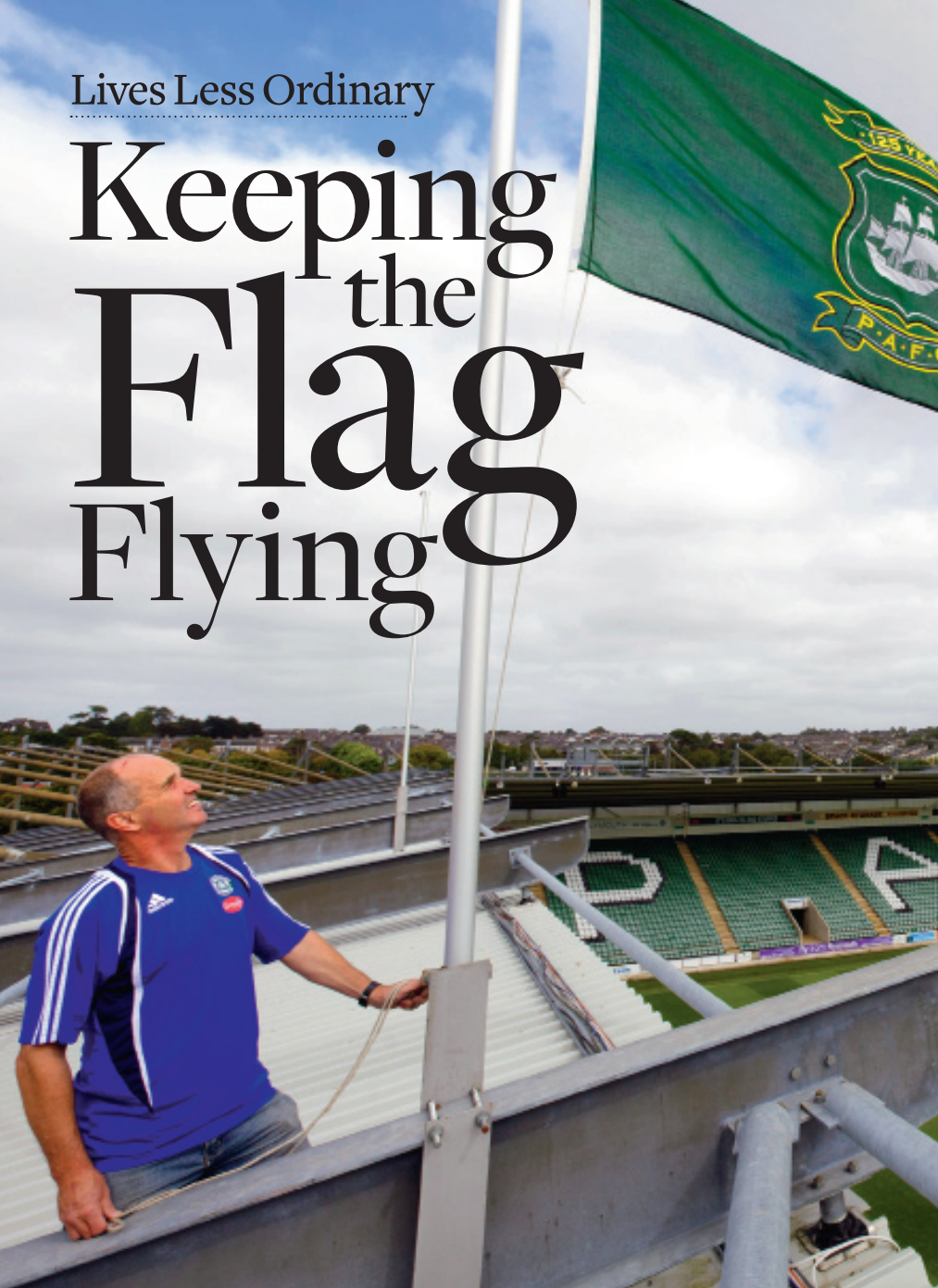


Lives Less Ordinary

Keeping the Flag Flying





Sky-high salaries and badly behaved players have given football plenty of negative press. Sometimes, it takes one of the more cash-strapped clubs to put the real meaning back into the game

By Danny Scott

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAM FROST

LIKE MANY STAFF MEMBERS AT PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL CLUBS, Rick Cowdery's job involves long hours, bags of stress and usually being on call seven days a week.

