placed Bootle, the team above them had four games in hand while Rylands had one and Northwich had two. The points-per-game system would have promoted all three, and rightly so.

McGraa said, 'I understand people have games in hand, but they are there for a reason. The games you've played represent where you are. The leagues don't lie. You don't have to have play-offs, just promote the top two. Do promotions and relegations because it's about reward and failure. The teams that haven't had a good season or have struggled have got a reprieve while those who have succeeded are getting nothing.'

Jersey Bulls were in the exact same boat as Vauxhall, and it was difficult not to feel for them. Both clubs had shared their stories on similar platforms; the radio and the *Non-League Paper* heard them. McGraa had contacted the Bulls' manager to share his sympathy.

He said, 'I spoke to the manager. We don't know each other, but we spoke to the same people on the radio and in the paper, so numbers were passed around and I reached out. He's a really nice fella and I'm as gutted for them as I am for us. They spent a lot of money, obviously, getting people over to Jersey cost them a lot.'

A condition of the Bulls' acceptance into the National League System meant they would have to cover the costs of visiting teams and officials. They had to do this as they are based on the island of Jersey in the English Channel, so teams had to get flights and ferries across on a matchday.

They had also spent a lot of money to get themselves over to mainland England for away games, a cost that limited teams faced.

‘I’m gutted for everyone affected. Especially the clubs that were nearly there [to getting promoted] and knew it was going to happen. They’ve been let down by the decision as well. Points-per-game was the way to go,’ said McGraa.

The Vauxhall manager had tried to make sense of the decision as he contemplated what was next for his team. It had only been Steps 3-6 of the National League System (levels 7-10 of the English football pyramid) that were voided almost immediately, but for these teams, it was more than football. Although players earned at that level, it was merely pocket money and not enough to live on, so they were part-time footballers with time and expenses sacrificed throughout the season. For Vauxhall, the decision affected them as they sat at Step 6. McGraa reflected on the season but remained disappointed at the outcome.

‘This season consisted of loads of work. This wasn’t just over a season, but two seasons in the making. We’ve had the same group of lads over that period of time and just added quality to the squad. All the lads had their jobs and knew what they needed to do. They worked and trained hard week in, week out and we’ve been the best team in the league by a mile. It’s disappointing it has ended like this,’ he continued. ‘We were never a Step 6 team. The players we have at the club make up a Step 4 or 5 team, and we are good enough for that level. I know all my players aspire to play higher and that’s what we achieved this season, but

now, that's been taken away. I expect it to be a struggle to keep hold of many of these players and I'm expecting clubs to come in for them. It's going to be hard to bounce back from this.'

Although it was frustrating, McGraa had moments he had enjoyed to reflect on. On top of flying in the league, Vauxhall had also enjoyed a good run in the FA Vase.

'I really enjoyed the last game we played [a 1-0 victory over West Didsbury & Chorlton]. It summed up our season in a single game. We were tough to beat and worked hard. We played some good football, but also grinded out results, so that was the most satisfying. I also enjoyed the FA Vase [third round] game against Newcastle Benfield when we were a depleted team [with suspensions and injuries]. We managed to beat a really good side 2-0 when we had five or six first-team players missing. That got us to the last 32.'

Their run in the FA Vase was brought to an end in the fourth round by eventual winners Hebburn Town with a narrow 1-0 loss, but the cups weren't their main priority. The Vase had been a competition of mixed results for the Motormen. The club's best run saw them reach the semi-finals in the 1999/2000 season, but in recent times, they hadn't reached those heights. Their run from the 2014/15 to 2017/18 saw them fail to get past the second qualifying round until a good run in 2018/19 saw them battle their way through to the second round proper. Vauxhall had started that run with progression past Longridge Town before facing Cheadle Town in the following round. The game had ended 2-2, leading the Motormen on to a 6-0

replay victory at home to set up a tie with Seaham Red Star. With a 4-0 victory over the County Durham side, the club's run came to an end at the hands of Runcorn Town. The 2019/20 season was a slight improvement on that.

'We've been brilliant in the cups this year. In the FA Cup, we were poor, and we should've won that day,' said McGraa, recalling their home loss to Winsford United in the extra preliminary round. 'The Vase was a different story. We weren't the best but got out of jail in each round. It was enjoyable. The Hebburn game was a simple case of they were the better team than us on the day. They had only conceded one goal all season, so it was difficult to beat them, especially once they went ahead.'

The FA Cup and FA Vase were the competitions every club wanted to play in and win. The Vase offered clubs in Step 9 and below of the pyramid a chance to compete for a trophy while picking up well-needed prize money, and the chance to play at Wembley. The FA Cup didn't necessarily offer this opportunity but gave clubs the chance to play in one of the most famous competitions in the world. They could also pick up prize money along the way and get the chance to test their skills against Football League players (if they reached the first round proper). The league cups, on the other hand, weren't necessarily the main focus of the club. Vauxhall Motors won some games but didn't take the league cups as seriously as they did the other competitions, which certainly cost them early on.

'Our run in the league cup came to an end a lot sooner than the other competitions we were in, but it was

something we felt we needed to sacrifice. We had beaten a couple of teams in the leagues above comfortably but didn't take the cups serious enough,' said McGraa.

