

# Zero to Pro in 4 Years

Written by Matt Ward

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## **Intro**

Thank you for taking time out to read my book. As you will go on to see, it is very basic 'no thrills' layout, with poor grammar and maybe the odd spelling mistake if my proof reader missed them. The good news is, I'm not interested in winning any 'book of the year' awards but what I am extremely interested in, is to give you some great content. For those who have absolutely no idea who I am (which is understandable, as I'm not well known), you can find a list of the leagues I've worked in below.

The purpose of this whole book is to share with everyone my experiences, of becoming a professional coach at a professional club at senior level within 4 years. This is with no playing career to mention and starting out as an amateur coach. I hope that regardless of your level as a coach, you are able to find some use in my content and if not, at least I hope you can have a good laugh at some of the stories.

All the best

Matt

### **2017 – Ghana Division 1**

Head Coach, Kotoku Royals

### **2016 – China League 1**

Assistant Coach, Shanghai Shenxin

### **2015 – Philippines Top Tier**

Assistant Coach, Meralco Sparks

### **2012 to 2015 – Taiwan League**

Head Coach, Royal Blues Taipei

## 1. Falling Out of Love to Find Love

My status and career doesn't give me any right, to write about my childhood past and growing pains of youth, like other well known coaches/players. So, I'm skipping that part and heading straight to the point when I hung up my boots and fell out of love with the game. It seems like a fitting point to start.

My playing career was unexciting and all in all, a bit of a let-down. From being a promising player in my youth, unsurprisingly, I can say that if I knew what I did now and had my chance again, I would have committed myself to making it as a professional player. I can't blame anyone but myself. While the ones who made it, were having quiet nights in on a Friday, I would be freezing my ass off hanging around a tree shaped as a fish, sipping on awful cider and celebrating getting into a nightclub at the age of 14. What a waste! To think that these fine lines, unknowingly have such a huge impact on a life... I really wish I was a more mature teenager.

Talking about mature teenagers, the difference in the players that were focused and committed compared to those drinking cider around a fish tree, was massive.. I went up against Liam Lawrence and Craig Disley, when they was at Retford Utd before moving on to Mansfield Town as Pros ( I think Liam first went to Nottingham Forest before joining Craig at Mansfield in 1999) and it was always a game we would all dread as a team. Both of them would be top of the goal scorers list and although I was a big, strong and quick young teenager, both of these guys were like fully developed men. Craig would sit in centre midfield and clean up any long balls, jumping twice as high as anyone and bringing the ball down on his chest, while I would be marking Liam and he would knock me off the ball down by the corner flag like I was an ant, do some kind of turn and leave me sitting on my arse. While I continued to sit on my arse, Liam Lawrence went on to play for Sunderland, Stoke and the Republic of Ireland.

I played in a U17 Youth cup final vs Boston Utd who was then in the now League 2, of the football league. We held our own and I was doing a job in the centre of midfield winning every ball in the air. We went in 0-0 at half time and in the second half, Boston decided to put one player in front and one player behind me in every situation of a possible long ball. Such a simple tactical adjustment put me out of the game and this shows a common flaw in my youth football education – I didn't have the knowledge I needed to improve and compete, nor did my coaches have the ability to coach me it (just to note, all of my youth coaches were amazing people and I admire them all). At the end of the match which we lost 1-0 after going to extra time, the lad playing in centre midfield next to me got approached by Peterborough Utd where he spent the rest of his Youthful years. I Shouldn't have been surprised, it was another example of difference between the cider fish tree on a Friday and not!

After short stints moving between non-league reserve teams and lower levels, I decided to call it a day at the grand old age of 26. If I needed any more confirmation that I didn't have the heart, desire and ability to make it any further as a player, it came in a friendly for Ramsgate Town reserves against Dover Athletic Reserves. At the time, Dover were a decent Vauxhall conference side and I was marking a 1<sup>st</sup> team player returning from injury. He was an absolute beast and every challenge I was getting clipped by an elbow into my cheek, or a stud left in on parts of my leg I never knew existed. Through the match I remember I was thinking "fuck this, what am I even doing here".

There's a point of me sharing some details of my limited playing career. During my time at every team I played for, I wasn't given the opportunity or tools needed to develop as a player. Again as stated before, the blame does not lay on the people giving up their spare time to manage and coach teams but I have no doubt, if there was some kind of needed coaching level or standard that we at least seem to have in place now, it may of given me that little bit of direction and give me an extra push. When I say 'the standards we have in place now', I mean the bigger availability for coaches to get onto their lower coaching badges to at least get some basics behind them. There is also a more monitored structure to have coaches at all levels, to have completed some kind of coaching badge which even at the lowest scale, makes huge differences to players (acknowledging it's mostly down to personality and character of the coach regardless of licence).

With the knowledge I now have as a coach, I'm already a better player than I was – not taking into consideration physical attributes. Having joined in some kickabouts, the off the ball positioning, decision making such as when to run with the ball and when to pass, selection of pass, timing of tackling, body shape...are all things that make playing easier and are also reasons why some experienced players no matter how slow they are, can still be quicker in their minds. The chance to have this knowledge whilst still being able bodied and hungry to be a player, is a special mix which all players deserve.

I'm not bitter or angry that I didn't have this special mix and I know, if my attitude and focus was right from the beginning, I would have found my way to the development tools I needed. But one thing I hope for, is that all of the coaches across the world know how important their role is. You are the ones that possibly hold the keys to a player's next step up, and you should not be the one to restrict any child's potential. When I hear youth and grassroots coaches claiming on one hand they are so committed to becoming a coach and their dream is to get into a pro club, then on the other hand they are saying, "that session was a complete waste of my time", my words to them are to fuck off and stop wasting the kid's time! Change and make lives, don't hinder them.

After my 90 minutes with the Dover Athletic Elbow of justice, my motivation for football was dropping drastically. I stopped playing and then completed the old F.A Level 2 (or whatever it was called). It all seems like a bit of a blur now, I feel I was too immature to take anything important from it and I shouldn't have done it with the current mind set. Deep down I wasn't convinced that I could become a good coach and have a group of people follow my instruction, my confidence in the sport was low and after doing some voluntary coaching work, I kept myself detached from any idea of playing or coaching and thinking of any kind of career in the game.

In the three years that followed, I did a lot of soul searching. Even though I missed football, I wouldn't allow myself to get sucked back into it. I started at university as a mature student and got stuck into work. I started ultra-running and this was great for clearing my head and helping my mind to mature. Coming up to 30 years of age now and shit, most people in a profession could already have 11 or 12 years on me. Within myself, I knew I needed a fresh start and I needed another change of scenery to try and find something I could excel at. Previously I had lived and worked abroad and now with a piece of paper from a University behind me, a few twisting events led me to Taiwan, a beautiful island to the East of China.

This is the island where things were about to change. Sometimes you must first fall out of love, to be able to love something again.

## 2. The Purple Shirt

Fast forward to 2012 and I'm sat in my apartment in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan. Life is good, I have a good job teaching P.E at an International school and I live right next to a river which I would run around most days. A huge variety of food is available right on my doorstep, a cheeky bar down the road and the metro station only 5 minutes walk away, giving me access to all of this small, beautiful city. One of the first things I noticed in Taiwan, was the calmness it enabled me to find within myself. My night's sleep was the best I'd had in years, no negativity running through my head and some happy dreams. I would often go and sit by the river and reflect on this, trying to put my finger on why I felt at ease. One of the main reasons I believe for my positive being, would be the inability to understand most of what was being said or going on around me, due to the lack of my mandarin skills.

The huge factor of this which is one of the main reasons I love living in Asia to this day, is that the mind has so much more space and power to use on better things, rather than worrying about politics and such idiotic, energy draining crap that is out of most people's control. It's so true, the amount of people who are living in the U.K getting caught up in politics, people's opinions, society, it's all a total waste of time and energy. These things will never change and even if they do, the people implementing the changes counteract the deficiencies of the people they are taking control from. Members of the public in the U.K can't be totally blamed for this, it's hard to escape the social brain washing; it's on the news, the radio, t'v shows, newspapers... seriously, how can people be so much more interested and bothered about something that will never change, than they are about their own lives. Not watching any news, reading about any news and not understanding any of the local politics in Taiwan, gave me my bliss, and the extra energy saved I would use to develop my life in every sense. In this case, ignorance truly was bliss!

Exercising, leading a stable life with plenty to do and see, new experiences around each corner and a good job, I was content, and I could feel I was the most content I'd felt in my life to date. With life generally in good shape, with all aspects a person needs to be truly happy (health, wealth, social), I was feeling like I could achieve anything I put my mind to and every day my mind was racing with new ideas and optimism. The last time I'd felt this in control of my life, was when I was doing my ultra-running and it all links back to a saying I would repeat, when going through pain on a long run; "the body has limits, but the mind does not". The fact that I was at peace with myself, started to raise my awareness of how powerful the mind actually is and if I could pass on one piece of advice to anyone reading this, it would be to invest time and money in keeping your mind trained and developed. Our mind's capacity is so powerful that we as humans, don't even know how to use its full potential!

Work wise, I was doing something I enjoyed, and it was a great opportunity for myself to learn. My Head of P.E was amazing and I learned so much from her and most importantly, I

picked up transferable skills which would later help me during my football career. With classes sometimes reaching a maximum of 35 kids, the first skill I had to quickly hone was my class management. The perception from most who don't teach or coach is that these jobs are easy, how hard can playing around with kids be, right? I enjoy to this day, people who do their first session with 10 kids and come back saying, "that was a nightmare, I had no control over anything". Dude, try handling 35 kids who don't speak English as their first language!

Without class management or control, the session cannot run or at least, shouldn't run. Regardless if you are working with kids or adults and although different in many ways, a majority of their needs are the same; they need leadership, clear communication, direction and trust that the coach knows what they are doing. One huge similarity between kids and even professional players is, you have maybe 6 seconds to grab their attention, another 20 seconds to get your message across, 10 seconds to confirm understanding and then anything longer, you'll most probably lose their attention. This is why it's so important to be confident and take charge from the very first second of any session, regardless of age and level. Even if you are shitting yourself with nerves, show confidence and there's more chance of your messages being received. Any days that I was feeling not as powerful or confident, I would always start a class or session showing organization. How do you organize 35 people are even a much tougher task, 35 kids.....?

"Ok listen up everyone, I'm going to split you up into teams of 6, one of you will be a team of 5. Once in your team, please stand in a line/put your coloured bib on and stay with your team". In the space of 10 seconds, this organises a group of 35 people and gets them ready for me to control. From here it is now so much easier to have instructions and messages received; "ok red team, if you can go and stand at the far cone with the balls, blue team you need to stay here with one ball each" etc etc. Another huge benefit of working with kids in larger groups and of a different native tongue, would be the need to choose the right communication at the right times. The projection of voice has to be correct and the timing is of the most importance; there's no use what so ever shouting over instructions or guidance when nobody is really listening.

How to ensure people are ready to listen? ... WHISTLE BLOW "Ok stop, stand still. Nobody move". With these short and sharp instructions, an environment ready for me to talk would be created. Coincidentally, this is one area I've seen people show weaknesses in, while on coaching courses; the coach is unable to stop play or create an opening when a coaching point needs delivering.

\*Set rules or consistent expectations of how you will be controlling your session.

For example; with a large group of young kids I would tell them while they were standing in their groups (as mentioned previously),

1 whistle = stop stand still

2 whistles = stop sit down on the spot

3. whistles = stop and come to coach

Obviously, these would differ depending on class needs and if you need a whistle to control a game, but I'm sure you get the idea.

Being aware of your surroundings and being in testing environments outside of the U.K, can help make any coach stronger. Once you learn how to control a class of 35 kids whose English language skills are at times, not great, facing a professional team with a wide collection of nationalities and having a use of a translator or two, proves to be less of an issue or at least, a less stressful task. I believe any coach in any country of the world can benefit from working outside of their country. A coach's adaptability to find different and better ways to communicate, is a skill which will make you a better coach in any team. I don't care if 'people' say, that experience abroad isn't valued back in your home country, it shouldn't be about that. It should all be about you, and that you know yourself that you have honed your skills in the best environments possible, and nobody else can match you. Don't worry about what other's say or think, concentrate on what you do and show.

