

# Tony Goodall Fans' Conference

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> April – 11am



## **Attended:**

Eric Eisner, Andy Redman, Andrew Cullen, Tony Brown, Anna Mitchell, Johnny Moore (PFC).

Barry Dewing (Pompey Independent Supporters' Association), Barry Thompson (Northern Blues), Donald Vass (TGFC Secretary & Chichester Portsmouth Supporters' Club), Gemma Raggett (London Supporters' Club), Mike Fulcher (TGFC Chair & Social Media Groups), Mike Whittle (Pompey History Society), Peter House (Pompey Independent Supporters' Association), Roy Gregory (Central Branch Supporters' Club), Simon Colebrook (Portsmouth Supporters' Trust), Spencer Green (Armed Forces & Services Club) & Steve Tovey (Legends Lounge).

## **Apologies:**

Pam Wilkins (Pompey Disabled Supporters' Association), Gez Johns (South West Supporters' Club) & Rob Wooley (Pompey Northern Ireland Supporters' Club).

## **Agenda:**

### **Q: How do you feel the club is progressing under your ownership?**

AR: As a club, first of all we want to win promotion, so how are we progressing? Not great this season as we won't make the playoffs.

The stadium is progressing well though. It's not ready yet, but it's getting there. We've begun work on ripping out the lower tier of the South Stand, and of course the work on the North Stand is relatively visible for everyone to see. We've been able to add DDA compliant seats at the front of the North Stand, and there will be more at the back of the stand too which will deliver a big improvement for our disabled fans.

EE: The seats in the lower tier of the South Stand are going to be level with the grass now. They're going to have great sight lines. They'll be ready for next season. What's going on at the moment is going to be a gamechanger in terms of improvement to Fratton Park.

AR: We'll be ripping away the advertising boards in the South Stand and restoring the heritage of the [Archibald Leitch] truss. We're doing what we said at the beginning – improve the infrastructure, stay debt free and run the club sustainably.

AR: Are we progressing on the playing side? We believe so. We had four good seasons under Kenny Jackett, but were ultimately unsuccessful. We won a Wembley final and made the playoffs consistently, but of course it was frustrating not to be at that next level. We had to balance hearing what the fans think with what we believe is the right strategy. We made a stylistic, more attacking, more modern managerial change.

EE: We've spent a lot of time with Danny and Nicky – they're the right men for the job. They really understand English football. I've learnt a lot about tactics from them. They want young players as the nucleus of the squad, then to use loans as the hired assassins which can take you to the next level. It takes a few years to develop the kids, but we're getting there.



**Q: What are the plans to further improve the stadium beyond the current redevelopment?**

AR: In order to achieve that, we need the city and national infrastructure to solve things we can never solve on our own. We talk to the local MPs and the city council about it every month, but until that's solved, we can't do it.

**Q: Is there any progress being made on either the rail or road networks to allow for that change?**

AR: The politicians believe progress is being made, but we're yet to see the fundamental steps needed. They say they're doing everything they can.

**Q: Is there a backup plan, if the local infrastructure needed doesn't materialise?**

AR: There's no other way around it, categorically. There's only two significant ways people get to the stadium – by rail and via Eastern Road. Without those two things being improved, it would be irresponsible to build something no one can go to. We've got a large amount of land, so are there things we could do? Sure – but it won't make sense unless the people can come.

**Q: You've been our best owners at improving infrastructure for a long time – thank you. But despite the stadium improvements being made at the moment, capacity will remain fairly static, with the ground not increasing much beyond 20,000. What's the strategy for sustainable income growth in the Championship if our matchday income won't be growing much?**

AR: The capacity when we acquired the club was around 16,000. If we didn't do what we've done, the capacity of Fratton Park would be much lower.

EE: As we improve, media values will increase, with more potential for streaming and TV income.

**Q: The interim report into safe standing was released today and appears to be very positive. Do we have plans to install safe standing sections as part of the Fratton Park redevelopment?**

AR: That's the plan, if it's approved in time. Fans seem to want it, so why would we not provide it? That's the hope. We have drawings which have it implemented, but it has to be legal when we do it.

TB: It's a matter of timing on changes to the existing law but we're trying to put in adaptability to the current stadium work..

AC: We're likely to be under pressure from the Sports Grounds Safety Authority to implement it, because of persistent standing issues in the Fratton End and the Milton End.

**Q: Improvement to infrastructure has been impressive, but supporters will always be most concerned with progress on the field. Will the managers be backed to improve the playing squad? There's concern that some fans won't renew their season tickets if the outlook for the first team squad is disappointing.**



EE: Absolutely [we'll back the manager]. We're confident performances on the pitch will help too. We need some young players so they all start developing and we can find the next Jamal Lowe. We had gone away from that, and were only signing League One players who, even if we went up, weren't going to be saleable assets.

We've just moved away from Kenny Jackett, who had a completely different tactical style. It's our first full year under Danny Cowley. We've got to give the manager time to execute a plan. Unlike other clubs, who change their manager three times a year – we're not going to do that. No one's happy with where we've finished this year, but we're starting again. Signings like Denver Hume and Joe Morrell will all have an extra year of development. Danny and Nicky are excellent at developing players. We're not going to go crazy, but our playing budget will be very competitive.