Prior to competing in the North West Counties League Division One South (Step 6), Vauxhall played in the West Cheshire League (Step 7), finishing second to South Liverpool in the 2017/18 season. That was an improvement on the previous season when they finished eighth in the same division. Ahead of 2018/19, they rejoined the North West Counties League, which they had previously won in 1999/2000. In their first year back in the division, they had narrowly missed out on promotion to the Premier Division after Warrington Rylands won the title, but McGraa knew the club were a project in the making and was confident in his side's ability to win the Division One South title the following season.

'We knew we should've gone up the year before, but we finished second and missed out on points-per-game,' he explained. 'We would've gone up [had their points average been better than other teams across the country] and it was hard to take. We kept the same squad together and added some more quality, so the main aim for us was to win the league. We weren't expecting to struggle with promotion.'

Along with the league champions, a select few of the runners-up would get promoted based on their point averages, compared to the leagues at the same level. For the Motormen, an average of just over two points per game was not enough to get promoted ahead of others at their level.

Having played 31 league games during 2019/20, Vauxhall had found themselves 16 points clear at the top, ahead of second-placed FC Oswestry Town. McGraa knew he had to give his players a target in order to keep them motivated for the remainder of the season. The easiest choice for him was a points total. Although they could still be caught by the teams below them having more games to play, the confidence was visible.

‘I think it [the league] was done. The main aim for us was getting over 100 points. We only lost three games all season, so the league was done and so was promotion. The goal for us, to keep the players focused on the remainder of the season, was to achieve that points total. We could have got 103 in the end.’

With nothing he could do about the FA’s decision, McGraa looked ahead to the next campaign. He knew that he and his squad would have to try and achieve the same feat again, but he also understood that nothing was ever easy. With few opportunities available for promotion, other sides would look to strengthen while he and his coaches had to get themselves focused before they could try and help the players.

‘We need to get focused ourselves as a management team and try to change things. The players will get bored of the same routine, and we’ve got to try and bring in fresh faces to give those players that are here a kick up the backside,’ McGraa explained. ‘I think pre-season will be hard. The lads will be deflated and it’s going to be tough. I’m not looking forward to it.’

When the new season had come around, the mood hadn't changed. For the Motormen, the excitement was lacking, and McGraa still wasn't looking forward to another season in North West Counties League Division One South. It was difficult to get his mind set on a new season, knowing he should have been preparing to manage a Step 5 side, but instead, he wasn't.

'It was hard,' he explained with a sombre voice. 'As expected, we had lost a few players to other sides and we tried to rebuild once again, but the motivation [to go again] wasn't there.'

After a pre-season that seemed to drag on forever, Vauxhall finally began their season on Saturday, 3 October 2020 as they welcomed Stone Old Alleynians to Rivacre Park. The Motormen knew they needed to make a good start to the campaign and the first game was a comfortable 4-1 win over one of their title rivals. The season had barely any time to warm up before McGraa's men were ahead; Michael Burkey made the most of a defensive mistake from the visitors and fired them ahead, before that start was bettered with another goal in the seventh minute, this time when Ben Holmes lifted the ball over the stranded keeper. A further two goals, a spot-kick from 12 yards converted by Glenn Rule and a home debut goal from Noah Robson four minutes from time, either side of a goal for Liam Hickson, gave those on the outside an impression of what they could expect from Vauxhall.

The club played a further six games through October as they remained unbeaten. Two wins against Maine Road

as well as victories over Sandbach United, Abbey Hutton United and Alsager Town and a draw at home against Barnton put them top of the table with 19 points. Despite the bright start to the 2020/21 season, the Motormen found themselves holding a narrow lead over Wythenshawe Town who had remained unbeaten themselves, winning six out of six.

‘We were still winning games, but we weren’t playing our best football,’ McGraa said as he looked back on an unusually short season. ‘We just got by, but that was enough to win games and grind out results. We still had plenty of games to play and that included both games against Wythenshawe and I was confident we would have beaten them.’

The season hadn’t been straightforward up to that point. More restrictions across the country had brought football to a standstill and after 35 days without a game following their 3-1 victory over Maine Road at the end of October, Vauxhall had returned at the start of December for some action in the FA Vase with a 240-mile round trip to Cumbria in the second round of the competition to face Holker Old Boys. The game produced little between the sides as a Ben Holmes goal in the 16th minute was enough to see Vauxhall through to the third round, where they came up against a familiar opponent.

After an additional fortnight without competitive action, McGraa led his side out at the Hebburn Sports & Social Ground against Hebburn Town who, at the time of competing in the 2020/21 edition of the Vase, were still awaiting their date at Wembley for the 2019/20 final.

The third-round tie was an entertaining affair between the two sides, who were leading their respective divisions; the Motormen sat top of North West Counties League Division One South while the Hornets were sitting pretty at the top of Northern League Division One. Hebburn had taken the lead in the 16th minute as Michael McKeown fired an effort beyond the keeper after latching on to a loose ball in the box, and that lead was held for much of the match, with both sides having several opportunities. That was until Hayden Cooper found an equaliser with 15 minutes left. The midfielder latched on to a low cross and tapped the ball home.