Like most things good and beautiful, there will always be some slight bumps in the road to bring them tumbling down. Mine came when my Grandad passed away and shortly after, my Grandma followed. My Grandma especially, had a huge impact on bringing me up as a child and although I got back to England to see her before she passed, it was a big hit on me and brought me back to reality, in my new country which was now called home. As these things tend to unavoidably do, it got me thinking about life, death and the future. Even more so, when I had got back from England early Sunday morning and my school was telling me I needed to go and join other teachers for a sports day... Neh no chance, I'm not going and I'm not wearing that purple shirt that you're are demanding I wear either. Some things have great significance and importance in life and at the time, sports day and a purple shirt wasn't one of them.

Around a week later, a sequence of events was started which would go on to change my life and this part of my story, was also covered by the SportDec Podcast: 'The Jerry Maguire of British Coaches'... I was sat in my apartment playing on FIFA and sipping on a few Gin n Tonics. Nice and relaxed, it was helping to serve my crappy mood of losing two people close to me, and being hassled about wearing purple fucking t-shirts. At the age of 31, I didn't spend much time playing on computer games anymore but right at this time, it was fun. I'd created myself as a player on FIFA, bald head, ginger beard and a prettier face than my real one. I put myself as a #9, fast, strong and good in the air. I should have been a striker when I was younger, as a bigger kid who was fast and strong, with a 'big kick', I would of made a good Liam Lawrence instead of spending most of my adult playing time being told I was too



short to play at centre half or, 'sweepers' are no longer fashionable. Anyway, I was the #9 for Burton Albion and that triggered a memory from my past....

I used to work at a health club close to Burton on Trent as a personal trainer and fitness instructor, great times! But I moved from there to start my University degree for the pure fact, of wanting to better my life and find a new adventure, a rewarding one. This brought my senses to the most focus I think they've ever felt, and something strange happened. I remember the feeling now, it was like someone had just pressed a switch and I turned into a robot. Yeah, I had already drank a few gins, but I was still in control of my thoughts and actions. I paused the game with the ball at my feet and just stared at myself on the T.V screen. I spoke these exact words out loud; "why the fuck are you playing a computer game with yourself on it, and why are you wearing blue boots and a wristband you sad wanker".

Standing up, I hadn't decided what it was yet, but I already knew that I was about to make a change and take action towards a different focus. Immediately, I was buzzing, I was restless full of pent up energy. I took a walk down to the shop by the river and got a 40p can of Taiwan lager, beautiful. Got to the riverside and walked up and down for what felt like 2 minutes, but must have been longer because I was now in full self-reflection mode. It was just past midnight, hardly any people around, the lights on the cable bridge still flashing and a steady ripple in the river which seemed to go on for miles. Again, talking to myself but this time not out loud;

*I'm happy here and comfortable but this isn't enough. I'm worth more and I want more than sitting playing myself as a character on a computer game. I'm going to do more. What would Grandma want me to do? She quit her job a couple of years short of her work pension, so she could help my dad to look after me full-time, she sacrificed for me and she led a life with no choices. Right now, she would want me to make a choice that made me happy (although in real life she would say to my face anything, to make sure I was just in a secure job making steady money) and even if I'm wrong, I owe it to her to make something more of myself in return for her own selflessness. Ok, what do I want to do, choose anything in the whole world. You can be anything and do anything you want so choose something and do it. Choose something you can relight passion for and where you don't get pissed off with unimportant politics, purple shirts, rainbows and unicorns. What do I want to be?..... what have I been scared of for years and never had the bollocks to throw myself into? Football. I want to be involved in football, I want to be a coach. Not just any coach, it's been great working with children however, I want to work with adults. I'm going to be a professional football coach!*

I quickly ran over to a bin and threw my can of beer away, waste of 40p and a great beer! I ran up the steps, down the road like Forest Gump and got back into my apartment. The game of FIFA was still on pause and I looked at myself again in the blue boots, this time laughing out loud "you genius wanker". I was so excited, I could already see the next 5 years

flash into my head in the space of seconds, whilst grabbing a paper and pen. I sat looking at the paper whilst sipping another gin n tonic and I was doubting myself; “Matt are you drunk now? Are you being one of them people who have a lifechanging thought and then the next day, they crawl back under a stone and get on with life as normal”?

I was doubting myself, I was now looking for reasons not to start this thing, whatever it was. I looked back yet again at the T.V and thought “I’m never going to be a professional player, but I’m going to be a coach, starting tomorrow”. On the paper next to me, I wrote down the next call to action I needed to do tomorrow, and I also set out a very brief 1-3 year strategy. The excitement came again and I wanted tomorrow to be here already. Underneath all of my writing I wrote in big capital letters; IF YOU DO NOT FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS TOMORROW, YOU ARE WEAK AND I DARE YOU NOW TO FOLLOW THIS THROUGH. HOW BIG ARE YOUR BOLLOCKS AND WHAT TYPE OF PERSON ARE YOU!

I put the pen down. Went over to the T.V and turned it off, went to bed and had a restless night’s sleep like a small kid waiting for Santa to come!

### 3. Winning in Taiwan

The morning arrived, and I had hardly slept a wink. Almost like I didn't believe that the night before was for real, I hurriedly walked to the table and checked that the paper with my scribbles on it, was still there. With traces of my gin and tonic still apparent in the form of glasses and bottles, I washed all the weakness away and got every piece of negativity out of my sight. I had no interest in seeing alcohol again while that piece of paper was laid on the table, with my future on it. Looking down at what I had wrote, a smile came over me as I saw the erratic handwriting which was almost pleading me, to see this thing through. Time for work, quick shower and then out the door with anticipating excitement to get to my desk and turn on my computer. Today was the start!

Sitting at my desk, my head was going a million miles an hour. My first class was in 40 minutes so instead of thinking about what I should be doing, I just started actually, doing. For the next 30 minutes, google was my friend and I crammed in huge amounts of detail about the Taiwan football scene and pin pointed a few teams which I immediately emailed. Taipei City Dragons was a foreign run team and playing in the top league of Taiwan. They had an agreement with the CTFA (Chinese Taipei Football Association) which enabled them to take part in the league, even though it was mostly a team of foreigners. I found a few highlight videos on their Facebook page and they were playing in stadiums, which immediately grabbed my attention. Already I was imagining being involved with a team who were playing in stadiums, against players who were playing for the Taiwan National Team.

The level wasn't great but who was I to judge and saying that, I could see the efforts and attempts to be set up in an organised fashion. It was better than anything I would get close to as a coach back in the UK. This team was my first choice, I wanted to be part of it and be part of Taiwan's top league and I was confident I'd at least get some kind of opportunity. I messaged the manager and wrote a polite email explaining I was looking for a chance to get back into football, a willing coach who's motivated to help out in any capacity needed. Being a qualified fitness coach and sports therapist, I was certainly open to any role I was offered, even if it was the lowest and most basic job at the whole club.

Knowing that simply sending out only one email wouldn't be enough, I had a list of other foreign teams to contact but I wasn't so keen. I'd just seen a top tier team playing in a stadium and having some of their matches on T.V, and these others with the greatest respect, were Sunday League. Again, I had no right to be picky and even though I realised I just had to start somewhere, I knew that time was against me as it was 2013 and I was already in my early 30's. I was about to start emailing the Sunday League clubs when I came across another team, who was playing in a somewhat 'stoned seating' stadium and on a really nice pitch. The Royal Blues. The Blues, were getting ready to play in the BML

(Businessman's League) and although it wasn't directly the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, it seemed to be the next highest regarded league behind the top division.

Again, I found the contact of the manager and sent him across an email just like I did with the Dragons. I'm not sure why I thought this would work, but I had a good feeling that my emails would get at least one reply. In any other country the chances would be slimmer but with Taiwan, it feels more like a community and everything seems accessible if you put your mind to it. My first P.E class of the day was about to start and for the rest of the day, every bit of spare time I had, was at my computer checking my emails and continuing to read up as much as I could, about football on this island. I got a reply within a week.

The top tier team, Taipei City Dragons didn't reply, it was a shame and I was genuinely disappointed. Knowing what I know now, I could of took more action and got an answer, but I was still quite new to the city and didn't have many contacts. Also, knowing what I do know now, it was a blessing in disguise as I got a positive reply from the Royal Blues, and I was invited to go and join one of their pre-season training sessions the following week. The fact that they had bothered to reply to a stranger and at least show some interest, already had my respect and I couldn't wait to go and meet them to find out more. My excitement stopped me thinking about anything else that week and when it came around, I started to feel more nervous.

The metro journey to the training pitch was maybe an hour away but that didn't matter, I was now willing to commit to anything it would take. On the way there I got my head into the book, 'Inverting the Pyramid: the history of football tactics', and when I arrived, I was almost disappointed to put it down. Seeing the evolution and results of different tactics from past years was fascinating. Not only was the football side of the book a good teacher, the influence of a country's identity and political expectations also rang true in deciding on a team's style of play, almost like society; everyone expects you to buy a house, get married, have two kids and sit watching t.v after work until 10pm. The Spanish: playing a possession based passing game while the English are hard working (days past, not present as England is slowly Changing).

The metro came to a stop and I walked out of the station hoping there would still be some distance, so I could walk and gather my thoughts. Unfortunately, there was not. The pitch was around 5 minutes away and I could see the floodlights lit up and could already hear the voices. Although I was sure it was going to be an informal meet, there was something inside me that knew this had to work out, because this was my first 'in' of starting this career and let's face it, the team were training under floodlights, which was at least a step up from only training in the Summer lighter days! The 5 minute walk went too quick and I was now on the other side of the hedges and could just about make out shapes moving around on the pitch,

I stood there and waited. Why is it that when we are going into an unfamiliar environment, with unfamiliar people, we automatically think that everyone in the whole vicinity will stop and stare and focus on you and you alone? It was obviously a lack of confidence which was strange, as normally I wouldn't be phased by this. I stood there waiting for another 10 minutes and I even thought about turning around and going home, but I didn't. I stood there staring at a bush and listened to the session going on. What a dick!

People were now walking past me and turning around wondering why I was stood there with no apparent intent. They probably thought I was about to take a piss, so with the added pressure of the public by passers, I took a deep breath and walked into the park. The lads were already playing on the pitch and I had already missed most of the session whilst pissing around waiting outside. I headed towards a staged area and approached a guy and introduced myself. The guy himself was who had replied to my email and that was the first time I met Robert Iwanicki, the man I will forever be grateful for replying to a stranger's email, giving me the start that most coaches are dreaming of. Rob was an ex-youth player at Schalke in Germany and had been involved in Taiwan football for as long as he'd been living there, over 10 years. He was the Manager of the Royal Blues. We chatted about the team and football in general and even if he was being understandably vague (as I would, if someone was trying to get in on my team and I had no idea who they were), I could see his commitment to the game and to this team which he had proudly started from scratch. The BML season was going to start in a couple of weeks and Rob invited me to go along to the match, to watch from the stands and take a look..... that didn't last long!

The first match of the opening BML Season came and the pitch was looking nice. One side of the pitch was old stone seating, still resembling some kind of a stadium, it was good enough for me to feel serious. I took my seat under the sun with paper and pen ready to take some notes. At this time, none of the players had met me and I had talked to nobody else other than Rob, so staying out the way seemed like a fair idea. We got to Half time and was 3-0 down and having just sat and watched 45 minutes of shit, the coward who was hiding behind the bushes outside the training session, jumped up and headed down to the pitch. I'm sure I wasn't on the official staff list but nobody stopped me, and I could see the players looking at me thinking who the hell is this guy. Quickly introducing myself to anyone close to me, I started stretching out some of the lads who needed help, literally rolling up my sleeves and getting stuck into anything I could.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> half came around, I stayed on the sideline and helped to get some shape and organisation into the team. Simple things like pushing the whole team up together, closing the space between the units and keeping shape in relation to the ball, helped us improve in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half and we came out at 1-1. Although it finished in a 4-1 defeat, in my head I counted it as a 1-1 and was quietly happy with it. Post-match, players were complaining and bitching, mostly because guys had turned up and not got on the pitch, basically the normal crap you get when players aren't getting paid to be in a squad. The atmosphere was already

negative, the performance was shocking amid the 2<sup>nd</sup> half improvement but the most important thing for me, was they now knew who I was and for me, all this bitching and lack of performance, was the perfect challenge.

The season continued with lots of downs and minimal ups, with one of the main successes being the organisation gradually improving. I was now fixed in as a kind of Assistant Coach position supporting Rob and although we ended up something like 7<sup>th</sup> in the league, the saving grace was that we now knew who we could and couldn't rely on. Towards the end of the season, players were dropping out, turning up late and in our last match, we started with 9 on the pitch against the eventual winners. It was pure amateur stuff however, I could already see and feel the potential of creating something special and with Rob and I now working together, if nothing else, the club now had two people who was full of passion, commitment and motivation to bring success.

