

## The slings and arrows of outrageous Non-League fortunes

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As soon as the final ball of the season has been kicked in the professional game, the players and managers disappear off into the sun (that is unless you play for Chelsea, Manchester City or Spurs and have to fly to the other side of the world to play a pointless friendly), leaving the running of the club in the hands of the groundsmen, ticket office staff and commercial department. Sometime near the start of that pre-season period all Non-League boards will sit down, set a budget and perhaps even be as bold to set some objectives for the season ahead. Outwardly fans may hear words such as "consolidation" "on-field progress" or even if they are brutally honest, "survival". Inwardly you may not be surprised to hear that clubs are much more bullish. They look at clubs who punched above their weight in the previous season and say "why can't we do that? We spend more money than them!", so more money is put into the squad and the manager is given often unrealistic objectives.

What then happens depends on the attitude and experience. Some boards will say let's out-spend everyone else and push for promotion again, whilst others may cut the budget to something more realistic and take a risk that it will just be enough to avoid relegation. The danger of the former strategy is that it's like building a skyscraper on shifting sand. Undoubtedly the cash has to come from an external source and there comes a point when that "structure" becomes unstable and the fragile foundations are removed. The Non-Leagues are littered with the bones of such follies yet there are still clubs and individuals who think they can change the age-old model and spend their way to the Promised Land of the Football League. Look away now if you are a fan of a club who is currently high on the euphoria of a speeding train up the divisions. This model does not work and in 99% of cases will end at best in tears and financial sanctions that would make your average Greek squirm, at worst without a club to support every Saturday.

When serving as Mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani came up with the phrase "hope is not a strategy". We all know that Rudy has never managed in the Non-Leagues because Hope is certainly the key part of every club's strategy. We hope that key players don't get injured, we hope that our young up and coming manager is not poached by a bigger rival, we hope that our floodlights don't fail during a game, we hope that our boiler doesn't stop working, we hope that we don't have a bad winter that stops us playing home (and thus our main revenue generating activity). Hope is certainly the cornerstone of every Non-League club's strategy.

Most Non-League grounds are held together with Duct tape and Superglue. Rustic, charming, quaint are all words used to describe some grounds. They aren't by design, trust me. They are through necessity. Ground improvements are carried out in almost all instances on the pain of death. Ask a Non-League fan whether we should spend £5k on a new toilet or on a centre-forward who may just do what he is paid to do? We can all venture into the dark abyss, close our eyes and hold our noses, yet none of us (honestly) can score 15 goals a season. So hope once again is the cornerstone of the strategy. Hope that nothing goes wrong.

Changes in the commercial relationships mean that players and managers rarely talk to each other outside of a training ground. "My agent will talk to your advisor" is now more common than "I will give you a bell" in a relationship between the two. Deals are done, often as we are led to believe by

managers who are normally on their way to the exit, by overbearing owners and new-fangled Directors of Football.

If only that was the case in the Non-League game. At step 3 of the Non-League pyramid few players are contracted to a club, which means that if someone else likes the look of your centre-forward, they can put in a "7 day approach" which basically means "I have a week to try and convince X that he only deserves an extra tenner a week to play for us even though we are 50 miles away". However, a player can choose to leave at any point without giving his club any reason. Likewise, a club can dump a player without any notice too. The dilemma for Non-League clubs is who they offer a contract to. The contract, normally fixed for a year, guarantee a weekly wage but also mean that if a club comes along and wants that player, they will have to essentially pay a transfer fee. Likewise, if a player is injured or the club wants shot of him, they will have to pay the remaining term of his contract. You hear horror stories of players put on significant-sized contracts who then injure themselves in pre-season training, leaving the clubs massively out of pocket and also having to find a replacement. These players may feel that "football owes them" but in truth they can end up crippling a club.

Some players will have already sorted their clubs before the end of the season. A nod and a wink is often good enough, although more cash is obviously preferable. Players want to feel that every year they appreciate in value. The truth is that the cold-hard economics of Non-League football is that the club's cost base rises more than any revenue opportunities. It costs more to repair the pitch, more to maintain the floodlights, more to repair the fences, yet less people are coming through the gates. Obviously, for clubs who have a Sugar-Daddy who is willing to pump in funds unconditionally, that isn't a problem, although they also cause ripples across the whole Non-League pond.

Let's say club X is taken over by Billy Big wallet. Billy wants promotion at all costs and employs an experienced manager to build a championship winning squad. With few players on contracts in the league he will lure them to his club X with ridiculous weekly wages. Some of these players will never get a game and one day will have a shock when they are off-loaded from their £1,000 a week wage only to find that the rest of the league can pay £150 a week. Likewise, average players in the league will use club X's wage structure as their negotiating tool with their existing club. As history has proved time and time again, club X's ambitious plan will more than likely end in a broken dream, the casualties being the fans.

So come the end of the season clubs have to start to think about their retained players and their wish list. The board will tell the manager his budget, which will depend on the ambitions for the coming season (for a translation guide to Non-League club ambitions read Tale 4). The manager will then normally shake his head, say "it's going to be tough to achieve that on this budget" before getting on the phone and starting to try to retain the players he wants. Some will try and play hardball, but most will see the light. Within a day or two you will have a core of a squad. Of course, without giving them a contract they could agree today and come pre-season be already playing elsewhere. As we have said before, there is little loyalty in football these days, especially on the Non-League pitches.

Then comes the job of filling the rest of your squad. There is a great scene from the film Money Ball where Brad Pitt plays the legendary General Manager of the Oakland A's baseball team. He is sitting in a room filled with his scouts as they try and discuss how to replace three world-class players with the smallest budget in the league. That's what the squad planning session is like. Well, sort of.

The manager and his staff will spend hours going through every team we played working out if there was anyone they could bring in, cursing their budget for the next season and of course putting together a plan as to what to offer to who and when. It's all a game of cat and mouse. You offer £150, they want £200. They try and get £200 down the road, but they will only offer £140. So they come back and ask for £160. You offer £150 and they accept. Then you move onto the next one. Slowly but surely a squad takes shape, although you never know what pre-season will throw your way that you have to legislate for.

Clubs don't have the mountain of stats that Jonah Hill's character in the film, Peter Brand, has. We have to go by our collective memories of what our opposition played like and who was the stand out players. Sometimes even that is hard - our bible is Football Web Pages yet if an opposing team upload the wrong team list, or get two players numbers the wrong way round we could end up buying a donkey when we wanted the dogs bollocks. The whole process can eventually be completely meaningless. We could end up retaining none of the players we want to and then have to re-assess our requirements for each and every role.

You can only gauge success when the season has ended in a year's time. Did we get it right can be answered by the final league position, the cup runs and what the squad (and the budget!) looks like compared to when we started the season. Sometimes you win, most of the time you don't. But that's what makes the game so addictive - the endless search to get all the ingredients together at the right time for the right money.