

## What is Non-League Football?

A decade ago this would have been a relatively easy question to answer but today the lines are now so blurred perhaps it is time we dropped the phrase all together. Non-League used to refer to any team that was not part of the Football League but with the creation of the Premier League in 1992, the situation started to change.

It would have been unheard of to find a full-time side below the Football League but today, certainly at Step 5 or National League, most sides will be full-time and thus classed as professional players. So, another loose definition of the “amateur game” is out of date. In fact, there are teams at Step 6 who are now full-time, such has the game changed.

What brought this question to a head was the “debate” over Social Media last week between Gary Neville, one of the co-owners of Salford City and Accrington Stanley’s Chairman, Andy Holt, over the signing of Aberdeen’s Adam Rooney by Neville’s club.

Salford City’s rise through the leagues has been impressive – just over a decade ago they were playing in the North-West Counties League (Step 9). Then came the “Class of ‘92” and their billionaire friend, Peter Lim, and invested heavily into the squad and the infrastructure and the club hasn’t looked back, taking their place in the National League this season for the first time. There’s nothing new in a club getting significant investment and rising through the leagues, although in most cases it does end in tears. I’m not sure the risks of the owners walking away is anywhere near as high at Salford City, but it has caused some bitterness and rivalry from other clubs.

Salford’s signing of Rooney has certainly set a new bar though for the “Non-League” game. The Irishman swapped the promise of Europa League football with Aberdeen for the chance to play in the FA Trophy with Salford City, oh and the small matter of a reputed £4,000 per week – or in Lewes FC speak, 150% of our weekly playing budget.

Ah yes, the playing budget. Rooney’s transfer set up a war of words between Neville and Holt, with the Accrington Stanley chairman happy to reveal his annual playing budget, but when pushed, Neville wouldn’t reveal the Salford City one, saying “You think I’m going to disclose my wages on here?” (Twitter). Why not? Why can’t clubs all be transparent with their wages?

Last season we saw significant amounts of “investment” at Step 7, with Billericay Town signing players such as Jamie O’Hara, Jermaine Pennant and Paul Konchesky. Whilst the owner/manager (until he sacked himself, then re-appointed himself) claimed his wage bill was nothing like the amounts being bandied around the media, they were still eye-watering in terms of the level Billericay Town were playing at, and probably on a par with the amounts Holt claimed Accrington Stanley, now an EFL One club, paid.

This season Step 5 of the English Football Pyramid, the National League, contains 11 clubs who have played in the English Football League, plus two (Salford City and Ebbsfleet United) with significantly wealthy owners. It would be an insult to call this Non-League anymore as many of these clubs have facilities and resources that some EFL clubs could only dream of.

Money does not always buy success, but it certainly gives you a big head-start and this season few would bet against Salford City being one of the main challengers for promotion to the Football League. They will face some still opposition from the likes of Chesterfield, Barnet and Leyton Orient, all who are desperate to regain their Football League status.

Two leagues below Salford City, the Rooks will take their place back in Step 7, the Isthmian League Premier Division, after two seasons at Step 8. We led the Isthmian South division for three-quarters of the season on a budget per week of half an Adam Rooney, winning promotion with four games to spare. We've managed to find a modest increase in the playing budget for manager Darren Freeman and we believe we have a squad that can compete rather than struggle. But the gulf between Step 7 and Step 6 is huge in terms of finances and if we were to gain promotion, we would be ill-equipped at the moment to match any of the clubs at the National League South level. Of course, that wouldn't stop us giving it a go!

So, should we stop referring to our game as Non-League? Whilst we all understand what we mean when we say it, we are in a structure, the 'pyramid', that gives us a path to promotion all the way to the Premier League (we can but dream). We aren't grass-roots either. The recent debate about the sale of Wembley and the plan to invest millions in 'grass-roots football' may have got us excited that some of that cash could come our way, but grass-roots means just that – the amateur game in its purest sense where facilities today in many instances are an embarrassment to our National Game.

For now, I don't think we have any option but to refer to ourselves as being part of the Non-League game. We all know where we stand, and even if clubs like Salford City want to think and act as if they are already in the Football League, then let them. We will still stand on the Terry Parris Terrace next season, beer in hand and marvel at the part-time players, the volunteers and the beauty of the game we call Non-League.