



Celebrating promotion to the Premier League

AFC Bournemouth

Rags to Riches

AFC Bournemouth's promotion to the Barclays Premier League is one of football's stories of the century. *Sorted* sent Stuart Weir to find how it happened.

Spending a morning at a Premier League club was no chore at all for me. I spent three hours wandering around the Vitality Stadium on a Friday morning. I was connecting with my inner "little boy".

From my arrival at main reception – no officious security guard to be pleaded with – when the receptionist knew I was coming and welcomed me warmly, it was obvious that Bournemouth had made the transition to

Premier League status without losing the character of the club. Being able to wander through the stadium out to the training pitch, where manager Eddie Howe was busily setting out cones, watching training – what better way to spend a sunny morning?

It is a real rags-to-riches story because in 2006 the club had debts of £4 million and was about to be closed down as bankrupt. To get from that position to the Premier League in seven years is nothing short of a miracle. The club has progressed from the third tier of

English football to the Premier League in just three years and without any real star players.

One of Bournemouth's biggest challenges as a Premier League club is their stadium. They have played at Dean Court for over 100 years; due to the sponsorship deal, it is now called Vitality Stadium. However, it is the same ground and holds less than 12,000 people.

Neil Vacher is the club secretary. He started coming to Dean Court with his dad in the 1960s. Prior to becoming club secretary, he has been the match-day announcer, →



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Chairman Andy Rimmer

Marc Pugh scores in Bournemouth's win at West Ham



he ran the club shop, had a spell running the Cherry Hotshots lottery, ran the travel club and stood in as kit man for three months.

Reflecting on the past few years, he said, "The club has changed enormously - real Roy of the Rovers stuff. We could never have foreseen what has happened. When I first came here in a full-time capacity in 2001, we were working from Portakabins while the new stadium was being built. From there we have managed to keep our heads above water - only just, with players and staff not sure they were

going to be paid on a number of occasions. We were playing in League One and Two. But throughout all the time, the prevailing spirit here has been tremendous - from the supporters, staff, players - everybody has always stuck together. Then by chance, in a sense, we have come across a good young manager and a financial backer of the club and the combination of the two has enabled us to go off on this course."

Pete Barry, player liaison officer, has two responsibilities. He does the travel logistics

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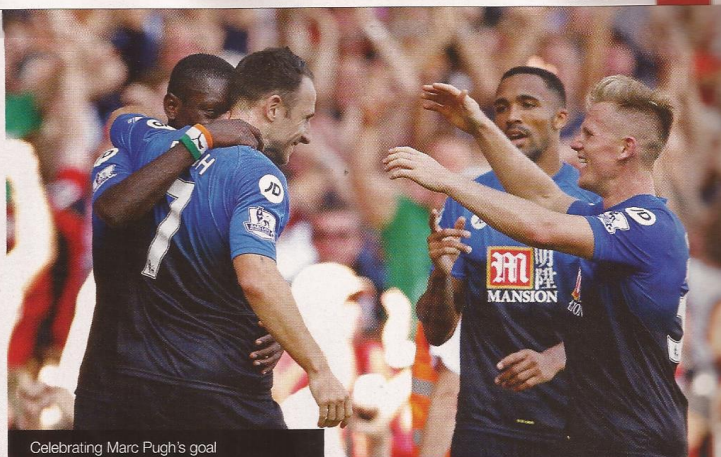
for the away fixtures – League and Cup in the UK and pre-season games abroad. His other responsibility is the welfare of the players in all that that involves – buying and selling houses, flats, cars, etc – career development plans and that sort of thing. Making sure that new players settle as quickly as possible in terms of accommodation, and that the families are looked after is a priority.

Premier League status has added to his workload: “On the player welfare side, there have been massive changes. The demands on players are significantly more and we have to be careful how we manage the players and the pressures that are on them.

“We have had an influx of new players from the UK and abroad [the current Bournemouth squad includes at least nine international players]. Finding them accommodation and dealing with language issues that come up and making sure that that is sorted ... so that they can understand what’s going on and what coaches are saying – that has happened a lot now, something that didn’t happen much in the past.”

I spotted on Pete’s noticeboard “Fly to Norwich” – a far cry from the days when paying the petrol for the team coach might have been a concern. “In those we were flying nowhere. This year – not counting cup games where we don’t know where we’re playing – we will fly eight or nine times.”

Marc Pugh is a typical Bournemouth player. Aged 28 he is now in his sixth season at



Celebrating Marc Pugh’s goal

Bournemouth. His previous clubs included Bury, Luton Town, Hereford United and Shrewsbury Town. Suddenly he finds himself a Premier League player and – the icing on the cake – a Premier League goalscorer. He told me: “The turnaround and transformation of the club has been remarkable. We have a great training ground and all the new facilities ... To see the club progress and to be a part of it has been amazing.

