

JONATHAN ALLSOPP

THIS THING OF OURS

TWENTY YEARS ON

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF FAN-OWNED FC UNITED



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From Milan to Nuneaton

IN THE club's early days, having swapped flights to glamorous European ties with Manchester United for bus rides to the mill towns of the North West Counties League, some FC United fans jokingly referred to our temporary home at Gigg Lane in Bury as the 'Stadio del Gigg', complete with its very own Curva Sud. At the time we had no idea that this football club we'd assembled from scratch might one day be playing in a European competition in one of the world's great stadiums. But, incredibly, the 2022/23 season had ended in June with FC playing in the San Siro in Milan in the third-place play-off in the second edition of the Fenix Trophy, a European tournament for non-league clubs whereby FENIX is also an acronym for Friendly, European, Non-professional, Innovative, Xenial. The tournament's aim is to provide a friendly environment for clubs, players and supporters from different countries to come together.

FC, roared on by more than 400 travelling fans, beat Brera 1-0 with a late goal from Matt Van Wyk, who had originally been due to sit a college exam on the day of the match but had decided to postpone it so he didn't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play in the San Siro.

For part-time footballers and supporters to get the chance to play and watch their team in one of the world's great stadiums – providing memories to cherish for ever – was something special.

There were some gripes about the state of the toilets, some killjoy stewarding and waiting nearly an hour in the midday sun to get into the ground for an early kick-off – dictated by the need to get the stadium ready for a screening of Inter's Champions League Final against another team from Manchester a few days later – but none of this diminished the sheer joy of seeing the football club you own play at this most iconic of venues.

And the feel-good factor continued throughout the early summer although we weren't quite reaching for the giddy-o-meter just yet. The men's first-team manager Neil Reynolds told the board at its June meeting that he was 'excited for the season ahead' and felt that we had recruited well during the summer and he was grateful for a significantly higher playing budget this year on the back of the increase in commercial revenue last season. We'd finished the previous season in eighth, only five points outside the play-off places, after being deducted three points for fielding too many loan players in a win against Warrington Town, so a tilt at the play-offs wasn't out of the question.

Meanwhile, the women's team manager James Mulvihill had spoken well at the club's general meeting in May at the end of a season in which he had led the women's team to promotion to the National League Division One North in the fourth tier of the women's game. So it was a double shock when, in the last week of June, James resigned and then, a week later the club's chief executive officer, Natalie Atkinson, also announced she was leaving. The timing,

as both men's and women's teams began their pre-season preparations, couldn't have been worse.

'It's a decision that I have made for me and my family,' said Natalie, who added she was 'happy and proud' with what she had achieved since joining the club in February 2022 – in particular in 'driving the vision and business plan, reviewing the club's structure with the introduction of revenue-raising roles, and building a cohesive community programme'.

Natalie had overseen a threefold increase in income from sponsorship and advertising in 2022/23, which had allowed the club to increase its playing budget for the coming season, but the review of the club's structure and the introduction of revenue generating roles wasn't to everyone's liking.

In August 2022, six months into her time at the club and shortly after Frances Fielding and Rachel Hughes had also joined FC as commercial manager and events and hospitality manager respectively, an FC fan had tweeted that 'punk football is what we signed up for but all I can see is poundshop corporate football' with 'highly paid twats in "leadership" roles'.

Meanwhile, around the same time, a co-owner emailed Natalie to point out that 'with the salaries of yourself, the manager, commercial manager, events and hospitality manager, health and safety officer ... it's no wonder the club is haemorrhaging money ... We are trying to be a Premier League club on NPL money. It's an absolute disgrace. This is not what my club is about.' All this at a football club that proudly speaks of 'making friends not millionaires' and that many of its fans refer to as an 'FC family'.

You could see why one former board member had wondered if FC United is actually ungovernable given the

volatile mix of sport, business and politics at play – the need to marry the raw, unfiltered emotion that comes with being a football supporter with the often hard-headed approach required to run a successful business while still maintaining that all-important link back to the club's founding ideology.