The first thing I wanted to do before the next season started, with me as joint Head Coach, was to refresh my coaching knowledge. Being outside of the U.K and not really feeling confident with my old F.A level 2 and the lack of interest I took in it at the time, I was conscious that I needed to start again and ensure I at least had a more solid foundation to build from and in other words, do things the right way. I wanted to try and avoid travelling back to England if possible but after long searches online, I found that the FA had stopped doing any kind of International coaching education – at least for British coaches, who were living abroad. Eventually I had to bite the bullet and booked onto a Level 2 course which meant I had 2 head back to England for a week in Hull, and then another trip back for the safeguarding and first aid parts of the course.

There was an extra weekend required but it was deemed not essential and fortunately, our tutor allowed me to send work from Taiwan. This meant that to do a course which I had in theory already done, I paid for the course fee, travelled back to England twice at around £750 per flight and lost out on money from time off work. All for a Level 2! The cost, time and effort didn't matter to me, I was focused on doing whatever it took to get me closer to where I was heading.... Remember, I wanted to be a professional coach!

This is one of the reasons why I now have limited patience with anyone making excuses, using time and money as factors. They are weak excuses. If you need more money then get more money, stop going out drinking, stop buying things you don't need, get a part time job... If people are serious about achieving something and want it so badly, then they must do it at all costs. If they say they want to achieve so badly but take no action, then it's just words and they can expect to stay in the same place, whilst watching and moaning as people pass them and take up better roles and opportunities, then moan and bitch some more whilst continuing to blame the F.A or the unfairness of professional players taking all of our jobs. The only barrier to us as humans, is ourselves, so shift the mindset and turn words into action!

Adding to the completion of the F.A course, I was also taking any online courses I could, and one of the most useful and most enjoyable ones I found, was an International Scouting course with Sport Management Worldwide (SMWW). It was all online based with coursework to complete in your own time and in addition to the modules, that were all real life, most importantly it showed me the importance and need of growing your network. Enrolled on the same course were coaches from across the world, including some people from higher up positions at pro clubs. There was a director from Dundee Utd and a couple from pro clubs in the U.S.A. The coursework itself was time consuming but it gave me an amazing grounding, on how to scout and analyse matches, opposition and individual players. One of my tasks was to watch a Honduras v Panama U18 match, and then compile a whole team and player analysis which started as a ball ache, but ended with me knowing every single player on the pitch and on the subs bench, including their current club, value and every favoured action on the pitch – did he receive from the left and play back the same direction? Did they always pass back instead of forward? Did they take a player on before passing etc etc. I loved it and it gave me more confidence and complimented the books I was reading relentlessly every day.

‘Soccernomics’ and ‘Brilliant Orange’ followed ‘Inverting the Pyramid’ on my reading list, and this was the start of my obsession. From waking up until eventually falling asleep, all I was thinking about was coaching and football. My job was turning into a hindrance that wasted my time and stopped me from reading and thinking about more coaching. As I still needed the job for money, I found ways to learn from it every day, whether it be class control or different communication methods. The time I knew that I would soon have to quit, was when my P.E football classes were moving away from being child centred, and I started putting players into teams, that suited the scenarios I wanted to see happen. For example, I wanted to see a strong team vs a weak team who had a strong striker up top. I wanted to see the dynamic and the attitude of the stronger striker in the weak team. This was wrong of me and although I always kept the kid’s safety and interest as a priority, I shouldn’t have manipulated variables for my own selfish needs. My second season with the Royal Blues was coming up, and the time when I would eventually leave my job was also getting closer too.

Since the end of the last season with the 7<sup>th</sup> place finish and through the build up to the next season, Rob and myself continued as motivated as ever. We would stay out after training until 3 or 4am having a beer , talking through everything we wanted to implement with the club and the whole vision for the next years. I was so fortunate to have an understanding girlfriend at the time (who would continue to understand as my wife). Yes, admittedly sometimes we would get carried away due to the alcohol but still, we were laying down plans and a foundation which would turn our dreams into reality. We wanted to get into the top tier of Taiwan football!

The club itself was becoming more organised and our recruitment of players was becoming stronger, due to the exposure through our social media platforms. We started to attract some of the best players from the amateur leagues and we started to put on two training sessions a week. Still, at the time, it was all amateur basis, but we knew this way anyone who was with us, was also willing to commit their time to be with us to the end. Before we knew it, we had a strong team of committed players who mostly bought into what we were trying to achieve, everyone was getting excited as it started to feel we was building a professional club. Not only was it allowing me to feel like I was part of a professional club, it also gave the players pride, to be part of the team. We were all getting the opportunity to chase our dreams, of being at the highest level we could in organised football.

Around the same time, the Taipei City Dragons folded due to the Taiwan top tier deciding they was going to implement the 3 foreigner ruling again. Was it fate? Had I received an email from them, I would have been back at the drawing board where as now, I was at the spearhead of building an up and coming club in a country I had grown so fond of.

My second season started and went much better than the previous one I had witnessed. We had better players, better togetherness and better organisation both on and off the pitch. Through the whole season there was always only going to be one winner, F.C Fritz. They ran the league and their team was made up of mostly ex-Taiwan National team and Division 1 (top tier) players. They were good, but they were hardly challenged intensely. We ended the season coming 3<sup>rd</sup> and we were all gutted not to get 2nd place. Our hard work during pre-season had paid off but still, we were some considerable distance from F.C Fritz and if we wanted to keep our best players, Rob and I knew we had to offer more and push for the title. Fortunately for us, the opportunity to do this would come sooner as expected, but ultimately, it would end in disaster!

News had come from the CTFA that there would be a playoff for two teams to qualify for next season's Division 1. The only catch was, the qualifiers would be following the 3 foreigner rule! This is all Rob and I needed, just a tiny whiff or an opportunity and we was already neck deep in planning for the qualifiers. The obvious and immediate issue we faced, was the fact that we had no local Taiwanese players in our squad. Not a great start! On the switch side, we now had the interest from most of the old Taipei City Dragons team and the rest of the best foreigners, from across the city. If we could put a team of foreigners out, we would qualify, no doubt. The recruiting for our foreigner places started to get serious and this was down to the fact that we got word, that Taipei City Dragons were also invited to the qualifiers as last season's relegated team. This now meant, the best foreigners we thought were joining us, were now undecided on who they would join.



I was at school one day and Rob was giving me minute by minute updates on the foreign player's status.... We were negotiating salary for them! This shit was getting real, we was now in transfer battles and we was putting up our own money, to make sure we got the best foreigners to fill them vital slots in the team. At that moment in time, nothing else was more important, nothing else mattered. We needed the best players possible and we needed to get into Division 1!

The trials started positively, our advertising reached over 20 local Taiwanese players and we had at least another 15 foreigners join too (fighting for 5 places in total). The level was pushed up a notch and some of the lads had the quality we knew was needed. After holding midweek and weekend trials, we finally nailed down a squad and we was thrilled at the fact that we had recruited our group of local players... something which Taipei City Dragons hadn't, and they would not enter the qualifiers. This was a huge relief as they had some really good foreign players, which would have been a tough challenge. We eventually started training 3 times a week with our new squad and it wasn't looking too bad.

The Taiwanese lads weren't the best quality ones, but they seemed able and held their own in training. Technically strong and quick. We knew that we had a mixed bag of in a kind way 'rejects', but that's all what was available. Going into our friendly matches, I was really excited to see what we looked like against other opposition....we was shite! Within the first 20 minutes of the match, it was obvious that most of our players were not 11 aside players, they were futsal players! Great with the ball at their feet but no idea off the ball (in terms of positioning on a full pitch) or when needing to judge different ranged passes. This wasn't helped by the fact that almost all of our trainings, we couldn't use a full pitch (at times only half) so of course, we had been training like a 6 a-side team, with futsal players! NB.Futsal is extremely useful to implement, but not when it hasn't been properly transferred.

The Qualifiers came around and although optimistic, even if by some chance we did qualify, we would get killed in Division 1. We got the lads together, we did all the pre-match meetings as a professional team would and we got ready for the Royal Blue's, first ever Division 1 qualifying game. It was a proud moment for everyone and we got around 200 people come to cheer us on. I think some of the foreigners in the crowd came to see us fail but the majority, were really wishing us the best. For me, this was heaven. I was on a good quality football pitch with my team, a kind of stadium atmosphere and had fans cheering for us.

It was time... the whistle blew and I was shitting myself and knew that the only big chance we had, would be our foreign players to pull something out the bag. 2 minutes in, me and Rob turned to each other on the bench "what the fuck is he doing, he knows he's playing fucking centre back right?!" Our Taiwanese centre back was trying to dribble it around players 25 yards from our goal, he lost it and we went 1-0 down. The first 5 minutes! It get's worse, as he continues to do this while our Full back has now placed himself as a striker.

What the fuck is happening! I thought they was doing it on purpose, maybe trying to sabotage everything but the truth is, we wasn't prepared, they wasn't good enough, and we as coaches had also failed them.

It didn't take long until we went 2-0 down and I wanted to sink into the ground. All of these people who had come to watch us, were now at least getting some comedy value. Half Time! We got the players in and made the needed changes with the main focus being, keeping things basic. Defenders clear the lines, midfielders win the ball and pass forward and 'little Ebrima' to chase the ball whenever it came to him. It wasn't pretty but that's all we could do. That was one of our best plays, Ebrima was one of the quickest players in the whole city. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half came and went too fast. We pulled it back to 2-2 and it was the best feeling for everyone involved, which brought us all together. We had this glimmer of hope and once again we could dream.

Our foreign players now got hold of the match and although still fragile, we were looking confident. Unfortunately, the high didn't last long. We conceded a 3<sup>rd</sup> and then got a man sent off. The match and our hopes of qualifying was over but deep down we all knew, it was a blessing in disguise. What we had done and shown to everyone, was that we wanted to achieve something and even against the odds of using local Taiwan players (which in itself was an indecisive decision from the CTFA) with minimal time to prepare, we had given it a go, and it felt that we made a statement of intent. It certainly wasn't the end.

Having finished 7<sup>th</sup> and then 3<sup>rd</sup> in the league during my arrival, it was an improvement from a previous 9<sup>th</sup> place. It was promising to see this progress and it was an accurate indicator of the path we wanted to head along. The 2015 season would be the one where we pushed for the BML league title, whilst having a careful eye on the Division 1 qualifiers, just incase there would be a foreigner rule again. Rob and I was working well as a team and although we had slight disagreements from time to time, our strengths complimented each other. We decided that this year we would be going out to win the league, then we was going to qualify for the top tier, soon to be renamed the Taiwan Premier League. Rob had to head to Poland for one of his coaching courses and unselfishly, he passed on the full reigns of managing the team to me for the season. This was the time I had been waiting for, I knew that this was my chance to build a coaching platform and I couldn't wait. It must have been really hard for Rob to leave me in sole charge while he was gone, but that's the type of guy he is.

Rob acted with total professionalism and still supported me with a lot of the admin duties, like booking training pitches and player registrations. From my side, I tried to keep him informed as much as possible and we would still exchange ideas as we normally did – I

couldn't have run the team without him. The biggest season of my life was about to start and there was no other option, we had to win the league!

It would be fair to say that the strength of our squad, would depend on the foreigners working in the country or those here as a student at any one time. Fortunately for us, we had assembled a really strong team and we had successfully recruited some strong additions from past rival clubs. Our pre-season started with two training sessions a week and selection for places was getting competitive. With my chance to stamp my own identity on our playing style and with the players at my disposal, our plan A shape was a Mourinho style 4-5-1 that would be devastating on the counter attack, turning into a more attacking 4-3-3 against weaker teams. The central three in midfield which included one holding player, who's only job was to shield the back five (including GK) and to allow the other two CM's to push forward in support of the attacker. Having tried the opposite with a double pivot, I found that the players were getting confused with their roles and positioning. A single pivot, that's your job, you shield and then there's no confusion.

Our wide players were predominately attack minded, but they knew they had to work back and they could. We had pace and stamina down the flanks, solid defence and anchor, with a selection of strikers depending if we needed legs or a body to hold up the ball. Our two wide lads and striker along with one of the attacking centre mids, were encouraged to rotate when they wanted or when they felt they needed to change the dynamic of the match -this proved a difficulty for the opposition to deal with. I started trying to do some opposition analysis and other reports in an attempt to improve our professionalism even more, I would scout the opposition when I could and by now, this role had taken over not only my real full-time job, but also my life. We had to win the league, nothing less.

