

‘And Dobbo’s number two...’

Jeremy Spolander caught up with Assistant Manager and former academy boss Richard Dobson after the Portsmouth home game to talk everything from timewasting, to why Sam Allardyce’s physio thinks he’s a raccoon.

How did you see today’s game?

We played some really good stuff and we certainly had them under plenty of pressure in the second half. We’ve been punished for a lot for individual mistakes over the last few weeks - it hasn’t been like we’ve been out of sight in any of the games. One-Nil is sometimes the best result in football if you can keep it clean and nick a winner.

Are the players still upbeat and together?

The spirit is brilliant. Last time around in this division there was a sense of inevitability about relegation, you could feel the players at times didn’t believe. There is more a sense of anger here that it’s got to this stage and there’s a real togetherness. I was really encouraged by the attitude. We might not have the most talented players in this division as there are a lot of very good players at other clubs, but we work with hard-working, honest players and I think there’s enough spirit and fight in them to get us over the line.

A number of players left in January, with some youngsters coming in. How did that go and how do you go about attracting players?

We were desperate to bring Fred back. He was a player that we felt was above this level and could pick a lock for us. We were waiting on Millwall signing someone and it didn’t happen. We also managed to balance the budget and Gaz has always been very good at that with the club. He’s never pushed to get a little bit more or gone beyond his budget. Giving young players their first go can be tough, with Under-23 football being a different animal to the rough and tumble of the Football League. Sometimes you make a call and the club says “This is what it’s going to cost” and we have to say “We can’t do that, we’re nowhere near”. Sometimes the key is them getting the player experience. With Luke Bolton, Manchester City liked what we’ve done with young players in recent seasons, so a reputation as developers can stand you in good stead.

How much thought goes into the mental side of developing players?

I’m quite proud to say we were standard bearers in what was happening in psychology in football. Everybody had a sports scientist but few had a psychologist. We always talk about the mental side of the game being the reason players either succeed or fail. I was one of twenty-five people to complete the FA’s first psychology diploma and we worked with them on our approach. We had six psychologists working within the academy and every player had private access to them. They also worked with the coaching staff and parents. There’s the mental health side of it as well and we have to look after the players in an environment that allows them to be themselves and isn’t too punishing when mistakes are made.

Some clubs can be absolute horror shows for a player to be involved with and the way that they're treated by some management staff in my opinion is an absolute disgrace. Players are people at the end of the day and in no other walk of life would you be allowed to shout and scream at them. It's always a difficult side of the game having to release a player that you actually really like and it's tough to say "I'm sorry, but this isn't going to work for you". One thing that I've always been conscious of is that I'm always on the phone if ever they need me and that goes if they pick up the phone in ten years time. I'm still there.

Were there some players you were glad to see the back of?

There's not many like that because we create the culture and we've had continuity for a long period of time. The poor attitudes were weeded out a long time ago. That's also a testament to the homework we do on players before they come in and the phone calls we make about attitude, to make sure that they fit our culture in the right way. It's okay to smile, it's okay to be yourself and I think that's why people like Jason McCarthy for example want to come back.

You must take immense pride in the development of the likes of Harris, Phillips, Ibe, Hause and Ingram, who have gone on to a higher level?

I've always said to them that what they do in their career will define how far they go, so I'm not one of those coaches that goes around saying "Well I developed him and him". It's the boys' endeavour to get somewhere, my job is to facilitate that and to help them in any way I can. I'm immensely proud of them. I can't lie, I'm always gutted when we sell, because it's always decent players. In the summer we lost Luke O'Nein. You work with a lad like him for a couple of years, he works ever so hard in training and you work to try and refine his game. When you see the progress in him you get excited and then he's gone and you have to start from scratch. I'm always disappointed, but by the same token I'm pleased and if people have earned the right to go on to bigger and better things, I would never stand in their way. Jordon Ibe lived in a tower block in South London. His mum is a fantastic lady, I really liked her. She's secure now because of Jordon's move and that's a hell of a job for a young man. I keep in contact with a lot of them and talk to them about what they're doing at other clubs and how life's going.

You originally stepped up to help out Gary Waddock and he went on to be replaced by Gareth. How did things change?

First of all, I love Gary Waddock. He is the nicest guy in football and an honest human being. I enjoyed working with Gary because you always knew that he was watching your back and whilst he is a far more reserved character than Gaz he's got some wonderful qualities. Gaz is a very different character. He's someone that the fans can relate to because he's very outward in showing his emotions and his charisma and people can connect with him easily. Players see it when he takes a team talk, it's done not just with words, but with emotion and with gusto and that's his real strength. Gaz was new and learning the ropes very quickly, so there weren't wholesale changes in terms of what we did with training. I think it was a gentle evolution. Later, we worked with ProZone and looked at all the stats in League Two and what brings success and pinpointed a number of key points that would provide success in League Two; physical, mental technical, tactical and social. They defined everything that we did, from our training program to our recruitment program.

