

Fans Forum, Tuesday 29th January 2019, 18:00.

Hartlepool United Football Club

Present: Mark Maguire, John Pearson, Pauline Mcsweenie, Neil Appleyard, Kevin Mcelhone, Richard Ward

Background:

This was the first meeting of the FF since early October and as such MM gave a detailed summary of events at the club during this period.

The club's management believed Matthew Bates (MB) had earned the right to be manager following his appointment on the strength of his results as caretaker manager. A poor run of results coincided with a planned football meeting and it was at that meeting that unfortunately the board felt they had to make a decision to make a change following detailed conversations with (MB) about the way forward.

Craig Hignett (CH) came in on a temporary basis as cover.

PMc asked whether the incident on board the team coach en route to Dover was a factor in MB leaving the club, and while MM admitted that there were things we would have done differently around the incident (as discussed on the HUFC Podcast) this was not a factor in the decision.

At that time, and despite ambitions to coach and manage in future, CH felt he was at the club to protect the interests of Mr Singh and he was best served in his existing role rather than as manager. As such the club conducted a recruitment process, interviewing a shortlist of four candidates. While the club had initially favoured the idea of an up and coming manager, at interview Richard Money (RM) was the stand out candidate, having significant experience at this level, a no-nonsense individual who it was believed could really make a difference. MM spoke with several of RM's previous clubs prior to the appointment, receiving positive feedback and therefore the appointment was made in good faith.

We didn't receive the impact or "bounce" we had hoped for, and it was clear that RM was taking some time to adjust based on the players he had available and the formations he would have ideally like to play. RM had concerns over the fitness levels of the squad, he tried several players and formations, but things did not seem to gel. The board felt it was important to not make any kneejerk reactions and RS, MM, CH and RM had many honest discussions about the need for short term results vs. longer term restructuring. RS gave approval for bringing in support straight away which led to the signing of Raynes (with whom MM has previously worked), Molyneux and Kabamaba.

Post Harrogate RM, CH, MM met with RS. RM acknowledged that there was a significant amount of work to be done at the club and that the squad we had was not suited to his management style. He believed it would be best for CH to focus the short term, on the pitch performances but that he had much to offer behind the scenes. MM noted that it was RM's decision alone to have CH in the dugout.

Based on those discussions it was agreed that CH would take over as manager. While there was some reticence from CH, he felt that given the huge support and trust of RS and MM that this was an opportunity he should grasp. MM backs CH to be a success and commented that CH was committed, willing to learn, and keen to deliver.

RM was comfortable with this plan and so HUFC went public with the announcement. RM introduced the club to consultants who were to assist with important aspects at HUFC which required changing (including the sports science aspect and the academy), and started out in the role with vigour, speaking to staff at the club and setting in place plans for improvements. There was considerable backlash in the media and on social media which appeared to rattle RM and on reflection personally and in discussions with MM it became clear to both parties that the reshuffle was not going to work. There was an incident with RM and some fans in a restaurant which compounded the situation and following meetings with MM RM offered to leave with immediate effect and without any further payment. MM stressed that while it was disappointing how the process had worked out, RM did provide good input and ideas to implement within the club. He identified the need for improved standards at the training ground, he recognised the areas of sports science that needed improving, linked MM to experts who can help the restructure of HUFC in several ways and recognised there were some challenges to address. Due to the continued cost cutting and restructuring at the club it is unlikely that a replacement full time director of football will be recruited.

The Academy:

The existing academy is an EFL affiliated category 3, EPPP academy that has received significant funding from the EFL and is expensive to run. Following our relegation this EFL grant funding is phased out, and while RS committed to plug a £180k funding gap for the current season to buy the time to review the options available, the parachute payments cease entirely next season and so a complete overhaul is required to move to a cost neutral model. Moving away from the EPPP model does allow for the academy to focus more on players who are a better fit for our level, however, it limits the ability of the club to bind youngsters contractually. MM has had meetings with the FA and has submitted a formal request to them to create a system where non-league academies are able to put contracts in place to protect their investments. This letter was co-signed by 47 clubs in the three National Leagues and is being reviewed by FA.