AR: We think we're fielding a competitive team. We hope Danny Cowley's style is more attractive to fans. It's been disappointing this year, of course. But 3-4-1-2 is not a common structure in English football, and it takes time to adapt.

EE: We think they're the right guys, and they're with us for the long term.

**Q: Some fans are concerned about the strength of the playing squad. What's the strategy for recruitment next season? Is there a need to hit the transfer window early, because of the earlier season start date and to help improve season ticket sales?**

EE: We talk daily with Danny, and he knows what we have to do. We're ready to back the managers. The job now is figuring out how to find the talent. Danny has a good philosophy. He wants the spine of the team locked in place early.

AR: I'd be surprised if any other ownership group talk as far in advance of windows as we do. We have monthly meetings on recruitment looking several windows ahead. That hasn't changed.

**Q: Have we been too reliant on loans?**

EE: Look at Gavin Bazunu – he's a great example. You can use loans to get quality players to fit the style you want to play.

**Q: Do you feel stung by money previously spent poorly in the transfer market?**

EE: That's why the Sporting Director will be key – it will help ensure we avoid mistakes.

**Q: What's the remit of the Sporting Director role?**

AC: The role will have a strong emphasis on recruitment. We're looking to appoint someone who already has healthy networks with clubs and agents, who can support our existing recruitment staff. They will help create a sense of alignment throughout the club. Although they'll focus on recruitment, they'll work closely with our medical staff, sports science department, and the academy.

Danny at the moment is heavily involved in operational matters, more so than he should be. He and I both need someone who helps and supports us with all that. Managers will naturally come



and go at any football club– the desire is to have a Sporting Director who will be a long term appointment, who sits independently of the manager and safeguards the club’s playing identity and long term recruitment within that philosophy. They’ll also be part of our succession planning, looking at key roles in the club. It’s all about creating conditions for success on the pitch. This role is absolutely critical.

AR: We brought in Danny and Nicky knowing a Sporting Director was a possibility. They look it as an advantage. Right now, they’re too busy if anything!

TB: This role is about the integration of all the football departments at the club including the Academy. It isn’t about titles or even individuals – but rather structures which will help the club become more integrate and sustainable to recycle the football investment as part of overall club strategy.

**Q: Is a Sporting Director appointment imminent?**

AC: We’re at an advanced stage of the recruitment process at the moment.

**Q: Will the Sporting Director work with the academy? What’s the outlook there currently?**

AC: Greg Miller is going through a massive change programme in the academy, overhauling the culture and addressing many of the issues he inherited. Some of the problems aren’t easily solvable, and there’s not an instant fix which means we’ll be producing 5 or 6 players this year. But there’s a clear sense of direction there now, and a Sporting Director will really help Greg to accelerate this further. They’ll also start to look at link-ups with other clubs, building relationships with non-league sides. This season, we have already doubled the number of scouts to improve our recruitment. We can sign players from up to 90 minutes away depending on age, yet at the moment most of our players come from the island – we want to expand our horizons. We have to spread out and be more aggressive. We need to improve our relationship with grassroots sides. We want them all to have a positive perception of Portsmouth Football Club and we naturally become their preferred choice to recommend talented players. This has to be a two way relationship and amongst the things we are looking to do is to support them as well by offering CPD sessions for local coaches.

**Q: What improvements are being made to the training ground?**

AR: There’s lots happening – we’ve just ripped out sections of the pool, we’re adding a sauna and a hot tub, and ultimately setting up for the club to move into the building. If you bring a young player or a potential loan player in and show them the facilities, these changes matters to them. The improvements are night and day.

EE: We went out during a pandemic and used our Capex to buy the training ground. That’s huge.

**Q: Are you able to add further pitches at the training ground?**

AR: Just as with Fratton Park, we’re making improvements in stages. We need to consider the orientation of the pitches, the number we need and whether we install a dome. The best case scenario is that we acquire additional space used by the rugby club, but that seems unlikely right now.



**Q: What's the timescale for the training ground improvements?**

AM: The pool will reopen in June. It's just been retiled. There's a double page spread in the programme today showing some of the changes. The gym is being renovated as well. We're putting in state of the art equipment that can be synched up with smartphones and watches so people can track their performance. We'd like to do open days and build the fanbase.

TB: We've agreed a partnership with an experienced gym operator who already operate at a wide range of different venues and are experienced in the challenges of the gym sector which will hopefully make a big difference to the members.

**Q: Is the gym going to bring in additional revenue for the club?**

AC: We expect the gym to become profitable over the next 12 months, with membership growth accelerated by the summer improvements.