Board chair Dave Ashurst thanked Natalie, on behalf of the board, for leaving the club in 'a better place than it was when she joined us'. But the statement stopped short of offering the usual 'welcome back at the club any time' message that had accompanied the resignations of senior staff members in the past. Meanwhile, an interim leadership team consisting of commercial manager Danny Davis, financial controller Steve Durrands and first-team manager Neil Reynolds took over while the club looked for a new CEO.

Although one of the early responses by fans to the news of Natalie's departure referred to it as 'catastrophic news', overall it received a measured response and a general recognition that, while her departure was disappointing, Natalie's hard work, together with that of senior staff and committee members, had given the club a solid platform from which to move forward.

The committee structure had been launched in 2022 to encourage co-owners with particular skills and experience to support the club across six key areas – commercial, communications, community, co-ownership, football, finance and risk – with delegated authority from the board. The committees mostly meet online – and most work can be done remotely – so it gave everyone a chance to get involved, even those who live miles away from Manchester.

With the support of the committees and the likes of Danny, Steve and Neil, all experienced managers, able to step in while the club looked for a replacement CEO, there

was acknowledgement too that the club was better able to cope with a high-profile departure such as this than it would have been a year ago.

Natalie's tenure as CEO at FC United was similar to her previous senior roles at other clubs having left her first CEO role at Curzon Ashton after 18 months to join Southport where she was CEO for little over a year before leaving to 'pursue a fresh challenge', which turned out to be as managing director at Oldham Athletic where she worked from June 2019 to September 2020. There's something of a pattern of only staying at clubs for a year to 18 months.

But FC United was meant to be different wasn't it? When she joined in February 2022 Natalie described it as 'like coming home' and, shortly after, at a Q&A session with supporters she remarked that in joining FC she had found a football club that matched her own values. Natalie had been involved in the building of FC's Broadhurst Park ground during her time at the Manchester Football Association so the club was, she said, 'close to my heart'.

James Mulvihill's resignation a week earlier was announced unexpectedly on the club's women's team's official Twitter account with a quote from James which said, 'I have loved every minute I have spent at FC. The girls have been a pleasure to coach and the fans have been amazing,' but he added, 'It has become impossible to continue without the proper support needed to carry out my role effectively.' As one of the early responses to this news on the members' forum put it, 'That's quite a quote from an official FC account.'

The board, like everyone else, were taken by surprise by this announcement and Warren Heppollette said that he was 'extremely disappointed in today's events and incredibly sorry to see James go' and offered some background to

James's decision. Warren explained that James had been seeking several changes to ensure the women's team and staff were supported to succeed in a higher division next season – including the reimbursement of expenses and allocation of any cup prize money – and the board had agreed to these changes at its latest board meeting the night before his resignation.

Two weeks later Mulvihill was named as the new manager of Wythenshawe FC's women's team, who had recently announced that, along with their newly promoted men's team, they were set to become semi-professional for the 2023/24 season – a huge step forward for a club competing in the women's North West Regional League, two levels below FC United.

It followed the appointment of Sacha Lord, then Greater Manchester's night-time economy adviser, as the club's chair in April, and his new investment and the subsequent dropping of the word 'amateurs' from the club's name (they were previously known as Wythenshawe Amateurs) signalled their ambition.

Shortly after, several of FC's women's team chose to follow Mulvihill to Wythenshawe including our longest-serving player and club legend Kirsty Chambers. It's not unusual for this to happen in the women's game but the departure of the manager and a substantial number of players at this stage of the summer inevitably had a serious impact on the women's team's pre-season preparations, resulting in the postponement of some pre-season games.

FC struggled to field a women's team at Clapton CFC on 15 July in the Supporters Direct Shield, an annual celebration of supporter-owned football which also involved a men's game between the two clubs. A depleted FC side lost 3-1 in east London – quite a contrast to the

women's team's 9-0 victory over Clapton in another double header at Broadhurst Park two years before. There was also some reputational damage to the club which initially made it difficult for us to recruit a new manager and new players.