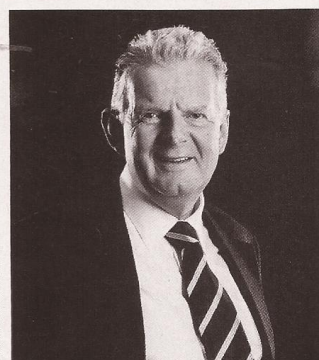
“Every young boy wants to play in the Premiership. From a really young age, I dreamt of playing in the Premier League. My heroes back then were Eric Cantona, Ryan Giggs and all those top players – and now to be mixing with world-class players, the best in the business, is a great way to test yourself. It means the world to me.”

Pugh made it clear that Bournemouth are not stargazers but are determined to surprise a few people. It was relatively early in season when we spoke, but he was really upbeat:

“The experience of going to Premier League clubs has been brilliant, and I think we have proved that we’re not in the division just to make up the numbers. We are holding our own and playing some good football. And I am sure that will take us a long way. It is a positive start to the season and to be mid-table is a great achievement.”

He picked out the 1–0 defeat at Liverpool – when even the Premier League acknowledged that the referee should have disallowed Liverpool’s goal for offside – and what it meant to go to Liverpool, not as underdogs in a cup-tie but on equal terms as a Premier League club. “It is an amazing experience and we held our own pretty well – Anfield is one of the great stadiums in the world and every player wants to play there. The atmosphere at the start of the game was excellent. It is what dreams are made of – a great day; shame about the result.”

A visit to the medical room gave me a stark reminder of how harsh professional sport can be. I met Tyrone Mings, an £8 million summer signing from Ipswich who was injured minutes into his Premier League debut, suffering torn anterior and medial ligaments in his knee. His dream of playing in the Premier League lasted just six minutes before his season ended. →



John Motson on Bournemouth

I expect them to do what a lot of clubs which come up do – that is, start like a house on fire and surprise a few teams, win some home games, even against high-profile opposition. But the question is always whether you can sustain it over the season. They have got an overseas owner but they have not splashed multimillions into the squad in the summer.

Of course, they have to make ground improvements as required by Premier League regulations. The Bournemouth ground only holds 12,000. I think it will be a case of trying to hold on for the season. At the beginning of last season, not many people would have put Bournemouth in the top two, but they surprised everyone.

They have been well coached – Eddie Howe has done an amazing job at Bournemouth. But they will have a lot of players who are adjusting to the Premier League, most of them for the first time in their careers. I think you would be a brave man to say that they will definitely survive in the Premier League but won’t it be fun watching them try.



Stoke's Erik Pieters in action with Bournemouth's Matt Ritchie

Bournemouth's Dan Gosling celebrates



"IT IS A VERY UNUSUAL STORY, REALLY, FOR A CLUB LIKE US TO FIND ITS WAY TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE."

Neil Vacher gave me some further thoughts on achieving the requirements of the Premier League without destroying or changing the club. "It is a very unusual story, really, for a club like us to find its way to the Premier League. But everything about the club has always been homely. The supporters have helped so much in the past and have been very much part of this club. There have always been made to feel welcome and have had access to the players far beyond what most clubs would have given them. And the players have been happy to interact with them. The same group of players has been with us since League One and [they] have seen us go up into the Premiership. That continuity has

certainly helped, and new players joining have bought into ... the ethos that the fans are part of the club. That is something I don't think we will ever forget."

Andy Rimmer has been chaplain of AFC Bournemouth for eight years. He describes his role as a "pastoral and spiritual safety net. I am here to be a support to the whole club, to be a friend – but a friend with the God aspect to my friendship. I meet a few players for Bible study once a week. I go to church with a few players; I have done Alpha courses for players and families. We have an annual club carol service".

His presence is clearly appreciated. Neil Vacher said, "The chaplain has an important

role, without any doubt. In times of stress and difficulty, it is a real help to have a chaplain on hand to deal with any issues that players or staff wish to address." Pete Barry put it like this: "I think one aspect of what Andy brings is the neutralness of where he is coming from. He is not part of the staff in the same way that I am or the manager [is], so players can approach him and talk about things they probably would not do with [us]. And I think that is an essential part of the make-up of the club, that we have that in place." Marc Pugh says, "Since I moved to the club, Andy has been an inspiration to me. He is always smiling. If you're having a down day, he is always there to pick you up."

It has become part of the AFC Bournemouth pre-match ritual that a few people pray together. A few years ago, Andy approached the manager, saying, "A couple of players would like to pray before the game ... Are you OK with that?" The manager was fine with it, and it happens before every home game. Andy told me, "We have three or four players and perhaps one or two coaching staff. I do a two-minute talk and we pray in a huddle. It is over in five minutes. I never pray about the result, but that there'll be no injuries, and acknowledge our God-given talents".

Marc Pugh values these get-togethers. "We have a general chit-chat. He will read something from the Bible that speaks out regarding the week and we have a little prayer together, being thankful for everything we have got. It relaxes you as you look forward to the game."

In a season when Manchester United have spent in excess of £50 million on a teenager and Manchester City and Chelsea continue to buy new players when they already have an enormous squad, it is good to see a club run on traditional values, to whom fans are important, not only reaching the Premier League but looking at home. ■