**Q: Do you stand by your pledge to make Pompey a Premier League club and global brand by 2029?**

AR: I don't recall giving specific dates, but yes – our ambition is 100% the same as it was the day we got involved. If anything, we enjoy the club more. Aside from the last two years where we couldn't come and enjoy the matches in person – that's been very rough. It's been fun to watch games on iFollow, but it's not quite the same. That's why Eric and I are here despite some level of risk of Covid. We've booked this trip 3 times and each one has been cancelled. Our next opportunity wouldn't have been until August, so we wanted to take the risk now.

EE: Our ambition is still 100% the same, but we're not tied to a year.

**Q: The fanbase here have been through a lot. Supporters will always scrutinise you.**

EE: Ask away – we won't tell you any lies. We get why Portsmouth fans are cautious – they've been burned a thousand times. But we won't burn you.

**Q: Are you supportive of the government's recommendations from the fan-led review into football governance?**

AR: It would be one of the best things for us. It would force other clubs to operate a similar model to us. Self regulating bodies like the EFL have little willingness to cut down other clubs [who are breaking the rules]. We're beholden to MPs, but yes, we're hopeful it can be implemented. Most of it is similar to how we are running the club already.

AC: Sustainability won't properly work without an independent regulator. During the period when I was a club representative on the EFL Board, one Championship club blatantly breached the Financial Fair Play regulations and got promoted, with massive financial consequences in terms of penalties. Based on the tariff, they were looking at a potential multi million fine. There was however the potential for a huge legal battle through the civil courts, and had the case gone against the EFL then the other 71 clubs would have been faced with the costs. In the end, there was an out of court settlement of £42m. Had there been a regulator, the tariff may have had a



better prospect of full enforcement.



Finances are distorted in the Championship. Clubs without parachute payments are trying to play catch up to clubs that do have them and parachute payments currently account for 30% of total Championship turnover amongst a disproportionate small number of clubs. [AC added later that this is leading to a situation where net debt in the Championship has reached £1.1 billion, with pre-tax losses of £309M and a wage to turnover ratio of 107%]. The EFL's position, which we fully support, is to get rid of parachute payments and work with the Premier League, to structure a joint TV deal, and have ladder prize payments depending on where you finish, as is the case in the Premier League. That's a drive towards a more sustainable model. That's the league's position – they're pushing for that and we agree.

AR: Over time, the world is moving in our direction. That's why we're building infrastructure. We're not perfectly run sustainably, sometimes we push beyond our playing budget, but we're trying to as much as possible live sustainably while building over time. If regulations came into effect, we'd feel much more comfortable.

**Q: How have you found the English football culture?**

AR: Americans don't really understand this, but our leagues in the US are socialist – teams who do the worst get the most help. Teams who finish first get the last pick in the draft. In England, you've got the ultimate capitalist system – if you do well, you earn more. Also, the relegation system means games like today, with Gillingham coming here desperate to avoid relegation, really matter. That doesn't happen in America. That's the biggest difference. We also love the passion – Danny Cowley always says he loves having a job where it matters so much to so many people. We love it.

**Q: With a significant cost of living crisis and rising inflation, what can fans expect from season ticket prices?**

AC: We will make a full announcement over the next fortnight. The reason it's taken longer than usual to decide and announce season ticket prices for 2022-23 is that we have had to spend a great deal of time putting together a very challenging budget across the club for next season. There are significant increases in energy prices, National Insurance contributions, and even the cost of food. As a business, we're not immune from that. Energy prices will hit us hard, as well as the cost of materials. We're also incredibly mindful that these same issues will have an equally heavy and painful impact on supporters. A football season ticket is a discretionary spend, and we can't take fans for granted and some supporters will be hit really hard. We've had the discussion over the last few days. Clubs in this division are opting to do several different things. Sunderland prices are down 1%, as they're in a deprived area of the country. Bolton are reducing prices in order to aggressively fill their stadium. The majority are either freezing prices or increasing. We don't want to affect the playing budget, but the right thing to do is to be mindful of our fans

There are different challenges affecting sales too – we have to map people into the North and South Stands first. Because of these factors, it likely that we will have to wait until at least the middle of May that season tickets can go on sale. People in the North and South Stand need the ability to move after first two games [once they've had a chance to sit in their new seats], so new

season ticket purchasers in these areas may be required to move. We have to protect the loyalty of people who have been forced to move.



We want to work with the TGFC to begin looking at a tiered pricing approach in the future. We don't want to do it this season, but need to start looking at this for the 23/24 season. That will be subject to a broader discussion.

TB: That will tie in with completion of the stadium redevelopment works and enhanced facilities across Fratton Park to enable a tiered stadium wide pricing structure.

**Q: Will fans be able to pay via direct debit to split the cost of a season ticket?**

AM: We're looking to use finance credit this year, so fans can spread the cost across 7-10 instalments. In the future, we're looking at direct debit to make things as easy as possible.

**Q: What plans are being made for hospitality next season?**

AM: We've made no decision as yet – it's been a challenging year with staff shortages. We've managed to improve a lot match by match, and like with season tickets we want to grow the numbers. We want the hospitality lounges to be a great experience, with players in as guest speakers.

AC: The biggest challenge for us with hospitality pricing will be the rising cost of food and staffing.

- Minutes by Donald Vass.