Much like most of the part-time teams who play around the world and only train twice a week with a match day at the weekend, it was a testing experience for me, with scheduling what needed to be covered in these few sessions. Sometimes it would only be me taking the sessions and like most coaches know, whatever you have planned will rarely go as you want it to. I was always ready with back up plans and although I wouldn't say I'm a really great coach, I certainly made the most of the resources available and did my best to put on competitive, but enjoyable sessions. I like training with intensity, which we didn't have a problem with as everyone was fighting hard for their place. The last session of the week would include some shape and one of the best ways to do this which also included the whole squad, would be to play attack versus defence in one half, using different variables and rules. This helped the players not only become familiar within their units, but also allowed us to train a range of scenarios which may occur in a match; overloads, defending wide areas, attacking from central areas, defensive shape depending on ball position etc etc.

I had a good feeling about the group of players and was secretly confident that we had the upper hand..... I believed in ourselves, in myself and I didn't think other teams were getting through the work that we were.

The season itself went as expected, we were in the top two places throughout and it went down to the wire with Carnegies F.C, another team with some really strong (Ex-Dragons) foreign players. The lads were amazing and their commitment and desire was faultless. Of course, there was some incidents to deal with such as lateness and I felt I handled it well, with only one real regret which happened on the last game of the season. Still battling it out with Carnegies F.C for the top spot and having already drawn with them in our first meet, crunch time was here. We met them again in what would be almost the title decider and the match just like the first, didn't let anyone down. It was thrilling and intense. Overall, we had the more depth in our squad and the younger legs, but it was a tough game. Our organisation and efforts of professionalism shone through and we won to go top.

What an amazing feeling and although the title was even tighter in our grips, I still couldn't settle until it was won. We had a BBQ after the match, just as a last get together before the final push. Luckily the rooftop of the apartment overlooked the pitch and I was so excited to watch our next opponents. Obsessed. It was pissing it down and the BBQ was getting wet, people were going inside or hiding under umbrellas like an ex-England manager on the sideline. I didn't care, I stood there with my wet hot dog and cheap bottle of Taiwanese beer, already playing out in my mind the players needed to win. I knew the lads were laughing at me and taking the piss, it was reasonable. Who the hell was this guy stood in the pouring rain, writing notes on a match which to most, didn't matter at all. Well, it mattered to me.

Our last match of the season came around and if we won, we would be champions regardless of any other results (Carnegies F.C would be playing after us). A draw still would make the title likely, but could go down to goal difference depending on other results. I didn't want that to happen. We all wanted it done and put to bed. Our last match was against last year's defending champions F.C Fritz and again, they still had a few ex National team players and were a real threat. On paper we had the strongest team now and we had it all to play for, but I was still nervous. We got our preparation right and there was a feel good factor in the squad, we were so so close!

Let's get back to my one regret. Rob and I decided to fly back one of our defenders who had previously moved to South Korea and missed most of the back end of the season. Although

a solid player, we managed without him but we was so focused on having the strongest squad available for the game, we brought him in and left out a guy who had been loyal and a good performer for us. He was sat on the bench and only when we went up by 3 goals, I brought him on. That was a bad decision by me and if I had the chance to go back in time, I wouldn't of done it. It wasn't down to the fact that I didn't trust him, I just selfishly wanted the best players both on the pitch and off the bench. I didn't see it at the time but my decision to bring him on whilst winning by a comfortable margin, was disrespectful.

In my mind I wanted him to get on and get some minutes in our final title winning match but outside of my mind, it was disrespect. Finally, the final whistle went, we won 5-2 and we were champions. We had won the BML and I can't explain the feeling, I was so grateful for the efforts from all of the lads, they were brilliant all through the season and not once, did anyone do anything that would splinter the team. They were quality lads and the title was for them, I owe both Rob and everyone involved so much, as they all made the title possible. Celebrating with the trophy, I then received an additional bonus surprise of receiving coach of the season, although, they probly gave it to the title winning coach every year. I didn't care, this was my first league title as a coach and was also my first personal award as a coach. From just under 3 years since the life changing game of FIFA, I was a league winning coach. My vision was taking place and I was to learn, it was only the beginning.

Here we go again, it was the qualifiers! And this time, there no foreigner restrictions! We had no intentions of playing in the BML again to defend our title, we were ALL IN for qualifying and getting into the top tier. That was the plan and that was the next step for me as a coach – I had to coach in a top tier league of a country! The qualifiers got down to the last 3 teams and we had to travel down south to play two matches, it was crazy. In good old CTFA (Chinese Taipei Football Association) fashion, we were drawn to play our first match late at night, with the second match the next day. No break! Well that's just fucking great, not only did we have no rest, we were also at a disadvantage by the fixtures because depending on the results and scores, the very last match between the two Taiwanese teams would mean they had the power to 'decide' who went through. This was not a good start and mentally, it was already a big challenge.

We got on the road in our hired bus and headed 5 hours down south to our hotel. We had organized more support staff in the capacity of an admin bod, a fitness coach and two massage therapists. Rob and I spent our own money on stocking the hotels fridge with fruit, drink and other snacks, whilst the lounge area was equipped with two make shift ice baths. We did everything in our power to create the best environment for the lads and it was the

sign of the professionalism, that had seen the club go from 9<sup>th</sup> place finishers, to 7<sup>th</sup>, to 3<sup>rd</sup>, to a league title and now down to the last three teams in the Division 1 qualifiers. Some things as always, were out of our control. *'Concentrate your energy on the things you can control'*.

Unlike one night, turning up at a training session, to find that a stage for a concert was being built on our pitch and we had a space of around 20x20 to do a full session. I remember the night as I walked towards the pitch, under the floodlights I could see scaffolding and a large stage area. What the fuck was this, we've got qualifiers coming up! I went to talk with one of the construction workers and tried to explain we want to play football here, him and his mates pissed themselves laughing and gave me a thumbs up. They didn't give a shit and knowing that this mess wasn't about to disappear in the next couple of hours, we got on with training. Training inside concert construction isn't easy, especially when there's a few forklift trucks cutting through your almost non-existent playing area!

Our first match was in the evening against a team who had previously been in the top league and had finished bottom, meaning they had to play in the qualifiers. We had the afternoon to prepare and all the tactic boards were in place. I went upstairs to find that we was one room short and Rob was already spread out ready for a nap. "Mate, where's our room?". He laughed and said this was it. I put my bags down and went to check on the lads, some were getting a massage and I asked where Small Ebrima was? "Here I am coach", poking his head out his door followed by his girlfriend's head coming out to say hi. "Fuck me mate, we're playing later tonight, just take it easy ok!". With that, the door next to Small Ebrima's room opened and Big Ebrima's head popped out (Small Ebrima was our winger/striker and Big Ebrima was our attacking midfielder and as the name suggests, was the bigger of the two), "Hi coach I'm here!" which was then followed by another head popping out from his room..... his girlfriend, "Fucking hell fire, you two Ebrima's just take it easy ok, we need you for tonight, we need you ready!". "Yes Coach". I went back to my room where Rob was really comfortable now, he was laughing, "what's up mate?" "Not much, only the two Ebrimas with their girlfriends in neighboring rooms before our big match". We both laughed, they were both good lads, respectful and even if not ideal, it was funny and I was assured it wouldn't effect their performance.

We got to the stadium ready for what would be the biggest match in the club's history and certainly the biggest in my young coaching career. The stadium was the home of our opponent's, Tainan City and we sure knew it. We wasn't given a changing room to change in and the quickly becoming waterlogged pitch, had been made narrower in an attempt to stop our pace down the flanks. The match was tight, unattractive due to the deep puddles

on the pitch and it turned into a battle. The first team to adjust to the conditions would win the game, and as we started to kick the ball hard for even small passes and cut out running with the ball, that was us! We scored and then defended for our lives and got an awful 1-0 win. This didn't go down well with Tainan City's staff, their manager (who was also some kind of member of the regional F.A) picked up a traffic cone and threw it at us in the dugout. Then their 3<sup>rd</sup> choice GK took his shirt off revealing a wobbly beer belly grabbed hold of another traffic cone, waving it and challenging anyone who 'fancied some'. Bad losers, fuck em, we won and we got the 3 points, go fuck yourselves with your traffic cones!

I sat back down on the bench feeling relieved, I was drained and emotional. The job wasn't done yet, only 50% and this match was heavy, it took a lot out of the lads and now we had to get ready for another match the next day, this time in the afternoon.... Not useful at all. During the game I'd made a man management error and called one of our defenders a Dick Head, during the match. Not the best way to keep them focused and keep their respect but hey, there's always lessons to learn!

It was late by the time we got back to the hotel and the lads got straight into the ice buckets, got taped up and massaged, refueled and then settled in for the night. I was shattered, it had been a long day and I went up to my room. The room wasn't big enough for me and Rob, I couldn't sleep there, and I wasn't going to join with any of the Ebrimas! I made my way back down to the lounge area where a few squad players were watching some football on T.V, I settled down for the night on a small sofa and didn't sleep a wink.

A few of the lads came in a bit later and had gone for a beer to unwind. It wasn't the best idea from them but at the same time, after a match you still have pent up energy and people unwind differently. I was conscious that even though we were trying to make things more professional and set different rules and expectations, I still didn't want to take away from the players their personality and traits, that made them the player they was - as long as they didn't take the piss. In no time, daylight was here and I was still awake staring at the ceiling. I had been thinking about our next match and the day ahead, all night. A draw would see us qualify but just like before when winning the title, we needed to go for the win!

We got to the stadium again and everything felt tired. I was exhausted, the lads were laughing as I looked tired as shit. I had the last laugh as they were the ones needing to play another 90 minutes. The game was poor, we never looked in danger of losing but legs were tiring and little mistakes started to come into our game. Without sounding like a cry baby, it wasn't fair. We had just finished our last match the night before around 9.30pm, and 3.30pm the next day we was facing a fresh team raring to go. We went 1-0 down and we looked knackered. The mood was dull and we was putting on a lot of pressure, but hitting brick walls. Time was ticking away and no breakthroughs were coming. The lads kept working and working and you could see, most of them was functioning on pure will power alone. 90 minutes was up and there was going to be 3 minutes additional time. I was

drained, and my stomach was sick, I was empty. We had come so far and everyone had gave so much, this didn't feel justified that it would end this way in such shitty circumstances.

Down to the last 30 seconds and the lads were still trying to play football, actually playing some great stuff and we created what must be our last attack. The ball breaks into the box and takes a deflection and falls into the path of big Ebrima, it's the last kick of the game and he finishes it with a placed shot! Big Fucking Ebrima had just got us the draw we needed! We all went wild, all of our fans who came to watch cheered and shouted, the squad and staff raced down the sideline to celebrate, some players could hardly run and was shuffling forward. I was sprinting to get to everyone, but my legs were sinking into the ground, we had qualified, we had made sure that in the last match to play between the two local clubs, we couldn't get screwed over. Two teams from the three would qualify and one of them was us! The Royal Blues Taipei had made it to the top tier league of the country, and I was going to have the opportunity to coach in a country's top tier league.

Without Rob, the players, all of the staff and people giving up their free time, this wouldn't have been possible.

Our first three matches in the top tier of Taiwan went better than expected, with 2 wins and 1 draw. The first match of the season was against one of the best teams in the country, Tatung F.C. Their side was sprinkled with National Team players both past and present and everyone expected us to get hammered. Having stepped up attempts to offer our lads some analysis on our opponents and players, I had a sneaky feeling we would cause an upset. We had put together the strongest squad of foreigners from the city and we had grown comfortable in our more exciting 'Mourinho style' of play and the Plan B version. For this match, we needed the defensive version and with T.V cameras watching, we played out an awful, scrappy 0-0 draw. Tatung hated it, they couldn't stand it. I loved it, one match in and we was mixing it with the bigger boys and with the two wins that followed, we was in 3<sup>rd</sup> position and in touch with a qualifying place for the South East Asian Cup Qualifiers (a very watered down version of the Euro/Uefa cup for South East Asia).

Sadly for me, this was to be the end with the Royal Blues and although moving on, I was gutted. I had built and still hold a huge affection for the club, players, Rob and all the other people that helped the team achieve what it did. It felt like home and deep down I didn't want to leave, a big part of me wanted to continue this epic journey we had created. As hard as it was, the time had come, and I had got an offer I couldn't refuse.

Before the start of the season I had quit my teaching job and was focused on concentrating on coaching full-time (even though it wasn't a full-time role) and also, I had got married. Everyone at the Royal Blues Taipei F.C enabled me to progress in my coaching journey and for Rob, it is this man who gave me that small chance to make it all possible. Thank you!