The tide seemed to have turned in the 90th minute as Vauxhall took the lead. Michael Burkley skipped his way through the defensive line, unleashing a shot that found the back of the net, but four minutes seemed too long for the visitors as Hebburn found their equaliser in the third minute of the time allocated. The Hornets needed a goal and found one after throwing the kitchen sink at the Vauxhall goal, a cross from Dan Groves nestling itself in the far corner. With the sides level at the blow of the referee's whistle, the game was settled on penalties. Hebburn converted all of their penalties to seal a 5-3 win after Vauxhall had missed their fourth.

McGraa said, 'After the lengthy break, we returned to action in the Vase. We had progressed through one round, but narrowly lost to Hebburn. I think we had played well in that game and were unlucky to have lost it on penalties against a side who had made it to Wembley. We couldn't

dwell on that game though; we were told by the league that [our game on Boxing Day] would possibly be our last game, so we knew it was coming.’

The match against Cammell Laird on Boxing Day had kept Vauxhall above Wythenshawe Town by a point. Forbes and Smyth had given Vauxhall a 2-0 lead but it wasn't a comfortable win. The visitors had pulled one back in the 73rd minute through an own goal, but it wasn't enough to halt their progress. It was the seventh win of the season, giving them 22 points, but in the back of their minds they knew football would be halted for the foreseeable. With that in mind, it made it tough to plan for McGraa for any possible return to action.

‘It was [tough], more so for the lads than it was for me. It was hard for them to get their fitness levels right because of the uncertainty around whether we'd play with all the restrictions. We started the season a lot later than expected, returned around Christmas time following a lengthy break before going into the new year without any football. We were trying to avoid injuries and that made it hard as well,’ McGraa said.

The decision by the Government to put the country into a third national lockdown stifled any hope of the players returning for the remainder of the season. That left problems for both the clubs and the Football Association. The 2019/20 season had seen near on 80 per cent of the games being played, but it was declared null and void, so it was difficult to see how less than 25 per cent of a campaign would result in anything different. You couldn't blame clubs

for fearing that the season would have just been declared null and void again.

It was late evening on Wednesday, 24 February when the FA called time on 2020/21. In an official statement by the governing body, they announced that after considering the data they had gathered from across the National League System, it was agreed that the season would be curtailed, but the results would not be expunged. Submissions on the decision were made by 99.1 per cent of Step 3 and 4 clubs and 95.8 per cent of clubs at Steps 5 and 6, with over 76 per cent of all those clubs voting for the season to be cut short.

With no decision on what would follow the curtailment, the FA knew that they would have to revisit the discussion of restructure of the National League System. With that came 'Project Non-League', a proposal from non-league clubs to the FA for the restructure of the lower tiers to go ahead, rewarding the strongest sides over the course of two seasons without the fear of relegation. That campaign certainly affected Vauxhall Motors who, having collected 104 points from 39 games across the two curtailed seasons, sat top of the North West Counties League Division One South combined season table with 2.66 points per game. That saw them sit 0.40 PPG ahead of Wythenshawe Town, putting them in pole position for promotion to the Premier Division.

'When the second season was curtailed, I thought it was going to be a repeat of the first. I didn't think for one second that we would get promoted. I really didn't,' said McGraa.

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The announcement of Vauxhall's promotion came on Tuesday, 18 March as the Football Association disclosed the 107 clubs that would be upwardly moved within Steps 4 to 6. The Motormen were joined by second-placed Wythenshawe Town in the Premier Division, while Stone Old Alleynians were also promoted, moving to the Midlands Football League Premier Division. With the promotion came a new challenge for McGraa and he knew exactly what he wanted to achieve in the next chapter of the club's history.

'We want to challenge, but we've got to be realistic as a club. We are not ready to go and challenge the top teams, but next season will be about familiarising ourselves with the league before having a good go the following season.

'I'm looking forward to facing all of them [the sides in the Premier Division]. The league is something new to us. Everyone's going to be talking about the Macclesfield games, home and away, as it's surely going to be a big crowd. Some players won't ever get the chance to play in front of crowds like that again, so that's the standout game. I'm looking forward to going head-to-head with all the teams and seeing if we can compete at the level we are at now.'

* * *

Ware Football Club didn't sit top of the league by a substantial number of points, leading Hanwell Town by six, but they weren't content with the null and void decision. Although they had played two, three and even four games more than the teams below, manager Paul Halsey felt his

side would have still lifted the Isthmian League South Central title, had they been allowed to continue.

‘Our next game was Hanwell at home,’ he said. ‘I felt we were confident going into the game and that we could revenge the 1-0 loss at their place with a win ourselves. I felt that if we had won that game, we would have gone on to win the league.’

A win over the Geordies would have given Ware a nine-point lead and even if Hanwell had won their two games in hand, the Blues would have remained ahead of their title rivals and in control going towards the end of the season. The run-in for Halsey and his side would have been tough, leading up to Bracknell on the final day, a team just outside the play-offs themselves, but looking at the other sides in and around the play-offs Ware were still confident they would finish at the summit.

