

## **The class of 92 become teachers by Stuart Fuller**

**Theballisround.co.uk**

We hear stories every few weeks of ordinary people having their lives transformed by a huge win on the lottery. There is even a (trash) TV show devoted to the rags to riches stories from across the world. In the world of football we are naturally cynical of stories of clubs, often on the brink of extinction being rescued like damsels in distress by a knight in shining armour. Rarely do these stories end in a fairy tale ending as we have seen recently with Salisbury City.

At the top of the game in England, we have the obscene money being invested in clubs like Chelsea and Manchester City. Foreign ownership in English clubs is at an all-time high. But what do these millionaires (or billionaires in many cases) hope to achieve? Only four teams each season can qualify for the European gravy train, the Champions League, where the serious money can be made. So why would someone agree to invest the GDP of a small African country into a football club when essentially all you are doing is funding the lavish lifestyle of a handful of mercenary players.

Those of us who have been along for the full rollercoaster ride at The Dripping Pan will know the feeling of elation, followed by nail-biting depression and finally relative stability that fan ownership has brought us. Whilst we are not a club that will ever put money in front of our long-term future, we are now about to start building for the future of the club and community through a series of funded infrastructure projects.

So what should we make of the news that five millionaires have invested in a Non-League club? Raised eyebrows I'd assume. Our scepticism immediately says "what's in it for them?" but if the five were all locals, knowledgeable about football and have a noble motive? Welcome to the story of Salford City.

To me, the news that ex-Manchester United stars Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, Phil and Gary Neville and Nicky Butt had clubbed together to buy Northern Premier League One North side Salford City was one of the most significant of the 2013/14 season. All five were very public about their reasons for investing in the club.

"Everyone knows how important Salford is to me, so this is an exciting acquisition that is right at the heart of what we all believe in. We want to engage the football community, use our football experience and knowledge to aspire and nurture young talent and being able to do that in Salford makes it even more exciting." Commented Giggs on the announcement of the deal. Ironically, Giggs's brother Rhodri actually managed the club briefly a few years ago.

Phil Neville added: "It is important to safeguard the hard work that is done in the lower leagues and it is going to be exciting to be able to feed our experience into the young players."

Gary Neville said: "I had my first trial for Manchester United in Salford at age 11 and I will never forget how important that was to me. Salford City FC to me represents those early years, the commitment, hunger, enthusiasm, desire and spirit of football and I am very excited about this venture."

None of the group plan to make any radical changes. Whilst the five have now taken control of the Ammies, the current committee, headed by Chairman Karen Baird will continue in the day to day management of the club.

'It is an exciting time for Salford City FC and I believe there are many more great achievements to come for the club. Without a doubt this deal will result in a very bright future ahead and is a great advert for Non-League football. The club are in full support of the group and believe it to be a very positive move both for Salford City FC and the City of Salford itself' quoted Baird.

Scholes, Giggs and Gary Neville took in the club's first pre-season friendly in the first week of July, away to Daisy Hill in the Manchester suburbs. In a few weeks they will be back at Salford's Moor Lane ground where they will line up alongside some of the other ex-Manchester United players...oh, and Robbie Savage in a pre-season game that should be a huge pay day for the club.

So why was this news so important for Non-League football? This was one of the first genuine signs of people relating to the professional game realising the importance of the Non-League game and investing in it without any strings attached. The five do not need any further publicity – in fact Giggs will rarely see a game now that he is assistant to Manchester United's new manager Louis Van Gaal. They genuinely believe that they can build something sustainable for the future. By investing in the infrastructure of the club they may one day find the next Scholes, Giggs or Neville and be able to sell them on. For a non-league club that is like winning the lottery.

The connections the five have within the game will ensure that the name Salford City will always be in the forefront of the media. The club still have a significant way to go to reach the promised land of the Football League – four promotions to be precise and then there is the matter of building a supporters base. Last season they averaged just 139 and whilst the new arrivals will put a few more on the gate, only progress up the leagues will drive up attendances. The club are located just five miles from Old Trafford, the Etihad and probably more importantly, Moston where the new FC United community stadium is due to open in a few weeks, so whilst they are in a rich catchment area of football fans, they will need to compete for every pound of disposable football fans income.

Only time will tell how actively involved the five will be. One thing is for sure is on the whole none of them have ever gone out of their way to court publicity or be known for anything other than giving 100% to their footballing careers (yes, I know about the other side of Ryan Giggs!). Their intentions appear to be completely honourable and who knows what impact their involvement may have on others.