#### **4. Thrills in the Phils and Life in a Jail Cell**

Whilst still with Taipei Royal Blues, I had travelled to Australia to complete my B Licence. Having tirelessly tried to get onto a B license course in the U.K and Ireland, I decided I couldn't wait any longer and got onto the FFA/AFC pathway with minimal fuss. The FFA was so welcoming and helpful, I was relived just to be able to continue my development again. Furthermore, I would need a B Licence to be able to coach in the Taiwan top tier. I headed to Canberra to the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and got stuck into the intense course, which offered accommodation and an amazing three meals a day. I arrived with a good attitude and best intentions but very quickly, I found myself impatient with the attention given to junior football - I just wanting to hear about the senior game which I was working in. The learning itself was certainly useful for me and we had a couple of good blokes as our tutors – Warren (Wozza) Grieve, a British coach who was making a good name for himself over in Oz and David 'Smudger' Smith.

As time went on, I just wanted to get out of there and get back to my team, coaching senior adults. For anyone coaching abroad in or around Asia and unable to get back to the U.K to do their Licences, I would highly recommend the FFA pathway. The most ideal choice would be the Irish F.A who do an intense block learning course but failing that, heading to Australia will keep you ticking over until your circumstances change. Don't worry about AFC or other bodies not being recognized/accepted in UEFA leagues. If you are living and coaching abroad, you're most probably making more money and enjoying a better life (not to mention experiencing more coaching hours), don't be in a hurry. You can do your UEFA quals at a later time that suits your own circumstances. If you are wanting to head to Europe in the near future then for sure, find any way possible to get back there and stay/get on the UEFA pathway.

Before my B Licence had come to an end (needing to go home and continue to work practically and with theory through distant learning) I received some explosive news. I was contacted by Simon Mcmenemy, a British Head Coach who was over in the Philippines with top tier side, Loyola Meralco Sparks. He was looking for an assistant coach and through previous correspondence with each other, and seeing I was already involved in the Asian scene, he asked if I would be interested. I didn't have to think about it, it was already a yes and I was already up for the challenge. Even through my days in Taiwan, I was already plotting out my next suitable steps in the Asian football scene and I had pin pointed the Philippines, as a good next step in my new career.

As well as focusing on Taipei Royal Blues and obsessing over them every day, I would also spend endless hours watching matches from what was then, the Philippines Football League (PFL). I studied the teams, the players, the way they played and tried to keep updated with

coach movements in the country. This led me to feel like I was already working there and one of the biggest things for me being, it was a full-time professional team. I would be getting my first full-time contract as a professional coach. It was really happening.

As I sat at the airport in Sydney waiting to board the plane back to Taiwan, the awesome news continued to come. Wozza, one of the B Licence tutors messaged me to say congratulations and that I had already passed my practical part of the course, through my 'on course practicals' meaning, I wouldn't have to go back and film a load of footage of me coaching a load of sessions. It was a relief and I was buzzing as it meant I had already secured my B Licence before I got to the Philippines (which I really needed) and with the blood still pumping, I sat on the plane and used the long flight to complete all of the needed theory work.

I was now a B licence coach. Next step, to go back home and go through the bitter sweetness of preparing for my new job but also, having to leave my wife. It wasn't only my wife I would have to say goodbye to, it was also all of the people connected with the Royal Blues Taipei, which would make it a double wammy of tough goodbyes. To add to that, I was nervously waiting on more information from Meralco Sparks and the days kept ticking by without hearing anything. Simon was great, he kept reassuring me and answered any worries I was having, but it was still tough. As each day passed with no solid date or details of arrangements, I started to worry my dream was going to come crashing down. My wife kept asking when my flight was, everyone kept asking when I was going and the truth was, I had no idea what so ever.

Fuck it, I'd rather take the risk of flying over there and looking like a dick rather than sitting around waiting for each day to feel like 50 hours. I made the decision to book a flight and head over to the Philippines off my own back (and felt uninvited). Again, Simon was great and he supported me whilst telling me what the issues were, that was delaying any kind of clarity in what was going on. Apparently, there was internal issues about existing staff and some loose ends that needed sorting out. Mainly about the guy I was due to replace!

After finally settling in and confirming that I was actually meant to be there, I couldn't wait to get started. My role would be the Assistant Coach of the 1<sup>st</sup> team and also the Academy Manager. What I quickly sensed from meeting and chatting with different people involved with the club, is that there were some clashes which had happened previously and I could feel an underlaying atmosphere. From what I know now, having worked in a few different locations across the world, it's mostly down to ego, pride and not wanting to be pushed back in the pecking order. No matter where you go as a foreign coach or an 'outsider', there will always be resistance to you, even if your intentions are good. There will be locals who are great at wanting to share and learn new ideas, and then there will always be those who think they know better. The Philippines, similar to many other countries and just like I experienced in Taiwan, was all about ego and having their name to something. Don't get me

wrong, the people were amazing and great with me and if anything, it was sad that things left on a less than positive note (which I will get to soon).

I met the lads at my first training session and the mix of the squad was awesome! There were some great local lads, good young talent mixed with some ex-internationals as well as current National Team players, some decent foreigners who had won the AFC Champions League and then there were the players who were born to a Filipino parent and a 'foreign' parent. There's still some questioning of their 'blood' and their 'half bloodedness' but you talk to any one of them, and they are 100% proud to be Filipino and to represent the Philippines... their country. There should be no debate, as these players had experience with pro clubs around Europe and they bring the quality and standards higher. Not to mention, many of them had or are currently representing the Philippines National Team with honour and pride.

On this particular day it was a gym session with the conditioning coach – an ex 100m sprinter. Nice guy, still in great shape and really knowledgeable about sports conditioning. The lads were lifting, pushing and pulling some heavy weight and I could also see their explosiveness was looking good. This was awesome I thought, we're going to smash pre-season and hit the ground running I thought.... And then I learned how long pre-season had already been going on - maybe over two months, with still weeks to go before a match would be played! The more I found out the more concerned I got and immediately, I was put in an awkward situation of having to question why the players were being trained like sprinters with no seemingly periodization or thought, for when a ball or football specific sessions were going to be introduced.

I'm no ex-Olympic athlete or claim to be the most knowledgeable coach in different areas, but I had been a qualified Fitness Coach for over 10 years at that point, with experience training sports people in preparation for sport. With each gym or conditioning session, I saw the lads looking in great shape and generating amounts of power that was scary, but now I was questioning my own judgement. I started wondering if I was wrong and everyone else was going along with this because it was right. Then, I saw what I needed to see that convinced me I should trust my own knowledge and instincts more often.

Sport, coaching, training and different philosophies will always open up big debate with hundreds of contradicting opinions. The majority of the time, it can all come down to what is best for the situation or for your group of players (in terms of football). When really in doubt, coaches should remember what the end aim is. With football players, they need to be 'football fit and football ready'. Strength training, conditioning, power and every other type of fitness training is very important in the game and it will always remain this way BUT, football is played with a ball and 11 footballers (correctly conditioned), will always beat 11

sprinters in a match. Sprinting is certainly important to the football player and our player's were quicker and their sprinting technique was perfect (big genuine praise for the conditioning coach with regards to conditioning them for running) but In my head I know that depending on position, a player will make over 400 changes of direction with power during a match. I knew that although the players were bigger and stronger, they were also weaker due to being in the habit of running in straight lines, meaning that the explosive turning and motions needed for football, could lead to serious injury.

My fears again were confirmed. The first real training session with the ball, the lads were awful. There were some really strong technical players from Dutch, Spanish and English leagues including National Team players, so I had them do some basic possession games in two grids. One error by me was that I made the grids too small considering it was one of the first sessions with a ball but what I didn't foresee, was how uncomfortable their control was. They were mega pissed off, almost like someone had just taken their super power away from them - the power to make a ball do what they wanted it to do. This continued, and trainings were becoming hard work, players were getting restless and a bad vibe was building within the camp. In addition, my attitude was also becoming poor. I had a chat with Simon about my concerns with the Pre-season training and he was understanding but at the same time, I got the impression that this was how it had to be.

From what I know now about football in Asia, some things are out of the Head Coaches' control and at times, there are too many friends of a friend of the friend's cousin getting involved with some decision making. Even though I'd never been involved with a Full-Time professional team before, I'd had to carefully plan the previous training schedules in Taiwan by juggling part-time player availability with match days, and this just didn't feel right. It got worse.

Our friendly matches came around and we were shit. We were rusty, lacking a good touch, terrible at any kind of combination play and was off the pace, which was funny because we were fast. Yeah for sure, there were times that you could see we were faster chasing a ball down the line, but that was what we had trained for. The 2nd match was against a University team and if I recall, we went 1-0 down. Same story again, slow and off the pace, so uncomfortable on the ball. The 3<sup>rd</sup> match was the straw to break the camel's back when again we were dreadful, and we picked up some really bad injuries. After the match, one of the club Directors arranged that we would all go for an 'emergency meeting' to sort this all out and get to the bottom of what was happening.

I wasn't surprised, everyone could see that things were not right. Simon had to be away for the meeting and instead of re-arranging it until the club's Head Coach was available, the meeting went ahead as normal. Unbelievable! By this time, Simon and my relationship was strained and having started out wanting to do so much for the guy who had given me my first chance in pro football, I had found myself siding with some of the unhappy players

instead of having the Head Coach's back. That's one thing I regret about my time in the Phils. It was my first time as an Assistant Coach and it was Simon's first time having a foreign Assistant Coach so we were both learning, but I had given him enough reasons to get rid of me. He didn't do, he's a quality bloke and I started to see he was actually surviving the way you needed to as a foreign coach in Asian football. He had previous experience in Asia and in some tough environments, he would tell me a few times "choose the battles you can win, because some things are out of our control". Even though our Head to Assistant Coach relationship wasn't as it should be, I wasn't happy about this emergency meeting and it was an experience that really showed me what foreign coaches are up against in any country.

Before the meeting of doom started, I met with the club's physio and I asked for our injury records. I can't remember the exact figures but since the start of pre-season training to the current date (which was still in pre-season), we already had something like 13 injuries with 9 of them being overuse injuries (looking at quads and hamstrings here). I was shocked but not surprised, after all, a recovery session we once did after a match consisted of more straight line running.

We all entered this Japanese restaurant and sit at a large table. General Manager is there with Director, conditioning coach, another team manager and the club physio and of course, me. No Head Coach. What happened next was just laughable. We was asked to go around the table and vote a show of hands, on different criteria such as 'Head Coach's performance', 'tactics', 'training' etc etc. I was put right on the spot, but the sad thing about it was that if I wasn't honest, everyone would see through me because we all knew that there were some issues going on. Then it came around to voting for 'conditioning training' a score out of 10. I gave it a 3/10. "What, what you think", the conditioning coach exploded sitting across from me. "I'm sorry but our players are not football ready, this is why the performances are bad and this is why we have 9 overuse injuries before the season has even started". I went on to add, "the players condition is now the equivalent to a team who is coming into the end of the season. They are tired mentally and physically, fragile and they are not ready for the start of a season". One of the only real sensible points of the whole meeting and not much came of it.

One of the biggest changes it had, was to have it agreed that the conditioning coach would start incorporating 'using a ball' into warm ups which was ridiculous. Our warm ups started to look like a ball mastery session for U4's but worse, the ball mastery session only had one ball per 12 or so players (let me add, the conditioning coach in question was a quality coach for athletes in my opinion, and if I ever wanted a personal trainer or fitness coach for other needs, I would have no hesitation in using him or recommending him). Eventually it started to get sorted out, we added another fitness coach who was more football specific and more flexible taking on board other people's opinions, and things picked up.

Unfortunately for me, my attitude was still wavering and more things kept adding to my frustrations: Why did we have pre-match meals at a steak house with fries and burgers? I was promised some small funding for my A Licence in Australia, with the idea later being dismissed, I had worked tirelessly with the academy to help build it up and started to hit resistance for progress. The funniest example was this big deal about entering our youth teams into the Gothia Cup overseas. Apparently, there was some turf war going on between academies in the Philippines, and our nemesis had got us barred from the competition. What a load of nonsense, how could we be barred from a global youth tournament! I spent every day for the next 2 weeks making it my personal aim to get us into the Gothia Cup and finally, we did it! We had got accepted and everyone was buzzing. I stood up and did a small presentation about it, which included the future of the academy and..... I looked like an absolute twat! When it came down to it, it was all talking and talking and words and more words. It became apparent that there was no true interest in entering the tournament and my efforts had been in vein.