Halsey said, ‘The teams below us all had a tough run-in too. We had Hanwell and Westfield at home, while also needing to travel away to Barking, Waltham Abbey, Chipstead and Bracknell Town, who were all within the top ten. I felt had we beaten Hanwell and Westfield at home, we would have been in a better position because the teams chasing us had each other to play, so they were all going to drop points.’

When the season was voided, Hanwell, Uxbridge, Chertsey Town, and Westfield occupied the play-off places, with Bracknell and Waltham Abbey both sitting two points off the final spot. They had all played fewer games than Ware, but the Blues sat 12 points ahead of fifth-placed Westfield.

The 2019/20 season had been a stark improvement on the previous campaign. That had been Halsey's first campaign in charge of Ware, and he was quietly pleased with finishing seventh. Although they had begun with a win over South Park at home, two losses against Westfield and Cheshunt had made for a difficult start. September had made for better reading. A draw and a defeat were followed by a four-game unbeaten run before they faced back-to-back defeats again, losing 3-0 to Hanwell and 3-1 to Hayes & Yeading United.

Halsey led his players on a six-game unbeaten run between November and December before a narrow loss to Cheshunt brought that to an end. A further three wins briefly boosted their cause – to finish as high as possible – before Northwood inflicted their seventh loss of the season. The new year had brought new sense of joy to the club as the Blues were defeated just once in 11 games by eventual champions Hayes & Yeading before April had proven tough for them. Three losses and two wins ended the 2018/19 season in that final month and, looking back, it was clear to see that a winning run in April could have propelled the club to a play-off place, but it was far from disappointing for Halsey.

‘I had taken over a couple of years ago, and in my first season, we had finished in the top half. We felt we had done really well that season and although we fell off towards the end, we felt it was still a good season. I had signed players I felt were going to push us towards the title and that's exactly what happened [the following season].

The team changed quite a bit, but I set out to go and push for the league [title].’

With a decent season behind them, Halsey’s mindset turned to being outright winners of the Isthmian League South Central Division ahead of the 2019/20 season.

‘We made a bit of a slow start, but we found our feet and were scoring goals for fun. At the start of the last season [2019/20], I had lost players like David Cowley and Brandon Adams, so people were questioning where our goals were going to come from. That just speaks for itself when we went on to score 90 goals in the league. Josh Williams and Dan Rumens were brought in, and I had strengthened where I needed to ahead of the season.’

After an opening-day 3-3 draw against Staines Town, who had just been relegated from the Southern League Premier Division South, Halsey’s men extended their unbeaten run by a further nine games that spanned across the first four months of the season. A win against Barking followed before they were held 1-1 by both FC Romania and Chertsey Town. Ware then registered a further four wins, beating Chalfont St Peter, Harlow Town, Uxbridge, and Bedfont Sports, before they were held by South Park at the end of October. A further victory against Northwood was the last of the unbeaten start to as Hanwell Town inflicted the Blues’ first defeat of the season.

The narrow 1-0 defeat to the Geordies could have derailed Ware’s promotion push, but instead they continued to pick up points. Another 3-3 draw, this time at home to Hertford Town, was followed by 18 goals in three games;

6-1 victories over Chipstead and Bracknell Town as well as a 6-0 win over Ashford Town (Middlesex) had put the club in a commanding position as they sought promotion. The win over Ashford had come at the start of December and, while Ware had only lost one game in the opening four months, they doubled that in December alone. Tooting & Mitcham United and Waltham Abbey had proven tough opposition for the Hertfordshire club as they lost 2-1 and 3-2 respectively, but had picked up wins against Marlow and FC Romania in the games that followed the defeats.

Into the new year, Ware almost saw out the season with an unbeaten final three months. Three wins against Chertsey Town, Bedfont Sports and South Park weren't enough for a perfect January as they had been beaten 4-0 by Westfield, but still, Halsey's men pushed on towards what they hoped would have been a promotion to cap off a great season. February had been the month with most games – six – but that didn't cause too many problems for Ware as they dropped just four points. A draw against Uxbridge was followed by victories over Harlow, Ashford, Tooting & Mitcham and Northwood, before they drew against Marlow at the end of the month. That was followed by what would be the final game, a 3-1 win over Hertford, on Saturday, 7 March 2020. The club had capped off another nine-game unbeaten run, leaving them top by six points.

The players' boots were still warm from the premature final game of 2019/20 when the decision to bring an end to the season was finalised. In a single decision, a season

of hard work and enjoyment was ended and the FA's ruling frustrated Halsey.

'It's no secret how I feel about the decision,' he exclaimed. 'It was a rash decision as we were one of the first leagues to come to that decision. From the FA, right down to our league and below, it was a poor decision, and I don't think they took everything into consideration. They didn't need to make the decision so early. I felt they should have let it settle down and reassess where we were in June. We could have finished the season.'

If the lower leagues had their season ended briskly, Halsey felt the 'elite' leagues should have followed. He felt the choices those competitions got should have been applied to Steps 3 to 6, and as he thought back to March 2020, he had his own solution for how the season could have ended.