In unrelated news, while James Mulvihill had spoken of being a 'successful businessman', it emerged, after he'd left FC, that he had, in fact, been disqualified from being a company director for seven years from July 2020 for conduct during his time as the director of a company which went into liquidation in 2018. And later on, Mulvihill's new boss, Sacha Lord, was also under investigation as the *Manchester Mill* published a story in May 2024 which revealed that Primary Events Solutions, a company owned by Lord, grossly misled Arts Council England in obtaining more than £400,000 of public money during the pandemic.

* * *

The men's team's pre-season campaign was described as 'the most enjoyable in years' by FCUM Radio and included an impressive 4-1 win against Altrincham, from the National League. Afterwards Neil Reynolds mentioned how a significantly bigger football budget for the coming season had enabled him and assistant manager Brian Richardson to strengthen the squad with an exciting crop of young players – a squad of 22 players with an average age of less than 23. Although only one of those players, Jan Palinkas, comes from the club's academy and, sadly, another academy graduate, Sandro Da Costa, who lit up the San Siro in June with his exciting wing play, was signed by Salford City over the summer.

Neil's outlook, and the mood around the club, was considerably more upbeat than this time last year when

there was some uncertainty around the playing budget which resulted in us appealing to supporters to ‘Boost the Budget’ through a crowdfunder which ultimately, and unsurprisingly in the midst of a cost of greed crisis, failed to hit its target by some distance.

It demonstrates that all-important connection between what we’re doing off the pitch to drive revenue from sponsorship, advertising, events and hospitality and what happens on it. It might sound like a tired old cliché when we read that ‘football is the engine that drives everything we do’ in the business plan – but it’s true. This increase in the football budget has not come about through a fabulously wealthy owner pumping tens of thousands of pounds more into their club to ‘buy’ a promotion push but is the carefully planned product of weeks of graft by dozens of staff and volunteers – and by the club’s owners, who outlined our priorities for the club over the next few years in a members’ survey in 2021.

Arguably, the highlight of pre-season came in the penultimate friendly with a 5-0 thrashing of Nuneaton Borough, although the game was also notable for a mass brawl, just before half-time, after a Nuneaton player thumped an FC player and should have been sent off. Adrian Seddon, a former board member and chair and now FC’s volunteer matchday secretary, went to see the referee at half-time and the Nuneaton manager agreed to withdraw the offending player in the second half but refused to voluntarily go down to ten men as he reckoned that FC had played so well in the first half that a depleted team would have ‘no chance’ of getting back into the match. This was a team that had narrowly missed out on promotion to National League North only a few months earlier.

* * *

Ahead of the 2023/24 year, two new non-executives – Bhavna Mistry and Gemma Avery – joined the board and, arguably, they were as important as any new additions to the men's and women's squads. It stemmed from a recognition that, with the club's business plan built on driving commercial revenue, the board lacked commercial expertise, so it had sought to remedy that by seeking to recruit a non-executive director with a strong commercial background. The club's rules, which allow for up to seven board members, permit the board to fill 'casual vacancies' arising from the retirement or removal of board members.

Both Bhavna and Gemma applied and the board decided that they would both make excellent additions as Bhavna has a strong commercial background and was an executive director for a multinational company until shortly before joining FC while Gemma is a specialist in communications and marketing who has previously worked in football-based marketing roles. So they were both offered non-executive roles and joined the board in June, with Bhavna becoming the board lead for commercial activities and Gemma leading on communications and marketing.

* * *

At July's meeting the board learned that a local company, brought in to review the club's usage of gas and electricity, discovered that, unbeknown to anyone at the club, there are solar panels on the roof of our Broadhurst Park ground and it appears that we have been making a significant contribution to the national grid over the last eight years – not to mention Manchester's bid to become a zero carbon city by 2038 – without receiving a penny or using any of

this power for the club's own purposes. It appeared that the solar panels were originally installed to power the club's boilers but this had not happened. Although with all the hot air generated at FC you'd question whether solar panels would be needed at all.

There is a possibility of us being able to use the power generated by the solar panels and thus make a significant saving on our future energy bills but the board and management team were keen to avoid making any assumptions until we know more. We're not quite ready to go full-on Forest Green Rovers just yet.