Retail and commercial:

The retail arm of HUFC is going well, with a turnover of £140k so far this season and several clubs are in contact with MM looking to replicate some of the new product offerings from the club shop. There is still a plan to move the shop onto Clarence Road but this capital project, along with a range of other capital projects have taken a back seat to other more pressing issues. Ian Scobie is now working one day a week with MM and he will focus on these areas with the target completion by the start of the 19/20 season latest.

MM recognised that regrouping of and improvement in the catering facilities, within the bars, hospitality and the food outlets is still required, and the club are looking to recruit a dedicated person to oversee all these operations. MM is passionate about this as he has experience in this area and appreciates the value that a successful operation can bring. There is still work required to facilitate disabled access to the hospitality areas and once this is completed it will also help to encourage through the week bookings of this area.

Financials:

JP asked whether RS was still fired up after a tough first year in charged and MM said he absolutely was. It is important that progress on and off the pitch continues but that he has committed to the funding required in the business plan. RW acknowledged the podcast as a useful tool to provide fans information but that it would inevitably raise questions based on what was discussed. He raised a concern about RS's comment that all the money he was prepared to inject was already in, and that MM had said the £250k loss of parachute payment next season would additionally need to come from RS. How did this funding compare to the target of a sustainable, restructured business model? MM stated that RS's initial funding was committed as expected this season, admittedly earlier than hoped because of various legacy issues, and it was expected that the club will make a loss next season. RS has, however, committed to the funding and the budget plan.

The budget this season was based on an expected shortfall which is likely to be exceeded but within a range that the Chairman expected. MM highlighted that this season the club is carrying significant in excess player wages, the £180k additional academy funding, plus the general academy spend, all of which will be different next season and will help to off-set the current losses and additional loss in parachute payment. The legacy of previous ownership will have been cleared and the board is working towards a plan for a sustainable business model and while the target remains to get back to the EFL at the soonest opportunity, the budget is planned on a National League position basis.

There is now an accountant working inside the club which helps the budget management but also puts emphasis on all departments to become more 'profit/loss savvy'.

General Business:

JP asked what input Jeff Stelling had in decisions made by the club. MM said that he was not involved on a day to day basis but that major decisions were communicated to him and board minutes etc always shared with him. JS is a shareholder in Clarence 18 but retains his presidency rather than being a director on the board.

PMc asked what is the point of the Fans Forum if it didn't deliver as was agreed at the initial meeting. The idea was to have monthly meetings and for the meetings to be accompanied by minutes to serve the purpose. MM accepted responsibility for the lack of the meetings and minutes, having been pushed by JP for several weeks to arrange the next meeting. He appreciates that the FF won't please everyone but that he felt it was an important part of fan engagement and committed to ensure the meetings were scheduled and that minutes were taken. RW asked that suitable notice was provided before each meeting so that those who attend can consult with their relevant organisations and prepare discussion topics in advance which was agreed.

JP asked about players coming and going. MM said that it's a fluid situation with players likely needing to leave before more come in and that he expected movement within the next 48 hours for one player. Luca Murphy's reported move to Fulham is not going ahead but he has been offered a contract by HUFC.

KMc asked when the next shareholder meeting is to take place. MM said imminently and the required local press notification is due to go out shortly.

KMc asked if there was any way the club could respond to the negativity on social media which had surrounded all the recent events. MM was clear that the only way for HUFC to overcome the negativity is by winning matches on the pitch. It was felt that getting players more involved with

fans was a way to bring a 'feel good factor', with PMc citing the recent visit by Carl Magnay to the HUSA Prize draw as a good example of engagement.

RW said HUST had been approached by a representative of the Football Supporters Federation, Fans for Diversity team who work with fans of football clubs and had offered to work with fans on increasing diversity of fans at HUFC but also to carry out a fans survey on their opinions of the club, providing the generated data to HUFC's management. While this is perhaps more in the remit of HUSA and HUDSA the fans forum provided an opportunity for a combined effort, if MM would value receiving the data. NA had also had discussions with the same contact. MM said that there would be value in such an offer, however, the timing of such a survey would be most suitable later in the year to allow the catering/hospitality recruit to be in place.