But what makes Plymouth Argyle's head of communications very different from most people in this money-hungry business is that, for most of this year, his take-home pay has been...zero. Zilch. Nada. A great big nothing.

Unfortunately for Rick—and the rest of the staff and players at the club, who are in exactly the same position—Plymouth went into administration on March 4 this year, with debts of £20m. ▶



Stadium manager
Trevor Richards
shows his allegiance

◀ “None of us knew how bad things had got,” says 50-year-old Rick, a former journalist who’s worked at the club for more than ten years. “Then, when we didn’t get paid for January, the truth started to emerge.”

Less than two years ago, Plymouth, currently at the bottom of League Two, were riding relatively high in the Championship, alongside the likes of Newcastle United and West Bromwich Albion. But huge contracts were given to players to try to keep pace with the bigger clubs, around half a million pounds was spent trying to become a host ground for England’s doomed 2018 World Cup bid, and a string of poor results saw the club relegated to League One. Crowds dwindled and money problems mounted up. Ten months later, administration—where an insolvent club has most of its debts written off, but is put in the care of legally appointed officials who try to find a new owner—became the best option.

Working for a club that would go out of business if a buyer couldn’t be found was worrying enough for Argyle’s 45 part- and full-time non-playing employees. But worse was to come. Lead administrator Brendan Guilfoyle held a special staff meeting and told them that, though there was just enough money coming into the club to cover the basic running costs and his firm’s

fees, until a new owner appeared, there wasn’t enough to pay them or the players’ wages.

“Every person in that room was being given a choice,” says Rick. “Take a chance on an uncertain future with the club...or walk away. But we knew that, if we did leave, the club was finished. Who’d want to buy something with huge debts and no staff? After 125 years, Plymouth Argyle would just disappear. I’m not the manager or the star striker, but, as I sat in that room, I realised I could actually make a difference. I couldn’t just let it die.

Plymouth was too important to fail.”

Despite an average salary of little more than £20,000, Rick and most of the other non-playing staff, along with the players, decided to take a stand. They volunteered to keep working for nothing.



The administrator hoped to find a buyer who would repay the staff within a couple of months, but various bids came and went. As the new season started in August, the staff had still received nothing, bar the odd tiny payment from ticket sales. Still they remained loyal, though it was leading many into real hardship. ▶

The players and most of the non-playing staff decided to take a stand





◀ “My wife doesn’t work, so we’ve been living on credit cards and savings,” says 51-year-old stadium manager Trevor Richards. “My father-in-law died a few years ago and left us a bit of money that we’d put away for an early retirement. But the way things are looking at the moment, that ain’t gonna happen!

“Every month’s been a struggle. It was our 30th wedding anniversary this year, but you can’t really celebrate when you’ve got this hanging over your head. All of that causes stress and arguments. My wife handles the finances, and every month she’s asked me, ‘What’s happening?’ Every month, I’ve lain there at night wondering what I’m going to tell her. But I was born and bred in Plymouth, been an Argyle supporter all my life, and I’d have hated to watch it go under, knowing that I didn’t try to help.”

“I can’t stand football,” laughs Sharon Hammacott, 42, an assistant at the club shop. “But I love my job and I care about this city. I’ve lived here since I was two. Plymouth has struggled throughout the recession; people are feeling miserable.

If the club went, it would be just another nail in the coffin.”

But Sharon is typical of the staff members who’ve somehow adjusted to a new life of hardship.

“My husband’s a self-employed builder and he’s been working all the hours he can. But we’ve got four kids and I have to make difficult decisions every week. At the supermarket, there’s a list of things I can afford and I never stray from it. It’s the same with

bills—a constant juggling act. We’ve had a few court orders demanding money. You can’t really ring them up and say, ‘We’re only in this position because I believe in Plymouth Argyle.’ They won’t be interested.

