



Wycombe's Matt Bloomfield retires: 'I forget simple words – it scares me'



Matt Bloomfield, pictured at Wycombe's training ground. 'As footballers, we don't take it seriously,' he says of brain injuries and concussions. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

A freak concussion – by his estimation a fifth in four years – has ended the Wycombe stalwart's career and he wants to help others

When Matt Bloomfield staggered off the pitch at Exeter last August he did not know it would be his final game as a professional footballer. Nor did the 191 visiting [Wycombe](#) supporters realise a freak blow to the head and concussion would abruptly end a proud playing career after 558 appearances – all but one for their club.

"I was trying to walk to the tunnel and I kept veering right, towards the away fans, when I was trying to head straight," Bloomfield recalls. "It is quite a narrow tunnel at Exeter and I was bouncing off the walls to get to the changing room. I was sat in the dressing room and the [club] doctor said I was very agitated and irritable. I couldn't deal with everything. It all unravelled that evening."

He got home to Felixstowe just as his daughters, Rosie, four, and Mollie, six, were rising. By then Bloomfield had been warned by the club doctor, Bob Sangar, that he might not return to the field. "It affected my mood, it affected my energy levels and I struggled to see the light in the everyday activities that I usually love doing with my girls," he says.

"Things that I usually jumped at doing with them felt like a bit of an effort. They read their stories to me at night and I couldn't focus on what they were telling me. Sitting with them and them giving me a cuddle with their stories is usually a special time, so I knew I wasn't right. I thought that it would go within a day or two and a week later I was still feeling the same. I knew it was more serious than some of the other concussions."

Bloomfield is not the sort to court the limelight but feels “a bit bad” that his parents, Jackie and Steve, and his grandparents were not able to watch him one last time. For Bloomfield, the Carabao Cup first-round tie at Exeter was a chance to impress.

“I’m not sure I had ever been as focused or determined to prove my point. As you get older, everybody keeps telling you that your days are numbered and I’ve spent the last seven years, since turning 30, proving them wrong and that I can keep going. I was thinking: ‘If I play well and we win tonight, I’m going to show the manager that I deserve to be playing at Cheltenham [in League One] on the Saturday.’ I had set myself up that it was going to be the night I would [show I could] play this season.”

It was not to be. After several visits to doctors and specialists, Bloomfield retired on medical advice. No more “going to war at five to three”. The written confirmation arrived a couple of weeks ago. “I re-read it a few times and then it was just that realisation. I told everyone I was fine and that if this was it, then I’m fine with it but actually dealing with it in my head, knowing I was never going to pull on a Wycombe Wanderers shirt again, never wear my No 10 again and never going to play football again ... that was quite a big thing to deal with.”

It is about 1pm at Wycombe’s training base and Bloomfield, who has taken on coaching duties, carries two bags of balls inside before sitting to talk. Emotions are raw but there are a couple of obvious highlights: captaining Wycombe to promotion to the Championship at Wembley and José Mourinho shaking his hand as he left the pitch in his testimonial game against Chelsea in 2014. Mourinho had another word with Bloomfield when his Tottenham team visited Wycombe in the FA Cup last year. “He did a kind of double take: ‘Wow, you’re still going! How old are you now?’” he says, laughing. “He is perceived to be so cold but my dealings with him have always been fantastic.”

Bloomfield estimates he has suffered about five concussions in the past four years. The last came not from a sickening clash but a teammate playing a quick free-kick on halfway, which smacked him on the back of the head. The process that followed was not so simple, which is why he is determined to raise education around brain injuries and concussions in the game. He is keen to assist the Professional Footballers’ Association, wants to raise funds for former players living with dementia and for research, and would change the way players with a suspected concussion are assessed.

“I’ve been fairly vocal in my dealings with the PFA,” he says. “I believe that the player should be taken away to a sterile environment – a physio or doctor’s room – and be assessed properly under bright lights rather than by the side of the pitch in the moment. Even if we’re saying the referee is not going to put any pressure on the physios or the doctors, you’ve still got a crowd, a clock ticking, a score on the scoreboard and players itching to get on with the game.

“As footballers, we don’t take it seriously. I know I didn’t. About 14 or 15 years ago I remember being knocked out on a Saturday and I played on the Tuesday. I’m lucky we’ve got the protocols that are in place now. Whenever I’ve had an injury in the past, it’s been, ‘I’m fine, I’m going to carry on’ because as sportspeople we’re geared towards blocking out pain. ‘I’ve got a performance to put on, we need to get three points.’ My whole life has been around performing on Saturday or Tuesday because that’s how I earn new contracts, pay the mortgage and earn my win bonuses.”

The lasting extent of his latest concussion became clear a month later on a trip to Peppa Pig World. “I went on the teacups with my youngest and I was getting dizzy. I was thinking: ‘This isn’t right; I’ve been on the teacups with them a million times.’” The incident also affected his vestibular system and has left him nervous when balls are flying at training. “I get really jumpy. I left school in July 2000 and for 21 and a half years I’ve been on training grounds five days a week and never given it a second’s thought, whereas now every time there are balls around and about I’m quite on guard, which is an ongoing issue that will hopefully subside.”

His memory has also been affected. “I forget simple words. There are definitely things I have noticed over the last couple of months and the long-term implications scare me, of course they

do. My brain health is fine in terms of the MRI scanning ... but these things can develop over time. It scares me, 100% it scares me.”

There have been difficult conversations – including explaining to his daughters why “daddy doesn’t play on the pitch any more and just stands on the side shouting” – but this is not a sob story. Bloomfield, as his wife, Madeleine, was quick to remind him, knows he is lucky to have had so long in the game and he is grateful for the support of the manager, Gareth Ainsworth, and the owner, Rob Couhig.

Bloomfield spends weekends clipping up game footage to present analysis to the squad on a Monday. “I don’t want to be that person in life who is always harping back to his past, looking backwards and feeling sorry for himself. I still have a lot of life to live and I want to be the best coach – and maybe manager – that I can be.”

He is enjoying some of the things he stayed clear of over the years. “I say yes to a lot more treats,” he says, smiling. “In the coaches’ office after a game, if we’ve won and they’re having a beer, I’ll join them, which is alien to me. I actually took great pleasure in saying ‘no’ to drinks at parties, in getting to bed at the right time, drinking water and being the fittest I could possibly be. To not *have* to attain to those standards has been a reverse ... it has been quite tough.”

Such is Bloomfield’s makeup, he still gets into training for 7.30am to do a gym session and, after, will often go for a run. “I see this as a new beginning,” he says. “I need to try and use it as a positive. I can’t sit back and say: ‘This is what ended my career, the ball on the back of the head, poor me.’ I want to help others.”