How have you coped with the change to working with senior players?

I see myself as a developer of people, so my attitude to that hasn't changed regardless of the age group. When Gary Doherty was here, or the likes of Bloomfield, Tyson and Bayo, they might be coming to the end of their careers, but I still believe there's something that I can offer to make them better and we must always strive to do that. People like Blooms are like a sponge and want to learn, so it makes your job easy. The only difference now is its become speed development, because we haven't got two years. Within three months, they've got to be first team ready, otherwise they'll drain our resources. We're looking for people that we know we can work with quickly and have certain things in the locker.

What's your opinion on Wycombe's perceived gamesmanship and reliance on Bayo?

When I took the youth team I was a purist, so to get tarred with the brush of timewasting and all the talk about the dark arts is something that riles me a little bit. We've never as a coaching staff actively encouraged the boys to waste time. It happens within games and at times when they need a rest, but we have spoken over the last few years about momentum in sport as a psychological trait that we're quite big on and we've looked at areas where momentum can swing and the right time to play. Bayo is a great character, he doesn't get anywhere near the amount of fouls that he should. There's a very one-sided bias in terms of fouls for and against him, just because he's strong. We worked really hard on trying to nullify him when he was at AFC Wimbledon, on the way that he played, the areas he likes to get into, when he fatigues and how we could frustrate him. When he became available we remembered how much work we did and wondered 'are people always going to put the same in?'. If they don't, then he becomes a very effective footballer. If they do, we create space for others. He epitomizes the ethos that we want at the club. He's a wonderful person in terms of sharing his time with supporters and particularly with kids.

Without getting into politics, how welcome would extra investment be?

I think in some respects we have played at being a Football League club for a little bit too long. I said to Andrew Howard at the end of last season when we got promoted, 'use this as an opportunity to improve the infrastructure of the club, because if we shell out all available money on players, we could still very realistically be in a relegation battle at the end of the season and then be exactly where we were a season before'. We had a part-time analyst working with us through the season and we've made him full time - he's been a godsend - and Cian O'Doherty has got help on the physio side of things. When he was on his own and we got injuries and had only one person to treat them, that became really tough.

Do you have ambitions to manage?

I've always been interested in management and I always wanted to make sure that I hit every stepping stone that there was in terms of learning to get there. I wanted to work with the youngest age groups and wanted to work right the way through all the age groups, because you learn key skills. This is my club now, having spent eleven to twelve years here and you invest so much into one football club that it would be a real wrench to leave, especially now I've got two kids that are Wycombe fans. We live down in the New Forest and they're the only kids running around in Wycombe shirts down that way. I love working with Gaz, we get on really well.

Andrew Howard used to say that we are Yin and Yang, two very different personalities, but we work well together. I don't know what the future holds, I think I've got a decent CV in my own right and I'd like to think that one day that CV would be good enough to earn me a job without having to rely on other people in the game.



• 'Dobbo' receiving the Outstanding Contribution Award from Anthony Stewart in 2017.

How do you manage manage the work/life balance?

I try and get to the training ground early, around seven in the morning, and get my work done during that quiet period when there's no-one else about and then when training is done I get back home and see the kids. I don't want to be that person that looks back and says 'I missed my kids growing up because of football'. We give a hundred percent for the football club, but there's a time where I've got to be at home and be dad and enjoy watching the kids play. But you still can't get away from football, at my son's games the parents all want to know what happened on Saturday. I don't spend a great deal of time in front of the television, but with my boys now we'll sit together and watch football. We're only a couple of miles from the beach and we walk along the beach and they're special moments, when you see the kids happy and smiling. For me, they're wonderful moments.

How do you like your name-check in the fans song?

Its nice that they recognise the work that I've done here over that period of time. I was at the Official Wycombe Wanderers Supporters Association dinner last night, it's nice to share a little bit of time on the table with these people, away from the manic environment of a Saturday.

Finally, just to keep the Editor happy: What is your spirit animal?

We did this years ago on a course with Sam Allardyce's psychologist from Bolton. We had to name three animals; One was what you think you are, one was what you want to be perceived as and the third one was what you actually are. I think I was a raccoon because they are adaptable, they survive and are intelligent.

Many thanks to Dobbo and to Matt Cecil for his help in arranging the interview. Dobbo was extremely generous with his time, so we have had to edit and paraphrase. If you'd like to hear more, you can listen to the full, unedited 40-minute interview on Soundcloud by typing in the shortcode: <https://bit.ly/2G5p3y4>.