'My second option was to not start the [2020/21] season until the suspended season had finished. We had played close to 80 per cent of our games, and already this season, we have played seven or eight games, which could have been the rest of last season. To see the National League going on a points-per-game basis, I felt it was disgraceful the way they [the FA] dealt with it. We could have finished the season in place of the start of the new season [in September] and started the 2020/21 season after Christmas. That meant the season would have finished later, but it would have been finished. There are plenty of people that would agree that null and voiding the season was too easy of a decision and the only sides that didn't agree with it were those fighting relegation.'

He paused, and added, 'It just made a mockery of the system.'

The new season began in September, a month later than originally scheduled, so focus immediately turned to the opening game. Halsey still had ambitions to win the title and, although teams who had struggled or were off the pace would have strengthened their squads, he felt his side would go on to challenge once again.

'I'm not going to change my mindset or plans,' he explained. 'The minimum is always going to be the play-offs, but I want to win that league. We expected a lot of clubs to go out and strengthen, but I felt the money situation [that came with the lost revenue] would have been a problem for everyone. It seemed to be the opposite and more had more money which would make the season more competitive.'

While several managers weren't looking forward to the new season and having to motivate their players, it was a different story for Halsey. A simple chat with all his players proved they were ready for another season and ready to battle again.

'Some of the players at the club aren't getting any younger and a few of them were planning to win the league and hang up their boots. I spoke to a lot of them [through the summer] and let's be clear, everyone at the club, from the chairman to the fans, was absolutely gutted with the outcome. I knew I would have to try and find a way to motivate them, but I didn't need to. Every phone call I made came back with the same response. They all told me they had unfinished business and a lot of those who planned to

retire weren't going to until we had won the title. For me as a manager, that was phenomenal and simply magic. It was easy for them to walk away, but I have a great bunch of players who play for me, and they are all friends, so they aren't just players of the club.'

There was a huge contrast between how Halsey had seen the 2019/20 and 2020/21 seasons. The former had been one of his best as a manager and, although it was not concluded how he had hoped, he would still have fond memories and would look back at it along with his time at Hertford, but the latter wasn't going to be firm in Halsey's memory as a great one.

'As a manager, it was one of my best seasons. I had some great times with Hertford and with their fans but building something special at Ware has been great. I'm a Ware man myself and live opposite the ground. We aren't just bringing players to the club, but we are also attracting fans, through the gate and all the local people are interested in what we are doing.'

There was still uncertainty around whether or not the season would be played. The country had been in lockdown since March 2020 and in order to even get the season started, the Government would have had to ease restrictions, allowing fans to attend matches. It was a huge ask from those at the top, but it had to be done in order for the lower leagues to survive. Those restrictions were slightly eased in May, around seven weeks after they were enforced, as the Government allowed for a 15 per cent capacity at grounds initially before taking that up to 30 per cent.

‘I think everyone was quite pleased that we had come out of the lockdown, but like most people, we were concerned we would face another one. We were still a little disappointed with the outcome of the previous season as we felt we had a good side, but there wasn’t anything we could do about that,’ Halsey said.

The 2020/21 season had begun on Saturday, 19 September as the Blues made the trip to Wheatsheaf Park to face Staines Town. It hadn’t been the first competitive game of that season, though, as they had already eased past Step 5 Southend Manor at Southchurch Park in the FA Cup. They had bowed out of the competition a week before their league campaign got under way as they lost 2-0 to Canvey Island, who went on to reach the second round proper and lost to National League side Boreham Wood.

The opening game was a defeat for Halsey’s men. After finding themselves leading 2-1 in the 25th minute with goals from Louis Rose and Liam Hope, the visitors failed to make that count as two goals in quick succession sealed a 3-2 win for Staines. The loss was nothing more than a bump in the road as the Blues won their next two games.

‘It wasn’t a worry at all,’ said Halsey. ‘With Staines, they were a young side with a new manager. I was more concerned with the chances we missed and the goals that we conceded. All three goals were things we could deal with on the training pitch, but I wasn’t concerned we would go on a bad run. I never go by the first game because you’ve always got a whole season to catch that up. Nothing really changed with the tactics or my philosophy

[to get the first win of the season]. The new players who had come in had to buy into that, and it took a few games for them to adapt.'

Wins against Bedfont Sports and Chalfont St Peter had looked to get Ware going on a good run of form, but they couldn't capitalise as they faced another setback with their second defeat in four games, losing to Uxbridge. They had taken the lead through Dan Rumens in the 23rd minute but an 11-minute spell just before half-time had given the Reds the advantage, with neither team scoring in the second half. For Halsey, it was another game where he felt the club had contributed to their own fall.

'If you look at the Uxbridge and Staines games, they were very similar in the way that we made mistakes we shouldn't have made. I think we rightly lost that 2-1, but it could have easily been the other way around. I feel we could have dealt with the forward play a lot better. We couldn't afford to lose too many games, so we worked hard on the training ground and went on a short winning run.'