On the pitch, things started to slowly turn around and we were picking up momentum. The lads were quality, great people and good players. We had beaten Ceres Le Salle, who were and are the best team in the country and have recently got far in the Asian club competitions. Things were looking brighter. Simon and I were getting on a bit better and I was genuinely pleased it was turning around with him still present. He had been under scrutiny from a few friends of a friend of a friend's cousin and throughout it all, he always kept his dignity and class. I've since apologised to him and for me, I learned some great lessons of what a good Assistant Coach needs to be;

- a sounding board between players and Head Coach
- comfortable with bringing concerns to the Head Coach in the right way
- loyal and always have the Head Coach's back
- prepared to never get involved with players too closely, that it clouds judgement

If you can take player's concerns to the Head Coach and have any issues or concerns ironed out without making the environment feel like a revolt, then you're on the right track.

Coming up to the midway point in the season, we were sitting in the top 3 positions of the league. The lads and staff had done great to recover from the terrible pre-season and early season performances, and I was again fortunate to find myself at a club who was in the mix to qualify for an Asian club cup competition. The referees were poor, and you had to feel for them, as it wasn't their fault. I just don't think they were getting the support and education needed from the F.A. Some of it though, comes down to common sense and when I started

coaching our U18's, officials' common sense was invisible. I took the matches with our U18's just as serious as I would any other senior team. We had assembled an ok team with not much to choose from and time to do it. We were set up well and organized and there were times where I had to tell the referees the rules of the game. We won our first two matches and then I was to be replaced by a Japanese coach, so I could continue with my other club duties.

The Japanese coach had a reputation of a Jedi Master for training youths, and I was excited to see the master at work. Within one week and one match, he dismantled everything we had built. He fucking killed it. He took the strong team spirit the lads had built and crushed it. Tactically, it was a disaster. I went to watch a match and saw our back line what was lacking in pace, playing so high up the field that every time we lost possession, it was almost a goal conceded. This went on all game and nothing changed. Parents were coming up to me from the stands and asking what was happening. I left before we ended with a 5-1 battering. No more 'Jedi Mind Tricks' for me.

Back to the senior team, we had just picked up another 3 points and one of the lads had scored a hat-trick on his birthday. Quality goals too! We had a recovery session the next day and a few of the lads went out for a beer, not ideal but a beer to unwind is what some players (and staff) need at times. I went into town later and met up with the birthday boy and we grabbed a quick drink together before calling it a night, all in good time for the recovery session the next day. There was only us two left and we had some nice footy chat and a good bit of bonding and then he bought a bottle of something to take home. I told the birthday boy to take it home and save it for us, the next time he scored a hat-trick, and we headed outside.

As a coach, of course I was in the wrong to be out in not the best area of Manila, the day before a recovery session, with a player, but getting us both home asap was better than making the night any later which could have been easily done. We headed outside to grab a taxi and as we stepped out, the café manager stopped us shouting that birthday boy (let's abbreviate him as BB from now on) had not paid for the bottle he was taking out.

He had done, because I saw him go to the bar and saw him bring it back to the table while putting his money back in his pocket. Manager was having none of it and to quickly try and calm the situation, I offered the Manager double what the bottle was, so either way, a profit was made and we could all carry on with life. NO CHANCE! In a flash, the police where parked up and twisting BB into handcuffs against their car. What the hell was going on! I was asking Manager to tell the police that it was sorted and to let BB go but it was too late, BB was already sat in the back of the cop car. One of the Policeman came to me shouting in my face, so I started shouting back, then I had Manager, Police Wanker and random bystanders who had come to get into the action all shouting at me. For What? I should have stayed calm and refrained from shouting like they was, with their child brains, but I could



see it was a set up and I lost it. "You fucking jobs worth prick, corrupt cop cunt and you, you little manager runt, you'll get your karma". So much for words of wisdom.... I was soon sat next to BB in the back of the car.

We both sat there in silence for a while trying to figure out if this was funny or if it was serious. It seemed funny because it was a big misunderstanding and the two cops in the front, were chatting to us about football and general life in the Philippines. We're totally fine I thought, so I asked them where they was taking us' "just going to central precinct boss, not far now". Ok great, because the cuffs were digging into me and as an ex policeman in the military myself, the cuffs digging into me cutting off my circulation (behind my back) didn't quite seem like correct protocol. We get to the station and the cops usher us inside. Manager is already sat at the desk with another officer - no doubt having told his story, they had created a new ending. We took a seat next to manager.

The desk copper explained what Manager had told him and I couldn't believe my ears. I turned to him and said "come on man just tell the truth and make all of this go away. You know you need to do the right thing here and we can all go home". Manager looked down at the floor and the desk copper shouted across the desk at me "LIAR" ..... It was aimed at me. Not Manager. With that, the door from the room next to us burst open and what must have been the Sgt having a nap, came steaming into me looking pissed off at being woken up. He knocked my off my chair onto the ground and the two car coppers, desk copper and Sgt started kicking me while I lay on the floor (a note to anyone in this situation: roll yourself up into a ball and cover your head with hands as soon as possible). "You fucking pussies, you weak little men, fuck off you pussies". I'd lost my self-control and I was crossing the line of no return, but what else was I to do? Fortunately, the cops weren't putting full effort in, otherwise I would of known about it. The Filipinos are tough bastards and you don't want to get on the wrong side of them, let alone four of them. Cuffed again, with hands behind my back, car cop took me down to a bottom holding cell where I sat and listened to a couple of slaps hit BB's face. Each slap gained a shout from me in my lone cell.

After the soft beating and friendly slaps were over, they told us to get into the car again. "Where are we going now, is it time to go yet"? I was still confident they was just having a little fun with us and it was now coming to an end. "Hospital", one of the car cops replied. At first, I thought they was taking us to the hospital to cover their asses about hitting and kicking us, but no. They were taking us to the hospital to account for any injuries on record before they took us to a central holding jail. This wasn't a good sign and it all still felt really surreal.

Me and BB were still finding it hard to believe and we tried to lighten the mood, more so for our own sake to try and hide our worry. Standing inside the hospital reception both with hands cuffed behind our backs, we was left alone and with childish grins on our faces we pretended to run away. We got outside and if we wanted to, we could of actually ran away

unchallenged but to where? And with hands cuffed, we wouldn't get far and then what? Turn up to training as normal? Car Cop came and got us eventually and didn't see the funny side. A doctor came and took some details and I pleaded with him to quickly listen to our story. He did so with no emotion and he already knew what was happening, he had no choice but to go along with it. All checked out with a full bill of health apart from a couple of marks from the 'precinct shoe in', all good to go.

In the back of the car, this time was less friendly, of course, the con was coming to the main event. We got to the central 'holding jail' police station place and surprise surprise, Manager was there again. Fancy that. One by one we were led in for a quick interview with some CID, plain cloths police and I was relieved, maybe we could start making some sense. After the short interviews, we walked out and they started to usher BB towards a secret door which was hiding prison cells on the other side. Now what's happening here then! CID and Manager came to me and said that BB would be arrested for theft. I said ok, and what am I doing here. Manager was being more reasonable and real now. He sat alone with me and said he was really sorry, but there's nothing he could do and my best hope, would be to talk with the police and say sorry.

I said of course, I will say sorry no problem. I didn't realise at the time but what Manager was trying to tell, by passing a message on from CID, the unspoken words were I should just pay a fee and all of this would go away. He didn't say this, and I was so tired and hurting from the cuffs which were now making my wrists bleed, I never thought to be the one to bring the subject up and ask to pay a 'fee' off my own back. All of a sudden, CID came, asked me to go with him and started to usher me to the hidden door where BB was now placed. I started to resist and CID was soon joined by two other coppers... Here we go again! It was getting on for around 6 hours now and my hands were still cuffed behind my back, ripping into my wrists and now these three morons were trying to wrestle me into a secret door, where BB had gone and not returned.

I knew if I went, then there was no going back and this mess would surely start to spiral out of control. I lost the scuffle, obviously hopping around like a flamingo wasn't going to get me anywhere and I was shoved behind the door of death.

Through the door was two small cells. I looked through and saw BB sat against the wall through the bars. The cell was packed full of prisoners. CID tried to push me in and I was resisting again in full view of everyone. My mistake which turned out to be good fortune, was that with the scuffling, there had been no time to hand in my valuables, but my phone was took from me by a guard. I stood in the cell and finally got the cuffs off me. The guard held onto my arm and BB looked at me as if to say, just let it go man. I stood there, everyone crowded around me and surprisingly, it was still all too surreal for me to be scared. From behind the crowd the smallest guy in the cell appeared with a lead pipe. How

and why the fuck is this little shit-head wielding a pole?! He came to me and stood guard over me while two guys checked my pockets and basically mugged me.

They took my wallet, shared out the contents of what was around £60, and then gave me back my wallet. Ok, could have been worse... I had been mugged, but it was pretty easy. They wanted my watch and wedding ring but they wasn't convincing and I did my best stern, quietly powerful impression and told them they won't be having these items. Thankfully it worked. With the drama over, the money collected and another foreigner added to the house, it was business as usual. I took a seat on the floor next BB and looked around me. "How has this happened mate"?

The cell was around 25x25 feet and the back part was a make shift shower and toilet with only a small wall to separate the two areas. There must have been around 20 of us cramped in there and with myself and BB, there was one other foreigner sat in the opposite corner, with a local guy sat between his legs and holding his hands. It was already early morning now and I was tired, which helped numb my panic and I guess, help limit my worry or even care of what could be happening. Still, I couldn't believe that it was happening and now we had no idea how long it was going to last, and what was going to happen next. There was still part of me that thought it was a mistake or just a show of power from the cops, but it was the not knowing, the unknown that starts messing with your head.

We had no phones and no way of letting anyone know where we was. There was none of this one phone call shit like in the movies. The guys in the cell took it in turns to try and talk with us, to test us out and all I kept thinking was to show strength and quiet confidence but not too much, in which to attract any aggression. Me and BB both had tattoos at least, but some of these guys were obvious gang members with tear drops on their face and the comfortable expression of feeling at home. All in all, everything was calm, and nobody bothered us apart from the little fucker who had the pole. There was a lot bigger and older guys than him but he was swanning around like the playground bully, basically irritating the fuck out of everyone and they would never react. He came to us and talked normally, no issues, no problems but he kept on asking for my watch in jest.

There was one guy whose English was good and he was an ok singer. He sat next to me and asked which songs I wanted him to sing and he also started to tell me what some people where in here for, "he did something bad to his wife, he is always in here, he has beaten someone badly and he (pointing to the little guy with pole) has been in here for a year". My heart dropped and that's the first time I started to really panic. "A year! How's this happening and why are people staying in a holding cell for so long"? Apparently, some guys were just left here as it's the best place for them. Hours passed and midday came and went... still no sign of us getting out or any sign that anyone knew we were even here. Lunch came and went. Some rice and a bit of meat and to be fair, it wasn't too bad at all. We all

ate with our hands and it was enough but the one thing stopping me from eating more, I didn't want to go for a shit any time soon!

Eventually, BB was able to go and use his phone for 2 minutes and he called the club General Manager. They said they was doing all they could and will see us when things were sorted. That was a huge relief as it was getting closer to the evening and there was no way, I wanted to spend the night with my new friends. Every minute started to feel like an hour, time was going slow and even though I was happy nothing eventful was happening, my mind started going to dark places. I started having thoughts of being stuck in here or going to court for some unknown reason and being moved to a real jail. I started missing my wife. My poor wife was pregnant, and she had no idea where I was and why I wouldn't be in contact for a long time. All I wanted to do was get out and talk with her, to let her know I was ok. The other foreigner from the far corner came across to talk with me and by this time, I wasn't in the talking mood. He was from Serbia and trying to talk football but the only thing I wanted to know was, "how long have you been here"? his reply stabbed me in the heart, "3 months. They keep changing the rules and my solicitor is working now to try and get me released".

It turns out that he was accused of sexual assault, so who knows the real truth behind that. After our quick chat he went back to his corner with the guy sitting back on his lap and embracing with comfort. It may have been desperation, but I started to envy the fact that at least he had some sort of comfort. Little Shit with the pole was still bouncing around trying to stir things up and it was like his energy was starting to build, this was my one big worry. Why were the big lads covered in tattoos not stepping in or telling him to calm down? That was a telling sign.