“Last week, one of the girls left...she’d literally run out of money,” Sharon adds. “We were all in floods of tears.” Even so, though several players have moved on after their relatively lucrative contracts expired or they found new clubs, almost all the other staff still remain.

But, as *Reader’s Digest* went to press, it looked as though their staying power may be rewarded. At the end of September, millionaire hotelier James Brent had, in principle, agreed a deal to buy the club and hoped to assume control within a month.

“If—no, when—the club has a new owner, we’ll hopefully get all the money that’s owed to us,” says Rick. “You have to believe that things will be OK, otherwise you’d go mad! I’ve had to borrow money off my mum...not the sort of thing you expect to be doing at 50.”

“The one thing that has really kept us going is the money from the fans,”

says Sharon. “Groups such as the Green Taverners have been giving us a little brown envelope every month, which is putting food on the table.”

“We weren’t going to let the staff fight this battle on their own,” says Mark Russell, co-founder of the Green Taverners, which was established at the start of the year to help the stricken club through fundraising events such as fun days and memorabilia auctions. “Initially, when we found out the club was in trouble, we were helping out with silly things like bottles of water for the players. But then we realised the staff were in trouble, too. I heard stories of bailiffs chasing people for money and bills not being paid. So we’d talk to the council—who’ve been really helpful—to help sort out council-tax disputes. We’d arrange for somebody to go down and pay off the bailiffs. People were in danger of losing their homes.

“There are lots of other fans’ groups involved, too—the Argyle Fans’ Trust, the Senior Greens, supporters’ website pasoti.co.uk. There’s a wonderful lady called Sue Pollard who stands outside the ground with a bucket, collecting money. During one game, more than £5,000 was collected. Since around February, the total we’ve all


raised is probably not far off £100,000!”

“Staff get invited down to the pub and we don’t have to buy a drink all night,” says Sharon. “The response has been really amazing. When you do come in to work on a grey Monday morning and you know you’re not going to get paid again, that really helps you to keep your chin up. Without that sort of support—financially and psychologically—I wouldn’t have been able to carry on.”

“We wouldn’t have got this far without the supporters,” agrees Romain Larrieu, Plymouth’s much-loved goalkeeper, who’s been at the club since 2000. “Unfortunately, the results haven’t been going our way, but I know the fans believe we can get back to the good times, because they tell me every day. And they tell me how grateful they are to the staff for sticking by the club.

“I was in Tesco the other day, buying my groceries, and there was an old guy in front of me—a pensioner. A normal ▶





day. Wow! That's how much this club means to Plymouth. When I'm out on the pitch and things aren't going well, it's that sort of kindness and generosity that keeps me going."

"Football has had a lot of bad press in the last few years," says Rick Cowdery. "Whether it's the

◀ guy...not rich or anything. After I finished paying, he just walked up to me and shoved ten quid into my hand. I said, 'Come on, mate...that's really kind of you, but I don't want to take your money.' But he wouldn't take it back. He just walked off saying, 'Thank you for what you're doing. We appreciate it.' I had tears in my eyes. I immediately took it round to the club and put it in the staff fund.

"You know something...that old guy keeps coming into my head almost every

behaviour of certain players on and off the pitch, astronomical wages or situations like we've had here in Plymouth. But what I've seen in this city in the last ten months has restored my faith. Forget the headlines, the celebrity names and silly wage packets—this is what football's really about. This is where it matters. At the community level. The fans and club coming together as one.

"Nobody's here for the money. They're here because they love football, and they love Plymouth Argyle." ■

REACTING PROMPTLY TO A CRISIS

Seen in my local paper, the *Evening Gazette*: "Due to the closure of the A&E department at Hartlepool, a free bus service will operate to the nearest A&E at Stockton. Must be booked with 24 hours' notice."

Submitted by Jane Peacock, Stockton-on-Tees