Work on the training ground was exactly what Ware needed as they won their next three games. The first had seen Halsey's side beat Barking at home. Leigh Rose had given them the lead in the 27th minute before the visitors found a leveller just ten minutes later. Ware had looked to avoid a repeat of the Uxbridge game, and goals from Marcus Milner a couple of minutes into the second half and Reece Crowter 20 minutes from time ensured they got the three points over the line. That victory had been followed by wins over South Park and Harlow Town, putting Ware third and

a point off the sides above with a game in hand. For Ware, it was the last time they played in 2020/21.

Their Tuesday night game against Harlow had been watched by 249 people as Ware eased to a 6-1 victory over the Hawks, but there was some anticipation in the air regarding what could happen if the pandemic continued to worsen at the rate it was. That fear was realised on Saturday, 31 October as the Government announced a second national lockdown to combat the ongoing surge.

Halsey said, 'As the season went on, I think we all knew it was heading for a lockdown. We were hoping it wouldn't go that way, but realistically, we were concerned it would. It was certainly a downer that that had happened as it had a knock-on effect throughout the club, but again, what could we do about it?'

While another lockdown had dampened the spirits of those in and around the club, no one had expected to not play another game. After four weeks the lockdown had come to an end, but no football was then played before the third national lockdown, enforced in January, confirmed the fears of many, with no more league fixtures scheduled during the 2020/21 season. Thoughts of managers and players alike had turned to what would be the outcome of the decision, with a sense of impending *déjà vu*, but for Halsey, he didn't feel enough games had been played to worry about the outcome of the season.

'We didn't feel the season would go the same way as the previous season because we hadn't played the same number of games. I don't think there was a sense of *déjà vu*, but

I feel it [curtailing the season] was the right thing to do. Although I found it strange that they null and voided one, but just curtailed the other and used points-per-game to decide promotion.'

The FA had made a decision to promote sides from Steps 5 and 6, meaning Ware had missed out on the chance to be promoted on points-per-game. Instead, when the FA announced the constitution for 2021/22, they had been moved laterally from Isthmian League South Central Division to Southern League Division One Central. It hadn't been the news they were hoping for, but it gave the club a new challenge to look forward to rather than the disappointment of facing the same sides in the same league. It was a completely new division though, with FC Romania, Hertford Town, Waltham Abbey, and Harlow joining them from the Isthmian League. That gave Halsey a good balance of familiarity and the unknown, which made for an exciting season ahead.

'Whatever league it is, I will be exactly the same. I set out to go and win that league, but now, we will face a number of new teams that we don't know. It's definitely going to be an interesting season. A few sides were moved across the Isthmian League alongside us, so I will be looking forward to those games, but I will also be looking forward to visiting the new grounds too. I'm not disappointed by the decision [not to promote clubs to Step 3], I'm just excited for the new challenge.'

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If it was a difficult time for clubs, it was even harder for those whose job it was to make the news clear for everyone and explain what was going on. The media had to make sense of it all and, as the presenter of the *Non-League Show*, Ollie Bayliss found himself at the heart of the coverage. The communication and information between the FA and individual leagues were scarce and brief, but people were seeking answers. Bayliss used his presence on Twitter to filter and share information, explaining it in layman's terms.

He said, 'It's a really difficult time for everybody. I don't envy the position the decision-makers are in. There is no right answer or easy option for those who run the leagues and for the FA. They've been forced to make one of the most difficult decisions they will ever make in football administration, and they have to make it without being face-to-face. On top of that, several key figures are fighting the virus themselves and are unwell. Clearly the health of the people is more important than football right now.'

It begged the question as to whether the pressure that the authorities were under had contributed to the haste with which some of the decisions were made. Through the frustration, it was hard not to question whether that affected the decision, especially with some officials being ill. Was everyone present?

'For me, the leagues and the FA have made the wrong decision. I think it was a decision that was made too early. We were still in March and only two weeks into the suspension of games when time was called on Steps 3 to 7,' explained Bayliss. 'I would have liked to see teams that

occupied the automatic promotion spots on their current points-per-game averages promoted. I think they could have promoted with no relegations. With the expansion of the leagues in non-league, along with clubs who will inevitably withdraw, I think the numbers would have pretty much worked. It's also a method that could have been applied throughout the English football pyramid without many feeling the decision was unfair.'

The FA didn't agree. For them, their primary concern was the safety of everyone involved in the sport and the FA's head of the National League System had put out a statement explaining the association's decision not to allow for promotion and relegation at those levels.

'The truth is that the consequence of clubs being promoted is that others will need to be relegated. The application of a points-per-game model would result in certain clubs that currently sit above the relegation zone falling into those places. Equally, there would be certain clubs that currently sit in a play-off position that would not qualify as a result of the points-per-game model. This model also doesn't address the issue of how to deal with the play-off matches and how to identify a winner who would consequently benefit from promotion.'

The decision from the FA was never going to please everyone, but the clubs missing out on promotion felt that clubs in the relegation places were benefiting more from the decision. The FA already had plans in the works to expand the non-league pyramid at the end of the 2019/20 season. The idea was a restructuring of the league borders

along with adding another division at Step 4 to address the travelling of clubs between the north-east and Peterborough. They also wanted to increase Step 5 by two divisions, taking it up to 16, and reduce Step 6 by three, taking it down to 17. A restructure of the pyramid meant that clubs could be promoted based on points-per-game across the country, like it had been planned to happen, but the decision was made to delay the restructure until the end of the 2020/21 season at the earliest.