Finally some hope, the new guy was coming into the cell and he looked hard as fuck. Big lad with tattoos around his neck and face, surely he would take charge and get this little shit with the pole to calm down and wind his neck in. 'Tattoo neck' walks in and he's made to stand in the middle of the cell, while the other prisoners crowded around. SMACK, the little shit-head with pole, walked straight up and blind sided him with a right hook to the jaw. 'Tattoo neck' dropped to his knees and accepted the punch with no retaliation. I didn't understand what had just happened until later, I found out he was from a rival gang and even later on, I found out it was going to be a long night ahead with the little shit-head with the pole!

That was my last hope of some kind of calm before the night came to us. Tattoo neck was then made to be the cell bitch and was given the job of sweeping and cleaning the house and bathroom! The moment I'd been waiting for finally arrived. Two guys from the club came and had brought with them three huge buckets of KFC with them. It was great to see

them and such a relief. They told us that they wanted to do BB for theft and they wanted to get me for aggression towards a police officer, for my shouting at him outside the café. It was some made up bull shit arrest and what they really wanted, was to be paid off. I was told that they seriously wanted to pass me on into the system, where it would go to court and that was the worst scenario ever. I couldn't believe my ears, If I get pushed through on some nonsense charge, I knew I would end up in real jail. "Just keep your heads down and we're trying to get this sorted".

The last piece of great news came when we were told we would have to spend the night with our housemates. Even though I was hungry, I couldn't eat. I took a piece of chicken then we gave the buckets to everyone to share, which had to at least score some protection points for bed time!

The dreaded night time came, and everyone had to help clean the cell. It was surprising to see everyone so focused on this task and helping each other out. Hygiene was a big part before we would sleep, to ensure no unwanted visitors came to clear up the crumbs left from our KFC feast. The good part of me being mugged when I first came into the cell, was that the money had indirectly paid for our comfort and in some terms, safety. The guys were looking after us and gave us pillows and some thin covers. To be fair, they looked after us pretty well and it showed that even though we were locked in a cell with some horrible people, their humanity was still alive and they were respectful to the fact that my money had helped them out. BB and I took a place and laid down on the floor squashed together. It was cosy and I just wanted to close my eyes, sleep and wake up to a new day as quickly as possible.

As I laid staring at the ceiling thinking the worst about what could happen to us, I was quietly praying for us to be released tomorrow and I was hoping come morning time, we would be free! For some reason I fixed the time of 10am as a reasonable one for things to start moving again and for us to get out. Just as I started imagining getting out of this place, the guard came with bottles of whisky! I stood up and went to the guard who was on the other side of the bars, "no you can't give them alcohol, what are you doing"? everyone was laughing and buzzing. Singing prisoner was celebrating like it was 1999 and I couldn't think of a worst idea in the whole fucking planet..... It get's worse.... As I settled down again trying to block out the party going on around us, the guard came back again with another gift. This time it was a load of hash for the guys to roll up and smoke. I turned and whispered to BB "mate this isn't good dude, now they're all getting high on weed or something". I don't know how, but finally I fell to sleep.

You know when you feel someone close to you, or staring at you when you are sleeping? Well I woke up like a shot and I saw three smiley faces hovering directly over me and the

little shit-head with pole, was asking for my watch. "Give me your watch, you need to give it to me when I ask". "No this is my watch, I gave you my money now go away". Peace again for a while and then some time later, I woke up in panic yet again with the same feeling.... they was standing over me again. "I want your watch, give it to me now"! My patience was gone now and it was either give him my watch or stand my ground. I didn't want to give in and hand my watch over, for the pure fact that once I gave in to this evil bully, where would it stop? "You need to fuck off now out my face, don't come near me again now fuck off". I stood my ground and it was a huge risk. Luckily for me, one of the big and older guys came over and told him that he doesn't come near me again. I looked over to the guy and we exchanged a nod with each other and as he turned around, I looked at his back covered in gang ink. I felt a bit better, that must be the end of it now!

Morning came and because I was excited to get the day started, I was up around 6am which just made the day longer. BB and I sat against the wall near the entrance and we were praying that 10am would soon come. It came and went. I was gutted and I was really starting to panic now. Sense of humour was starting to fail and I could feel myself starting to lose the will, starting to accept that this isn't going to turn out well. The guys from the club came back again which was another massive relief. This time it was better news! We would have to pay a 'fee' of around £650 and apologise to them. No problem, let's get the deal done. We sat back down, with the good news lifting our spirits, our new friends were coming and asking if we were getting out and they was really happy that we was. They obviously knew from our story that we had been stitched up but funnily enough, it didn't stop one last try to ask for my wedding ring, watch and shoes. I think BB exchanged his shoes with one of them. I had gone for a piss the day before and the guys were bantering pretending to look at my cock, but really it was just a giggle and I was laughing at BB, "mate don't you need a piss or something, are you going to hold it until the end"?

Singing guy went to the bars with a mirror and started shouting to the cell next to us. What was he doing? "yeeeaahhh we love you make song for us"..... It was a lady's cell next to ours. Singing guy was using the mirror to see them passing a love note to him then they started shouting at me, "what's your name baby, you want suck cock when we get out, no problem we suck you". I told them my name was Neil and I decline their offer. Getting out, finally the words getting out was heaven. It was around 4pm and the guard came and let BB out. They processed him with some paperwork and then released him. I sat and waited... and waited.... And then I started to get scared again. What happened if they had changed their mind?! Eventually I was let out and had to fill out forms and get a photo taken in front of the ladies cell. They was screaming and shouting at me and then one saw that my name wasn't Neil. "You bastard you lie to us Mr Ward Stephen, why you lie you, fuck you, think you special". So much for not sharing details with random prisoners... at least they only got my Dads name and missed my first name.

We paid our fee, grabbed a load of food and went home and I've never been so happy to get a shower and lay on my bed. It was like I'd been given a new life and I was so grateful for the club's support and for the guys, who came to save us. My wife had been worried sick and I reassured her with, "don't worry I'm fine, just spent the night in jail".

Simon came and saw me and like always, was supportive and rightly so, bollocked me for being out with a player before training and getting into this mess. Not to mention, I would be suspended for 2 weeks by the club from my 1<sup>st</sup> team duties, which I hated. I loved being around the 1<sup>st</sup> team so that in itself was punishment enough. Simon and other club members had to meet with the owners and there was a chance I would be let go, which is something I hadn't considered, whilst only worrying about getting out of the cell. That's when I started to worry that I had messed up and had put my short-lived career in jeopardy. I wouldn't have blamed them and it was a blessing that they stuck by me and for that, I was also grateful. One annoying point was that BB didn't get suspended and he was in the squad for the next match, but I was happy for him, and it was great news for the team.

We continued picking up points, got to the cup semi-final which we lost and as I passed my 6 month probation period at the club, I asked for a small salary raise of around £160 a month. It was nothing in the grand scale of what was being paid out and as I'd been basically running two jobs with the 1<sup>st</sup> team, academy and my support for my A-Licence had disappeared, I thought it was worth an ask. The request was declined. It wasn't even really entertained and that pretty summed everything up about how off field business was conducted. We were bringing in players paying money up front, air ticket and house only for them to be crap and leave after a month. We had a new training uniform turn up, only to find out it was apparently from a fake market. There was delays in following up contact for sponsors and everything seemed to be left until the last minute, or not done at all.

I wasn't trying to be ungrateful for what I was already getting, all I wanted was just a tiny bit of appreciation, which would have balanced out what I was earning compared to my workload. In the end it didn't matter, as many players and myself would find out that our contracts hadn't been handled properly and in fact, my contract was only the offer letter which was signed and accepted. Too many setbacks had built up and I'd had enough of the disorganization and felt it was time to leave. With a twist of good fortune, while I was back in Taiwan before I left my role, I received a phone call which would see me head to China. It was perfect timing for me and a chance for a fresh start.

My time in the Philippines was amazing. Regardless of the issues and challenges, it was good learning for me. I got to work with some great players and great lads. The staff were great and even if a few fallouts, they are all good people. I picked up some coaching and management tips and I also learned a lot about myself. Not all positive but still, valuable

experience. The team went on to finish 3<sup>rd</sup> in the league and just missed out on qualifications for the AFC club competition. Simon went on to be Head Coach in the Indonesian top tier again, has since won the league and finished 3<sup>rd</sup> with them in one of the toughest leagues and environments in the world. He is now the National team Head Coach of Indonesia. I'm glad about that and for anyone reading wanting to know what you need to succeed coaching abroad, especially in Asia.... Thick skin, patience, dignity and the ability to channel your energy to things you can control. Choose your battles wisely.



## 5. The Chinese Dream

The call came while I was back in Taiwan visiting my wife. It was 3.30am and I answered it with intrigue and excitement. It was an offer to go to China and be part of Gary White's coaching staff and it took me seconds to confirm a big YES! The timing was perfect, considering new revelations about my contract in the Philippines, which was only a non-binding offer letter. I'd now got used to the fact that my efforts of holding two roles in the Philippines wasn't worth an extra £160 or whatever it was a month, and with a baby on the way, I had to look after myself. That's one thing you must quickly learn when you are working away from your home country. Regardless if you are naturally a thoughtful or flexible person and willing to give, there comes a time when you must put yourself first because believe me, nobody else gives a shit.

Of course, there are good people around, look at the people who have given me a chance in the past, but when it comes down to it, each person's life and family is more important than someone else's. When I went back upstairs my wife asked what's going on. I told her I was heading to China and I didn't even know which club yet. I heard the terms, I knew I wanted to work with Gary and it was an easy yes. Having a life in Taiwan, China was a good location for me as there was already a lot of sacrifice happening - being away from a pregnant wife and most likely, about to be away when the baby is due too. So being as close as possible was a good move but at the time, I hadn't thought about how big China was and that I could end up further away than the Philippines, which was only a couple of hours on the plane. A stroke of luck brought some positive news.... The club was Shanghai Shenxin F.C, previously of the Chinese Super League and now playing in China League One, the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier. This would be a 1 hour 40 minute flight back home whenever I had the chance, which as a professional coach at a real professional club, isn't too often.

On arrival in Shanghai the difference in treatment was evident from the get-go. I was collected from the airport and took to a plush hotel for the night, which was a huge contrast to me making my way to the Philippines, on my own and paying for my own flight and accommodation, then finding an apartment with no support. The next day I was met at the hotel by the gaffer and it was good to see the man who had given me this opportunity. We had met before previously in Taiwan, when his Guam team came for a tournament. He's one of those people who instantly makes you feel at ease and knows how to communicate with people. We were in the car and there wasn't much time for anything else, it was straight to the training ground to meet the team and the other staff.

The previous staff was made up of a South Korean coaching team who was on a 3 year contract. 6 months into the 3 years with the team one place above relegation, the Koreans were let go and in we came to clean up the mess. Not an easy job, considering it was an

absolute mess with 1<sup>st</sup> team players in the reserves and vice versa, a low fitness level, low team ethic and dead weight hanging around the squad who couldn't even be used in any matches. There were no funds for any transfers and we had to make do with what we had.

The car pulls up into the training ground and we are greeted by the translator and other staff, then get hurried into a meeting room. We had to quickly change into our new bright, yellow, skin-tight Nike kit and then straight into another meeting room to meet the players. Shit, this was moving fast, I took my seat awkwardly at the side of the room and the gaffer took the stand at the front. I sat there thinking, 'none of these guys have any idea who I am and what is going on'. As I looked around at the players, I could see uninterested faces and our foreign players were slumped down chewing, not giving a shit. I'm guessing they were all pissed off from the previous shit show and they were going through the motions of more new faces in the coaching staff.

The gaffer grabbed their attention in seconds. The foreigners sat up and focused, the local lads were fixated. We left the room and I had just been given a management lesson you couldn't pay for anywhere. I had no doubt that everyone left that meeting room, with clear knowledge of how things were going to work and how we were going to achieve it. The first point of call was to watch a training session which would be started by the Sporting Director who also used to be the Head Coach, in the club's Super league days. We stood there and watched while this guy placed himself on the halfway line, screaming and shouting orders at the players. Directing, ordering, shouting, never once leaving his spot.... Oh boy.

After that masterclass of robot training, we watched a full-size match to try and get an idea of the players we had in the squad. This is when you could see there was player's who should be in the reserve team and then there was players who were easily 1<sup>st</sup> team starters, that had been relegated by the previous staff. No wonder we were in a relegation battle!

It makes me laugh, there's certain nationalities who get a glowing reputation in Asian football and who are considered the best in the region.... But all I had witnessed was the previous Jedi Master in the Philippines and the shit show that these other Masters had left behind. One thing for sure, there are great coaches from every country in the world but just like the U.K, the majority of these don't get an opportunity to show their quality.