Bayliss said, ‘The best solution would have been to promote teams without relegation with points-per-game. Relegating teams on points-per-game is particularly harsh, especially if it’s by a narrow margin. The FA’s decision affected around 100 leagues from Step 3 to 7. There shouldn’t have been a strict “one size fits all” rule. Non-league is used to seeing clubs being promoted on ground-grading, sideways movement, and reprieves. I think teams could have got on board with some promotions, but no relegations.’

Justifying the comparative difference between the way the FA saw the Football League and the lower leagues made it far tougher for Bayliss and his fellow reporters. The Premier League, EFL and National League were offered the chance to continue when it was safe to do so, but again, it was difficult not to question the decision. The thoughts of those who weren’t able to continue were that non-league and grassroots football had been thrown to the gutter. The clubs that had everything to lose wanted to continue, and would have been happy to wait as long as was needed,

but they weren't given the chance. Despite this, Bayliss understood that far more clubs supported the curtailment of the season.

'Many clubs did mostly support the season being finished. Leagues did consult with clubs and the majority wanted confirmation that games had finished for the season. Having some certainty allows clubs to financially plan and sort out contracts. For many non-league players, they were on weekly contracts until May and clubs were worried they would have had to extend them without knowing if games would be played.'

The National League already had a longer process to decide the outcome of the season. After a majority vote to abandon what remained of 2020/21, the league issued a vote to decide the outcome of promotions and relegations, but this was never an option for the lower tiers. Instead, the FA expunged the results, wiping any trace of the season from their records.

'We are seeing a number of unhappy clubs being vocal about the decision to expunge the leagues. It will be sure to mean many clubs will withdraw or fold over the season and the financial impact of the current crisis will see a much greater number sadly leave the pyramid. It's very hard for the FA to look after all of the several thousand teams who play lower-league football, but there hasn't been much in the way of grants and support being offered to these clubs,' explained Bayliss.

The option of using points-per-game may have changed the course of who would have been promoted or relegated

and while the majority of clubs in promotion places would have achieved the same on PPG, Bayliss understood how hard it was on the clubs affected. Saffron Walden Town sat top of the Essex Senior League when the season was voided, but both Walthamstow and Hashtag United were within three points and had three games in hand each. A PPG solution would have seen them miss out on promotion to Step 4, but unlike the Bloods, clubs like Worthing and Colney Heath would have achieved their destiny whether the season had been played or not. Still, the thoughts were mainly focused on the clubs who had already achieved that, with games spare.

‘The decision was particularly harsh on Vauxhall [Motors] and Jersey [Bulls]. They had already celebrated promotion. The Bulls had a 100 per cent record and hadn’t dropped a single point in their 27 games, so these clubs just showed why I felt teams in automatic promotion positions should have been promoted,’ suggested Bayliss. ‘It doesn’t really do anyone any favours having them compete at Step 6 again, but I’m sure both will have a good campaign. It’ll be hard to motivate themselves to go again.’

The words of Bayliss echoed those of Vauxhall’s manager Mike McGraa. The question of where the motivation would come from certainly would spring up again. The players were looking forward to a new challenge; instead they were set to face an even tougher season for the wrong reasons. The clubs that led in the North West Counties League would certainly improve their squads, hoping they’d be one of the four teams to achieve promotion.

Another issue with promotion was that the PPG solution didn't take into consideration the teams who had started to pick up some form. For them, deciding a season on point averages was not fair.

The heartfelt sympathies also went out to those who were close to achieving the same feat but would still need points from their remaining games to seal their fate. South Shields, Maldon & Tiptree and Stowmarket Town held substantial leads in their respective leagues. Maldon & Tiptree sat 13 points clear at the top of the Isthmian League North Division but had four games in hand over second-placed Bury Town due to their excellent FA Cup run, while South Shields were comfortably ahead of FC United of Manchester in the Northern Premier League. Elsewhere, Stowmarket were well ahead in the Eastern Counties League Premier Division, holding a 15-point lead over both Norwich United and Stanway Rovers. They weren't the only sides to be sat at the top of their respective leagues and denied the chance of promotion, but it showed what the FA needed to consider when voiding the season.

Bayliss said, 'Clubs will be playing the same clubs in the same division despite having a good campaign. By the time we kick off next season, it will have been at least five months since football was last played, but the boost in excitement and support upon the return of football will hopefully help keep teams motivated in the early months at least.

'Players, managers and volunteers have worked hard to get themselves in a good position at the top of the

table. Clubs have spent a lot of money to chase promotion and sponsors have paid into a project. No one has seen a reward for their efforts or their finances, so sponsors could justifiably walk away next season, as could players and managers. Teams who have had a good season this year might not necessarily be able to have a good campaign next time.'

A gambling company were one of the sponsors that made the decision to pull out of their deal following the end of the 2019/20 season. They had sponsored the Isthmian League but felt their contract couldn't be honoured despite having a year left, while they made it clear it didn't have anything to do with the ongoing pandemic. Despite that, for the league itself, it made it tougher to find a sponsorship as the economy had already taken a hit, but they were keen to continue their relationship with sponsors.

A league statement read, 'We are very disappointed that this decision has been made as it means that we are not able to develop the relationship with the sponsor. We are actively looking for a new sponsor, but we are apprehensive at this time due to the general economic downturn due to Covid-19. We believe we have a good and marketable product which has attracted sponsors for nearly 40 years, and we hope will continue to do so once we are able to restart the league.'

The financial impact on clubs and the lower leagues was the toughest part of the decisions, but there was nothing that could be done. With sponsors pulled away from their respective sponsees and the 2019/20 season

ceasing to exist, all people could do was look back at what could have been.

Bayliss said, 'It was particularly harsh [the decision to expunge the season] given the efforts and achievements of so many clubs. When the Second World War disrupted football 80 years ago, the leagues were simply left unfinished. That would have been kinder and fairer. Perhaps there were legal reasons why they needed to expunge the season rather than just indefinitely suspend the season. I'd have preferred clubs to have been rewarded for their efforts for the part of the season that was played.'

There was plenty of optimism as 2020/21 approached, with clubs and supporters hoping the new season would be free from disruption and completed in full after the first unprecedented season had come to an end. Many didn't want to think ahead to what might happen if the pandemic took hold again, but the majority were just excited to get back through the turnstiles and into grounds around the country ahead of what was set to be an exciting season after a lengthy break.

'I think when we started the 2020/21 season in September, there was a lot of optimism. There wasn't yet much evidence of a second or third wave [of coronavirus]. Maybe the FA should have put something in the rules to dictate what happened if the season was curtailed, but I don't think it was unreasonable to start the season as normal,' said Bayliss.

The new season had merely been two months old when the second lockdown was brought into force at the start of

November, but there was still hope that overall it would largely be unaffected by the goings-on around the country. That break lasted for four weeks before football was able to resume with a few games before the non-league world would fall silent for the annual Christmas break, but new restrictions days before the festive period squandered any plans to return in the new year to continue the season. Although it looked set to be the end of a second season earlier than expected, the same sense of disappointment wasn't replicated from 2019/20.

'I think there was a bit more of a feeling of inevitability about the season stopping in December. Fewer games had been played than the previous season, so I think most clubs were resigned to losing another season to Covid. There was less anger than the season before,' said Bayliss.

The talk of 'Project Non-League' had been around since the start of the year as many suspected the season wouldn't be finished following the lockdown in January 2021. The proposal behind the idea was that clubs would be promoted based on the two incomplete seasons to fill in gaps left by those who had left the pyramid and the imminent restructure to the lower levels by the FA. While it was a good idea for most leagues, the FA only had plans to fill Step 4 and below, meaning clubs looking to get promoted to Step 3 and above wouldn't have got their just reward, despite also being affected by the restructure. For Bayliss, the governing body had made a huge error in not applying the project to all the divisions, as he felt the pyramid needed promotion at all levels to happen.

‘Broadly the suggestion from “Project Non-League” was adapted, although there were some significant differences. It was only used to form new leagues, so just teams at Steps 5 to 7 were promoted. It means gaps still exist in leagues and it’s not clear why the FA didn’t take the opportunity to fill all the gaps.

‘Clubs at Steps 3 and 4 have every right to be frustrated that they weren’t elevated. There were gaps at Step 3 and 4 that could have been filled. The aim is for Step 2 leagues to run at 24 clubs, so there’s scope for seven clubs to be moved up to that level, but in reality, I think every top-placed club that wanted promotion was given it. In many cases at Step 6, leagues promoted up to three clubs. That was to fill the new leagues at Step 5, but there’s a slight bias towards clubs being promoted to Step 4 in the north, because the new league that’s added is in the Northern Premier League. This situation was communicated to clubs ahead of the season.’

The restructure had gone ahead as planned ahead of 2021/22 as the FA added another league at Step 4, a further two at Step 5 and reduced Step 6 by three. While that had gone ahead as planned, Bayliss understood that the FA had found themselves in a difficult position, despite also giving 110 clubs upward movement.

‘It’s a really difficult job for the FA who get a list of clubs in each step and have to sort them into geographic leagues. Clubs understandably get frustrated, especially when they get moved around regularly. It affects their playing squad and sponsorships as well as travel times. There’s no easy solution to this situation, however.’

NULL AND VOID

The 2021/22 campaign was set to be huge for the lower leagues. After two years without a full season and promotion based on points-per-game to fill in gaps for a restructure, it was paramount that clubs needed a full season behind them and promotion and relegation to return to a sense of normality. Whether that was going to happen would remain to be seen.

Bayliss said, 'Promotion and relegation will hopefully be back to something close to normal. However, we will still have significant gaps in the pyramid. The National League North and South aim to increase their numbers to 24, so we'll need more promotion places and fewer relegation spots for a season or two at least. I also think it's crucial we get a full season in. Clubs, players, and fans are getting increasingly frustrated by the situation. We risk losing a generation in the lower-league game and clubs rely on the finances from fans, so it's crucial we get them back as normal and as soon as possible.'