My role was as Assistant Coach but I wasn't a no.2. My experience wasn't ready for that yet and that was fine by me. The gaffer had brought me in as I'd done good by him previously. When you have an opportunity to choose your own staff, it's so important to have people around you who you can depend on and from my Philippines experience as an Assistant Coach, I was determined to make sure I had learned from my past errors and be even more valuable. Our staff would later have additions of a Sports Scientist who had previously worked with Ajax, a GK Coach with experience in Spain and with Indian Super League teams (who has also won China League One title with Shenzhen F.C) and another Assistant Coach,

Louis Lancaster who would be the gaffers no.2. Louis is a quality bloke and a great coach who absolutely adores coaching. We could be out having a bite to eat and in a few seconds he can create a buzzing session plan on a napkin, he loves it. This showed me the level of enthusiasm for coaching, you need to be a top coach and it started to raise questions to myself. Do I actually like coaching?

I enjoyed being around a 1<sup>st</sup> team environment, match days, being with the players and I loved the tactic and analysis part of the game. I enjoyed helping to work out player's and team's strengths and weaknesses and beating a team through work we had done off the field, also leading to creation of good sessions which then in turn would win a match. This gave me the greatest job satisfaction. Coaching, I could take it or leave it.

There's an unwritten rule across Asia (and written, both in Asia and across the world) that if a coach loses three matches in a row, they could get the sack. No pressure then! Our first match with the team was an away game against the league leaders.... a dream start! We travelled to Qingdao who was coached by the Ex-Barcelona B coach, Jordi Vinyals and to make it even prettier, they wore the same colour and style kit as Barcelona. Cute. We went 1-0 ahead and it was the biggest buzz ever. It didn't last long as we were unfortunate to concede two and lose 2-1, but I left the match noticing something odd. We had conceded an insane amount of freekicks around our penalty box, with one of them leading to one of their goals.

Well that's 1/3 games lost, two more to go and we were fucked. The pressure was already on! Our next game was another away one at Yiteng, a 4 hour coach trip away which wasn't too bad. The bad thing was, Yiteng had a reputation for making things not so great for the travelling Away team. We got to the impressive stadium which was decent and having come close to beating the league leaders in our previous match, we certainly had the talent to get the 3 points here. Or so we believed. We stepped from the changing rooms onto the pitch for a training session and it was horrible. Because of the design of the stadium roof, it didn't allow much natural rain or sunlight to hit the pitch and the quality was poor. The worst thing was, in some areas the grass was close to ankle height and it was rock solid underneath. It was hot and sticky and felt like we were stood in a swamp....disgusting just like the team we were about to face.

The match started and we looked comfortable, they didn't look up to much. And then in the 10<sup>th</sup> minute we get a red card! It looked like nothing on the edge of our box and when we watched the video back later, our defender did make contact but it was in retaliation and there was something 'planned' about it - almost like the ref was waiting for an incident, to pounce on it right away. Well with 10 minutes gone, it looks like he couldn't wait! The game turned into shit and just like the previous match, we had a huge amount of fouls given against us around our penalty box. It was starting to become very clear that this is one

common thing, that all Away teams face and I hoped we would get the same 'luck' when we played at home.

From one of the fouls around our box, they scored from the resulting free kick. Not surprising really because if each team has a set-piece specialist in their ranks, give them 10 opportunities and they will probably make one of them count. The rest of the match we were putting on all the pressure almost as if we still had 11 men, but we were being cock blocked. Any sniff of a positive attack, a foul would be blown against us in their half. The match was fucked, it didn't feel right from the moment we walked into the stadium and now I could see why Yiteng had this 'reputation'. For anyone looking at the score or the match report, they would see that Yiteng got a red card on the 85<sup>th</sup> minute – nothing more than a token gesture. Two losses in a row and our next home match would be our defining moment....

For the week building up to our first home match, I was trying to stay positive but it was difficult. I had been given this dream opportunity and from an unlucky start, we were going into our third game needing nothing less than a win. It had to be a win, otherwise my time in China would have ended and I would have gone from 'Pro to Zero' in the space of a month. We were up against the bottom club which helped take some pressure off, so it was a double header to save our jobs and also to get points over our rivals in the relegation scrap. The squad strength we had put us in a strong position, with some great local players including some gems who had been brought up from the reserves, and then we had our three foreign imports; Biro Biro who was voted the 2<sup>nd</sup> best young Brazilian in 2016, Davi, a Brazilian who had played at Sao Paulo and for a couple of teams under Sven in the Chinese Super League, and then there was Daniel Chima, a Nigerian/Norwegian striker who had big success in Norway with Molde.

On their day, these three could tear anyone apart. The local lads were disciplined, worked hard and they had bought into what we were trying to achieve at the club. Good lads, respectful and it felt like they appreciated the new lease of life they were all given. Judgement day came around and it was win or go home, but as soon as the whistle blew, we looked comfortable then just before half time, we found ourselves at 1-1. This was the defining moment of the future at the club. I'm pretty sure there was unrest around us and they probably wanted to get rid of us there and then, pack ya bags and fuck off before the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, but no. The Gaffer took charge like always and we went out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half and got a 3-1 win, that we badly needed. I'm pretty sure we were inches from being gone and now we had won our first match, surely it could be a turning point?!

The win gave us a steady platform to build from and with wins come win bonuses for players and staff. I won't go into details about money, but the bonuses from one match could be more than a person's monthly salary. That's not trying to be clever, that's me just sharing the reality of certain leagues at professional clubs. We would get a win bonus, a draw bonus, a triple bonus for three wins in a row and a clean sheet bonus. Not bad work if

you can get it! We headed Away to a team in Beijing who were a solid outfit and got a draw. It was a clean game and another one we could have won.

Ok so now we were unbeaten in two and had 4 points from the last two matches, with a cup match up next and then our next 3 league matches were away! Our first 6 league matches were made up of 5 away matches, not the nicest start for anyone! In the cup we had Jiangsu Sunning at home, a team from the Super League who had some familiar names in their team; Ramirez (Ex-Chelsea midfielder), Jo (Ex-Man City and Everton striker) and Alex Teixeira, previously of Shakhtar Donetsk and had been chased by big clubs such as Liverpool. It was a tough one to call, as it was a big night for everyone and we wanted to show everyone we could mix it, but then there was the relegation battle ahead of us. A few of our younger lads got called up and one of them came into centre midfield and he didn't give a shit. He was smashing Ramirez into the turf, then Ramirez would get hit again by another of our midfielders and he was losing his head.

We had a few chances, but you could see it would be a tough night, with Suning looking like they could turn it on at any time. Jo has never been the most mobile of players and looked like he wasn't that interested in the game and then BANG! He would let fly with a rocket with no backlift, from outside the box. There was danger all around. We got to Half Time at 0-0 and we were actually unlucky not to be ahead. This is when there are two options which were; to sit back and try to keep it tight and see what happens, or go for the win. We went out in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, played with enjoyment and freedom, gave a couple of young guys a chance and we lost 3-0. It wasn't anyone's fault, in the end they just had that extra spark and strength in depth. Overall, it was a great night and the team could still be proud of themselves.

The next match was away against another relegation rival and we went to them and played beautiful football. Even though some decisions were against us as the Away team, we was that good that it didn't matter. We won 4-0 and it was an impressive victory and great for our spirits going into the next away match, which would be a 5 hour flight to Inner Mongolia to play Nei Mongol. Just like the horrible Yiteng team before, Nei Mongol had an even worse reputation for 'being difficult for Away teams to get anything' and as soon as I stepped onto the pitch for our warm up, I had a really bad feeling. Looking around the stadium, there was maybe 1,000 riot policemen with shields and batons, which left me thinking it was a bit heavy handed considering the crowd wasn't that big. Everything was aggressive and uncomfortable and unwelcoming.

The match started and we were the better team and looked dangerous. Nei Mongol didn't have the quality to handle us, they had a giant Brazilian striker up top and a midfielder who was in the Premier League with Wolves all them years ago. It was steady, then it started again! Fouls around our fucking penalty area, we just couldn't escape it and there wasn't much anyone could do, as with every small contact made, the whistle would go. If this

match was on T.V, it wouldn't have been able to happen because it was so obvious. The score was 1-1 and then they pumped a long ball into the box, their player took a tumble and they scored the resulting penalty... yeah sure, of course that was going to happen. 2-1 down and looking like we was going to come back and score 3 or 4, it got to the 90<sup>th</sup> minute and it was still 2-1. Then in the 92<sup>nd</sup> minute, a cross came in from the right and we finished at the back post.

As soon as it hit the net the linesman put his flag up.... Offside! It wasn't offside, we could see from the bench and that was backed up by the videos we saw after the game. It wasn't even close to offside. That was the very last kick of the match and we had been robbed a point, against another relegation rival. With that, there was no hesitation and our whole squad ran down the pitch side (both players on and off the pitch and staff) and we went into the linesman, all hell breaking loose. This is exactly what the riot police was for and they were trying to hold us back and the strange thing was, it didn't feel like it was wrong.

We had been suspiciously mugged off and everyone knew it. Some of our players lost it and even our old general manager looked like he was going to kill someone. We were all fighting for each other and when it finally calmed down, Nei Mongol's foreign fitness coach came and shook my hand. At the same time, he was shaking his head and he apologised. That said it all! Nobody got charged for the tussle which kept things nicely under wraps and no further attention was brought to it. We would meet the same ref later in the season at Home, when that horrible Yiteng would come to us. Such a fitting convenience.

The away matches were taking their toll on everyone. People may get the wrong perception when footballers fly to matches but it does take it out of you. I wasn't even playing and I was drained. It cuts your training week down, making it one or two days shorter depending where you were travelling to and then you have the mental drain, of facing some very suspicious decisions against the Away team. We headed to Shenzhen F.C who was coached by Clarence Seedorf and it would be his first home match. Around 20,000 fans were there and it was a buzz we didn't need. Nothing fell for us, we had a bad night and the lads looked tired. We lost 4-2. So, in the space of two weeks, an injustice at Nei Mongol and a tired performance against Seedorf, we was back fighting for our jobs again.

The exact same feeling as before, win or go home and the same pressure and worry. As before, we would play at home against a team one place below us, but this win would get us moving up the league. It was that tight. We went out on the night and smashed it, winning 5-0. Phew, pressure off for around one day, when the hard work would start again. The next few games saw us win two on the bounce, with one of them being against Wuhan Zall, who had the ex-Italian defender and Juventus Manager Ciro Ferrara, as their coach.

Louis and I stood chatting to his backroom staff, really nice guys, all Italian, respectful and spoke perfect English to us, "Where were you guys before here"? they asked. Louis told

them he was previously at Watford F.C and also out coaching in Dubai and I told them I was in the Philippines, adding 'the top tier' trying to make it sound a bit more special. I then asked them what they had been doing previously and with good grace and not a hint of arrogance they replied, "we were the backroom staff for Fabio Capello and England". We had a little laugh at the irony and as Louis and I walked away, I knew we were both thinking the same thing, "let's smash these fuckers" .... And we did! 3-1 was the final result and it was a massive win against a team with a lot of money and to make it even sweeter, it was an Away match. We started getting into a habit of being competitive in our away matches, and this would be something I would use later, when I moved to Ghana.

Although the 3-1 win against Capello's men was one of the high points in my time in China, I remember that match for very different reasons. A few days before, one of our staff's Father had passed away back in their home country, a very sad time and not that it would make anyone feel better, but I was devastated for him. He could have chosen to go home but with his family's wishes, he didn't. That's not to say that he didn't care, because he cared deeply. He's one of the most committed family men you could ever meet but at the same time, he is one of the most professional staff you will ever meet. He stayed with the team to support us, to ensure we stayed stronger and to help us get out from this draining, dirty relegation fight. It was a huge personal sacrifice.

My question to any of you reading this and hoping to forge a professional career out of coaching would be, how committed are you and how much are you willing to sacrifice, to be the best coach you can be, which will lead to supporting your family in the long run? As cut throat as it may seem, if you are not willing to make the sacrifices then there will always be someone ahead of you.

As passionate as I am about seeing coaches get opportunities and make it through the coaching world, at the same time, I get tired with the sense of entitlement that some have, complaining about lack of opportunities or thinking they are worth more than a good opportunity is offering them. Those who are not willing to put themselves out and make real effort, will not succeed. If a coach cannot be arsed to do research on who they are sending a cv to, or if they lazily contact other coaches (who they haven't built a relationship with) asking 'got anything going', they deserve nothing. If these coaches are not willing to maybe take a step sideways before moving forward or take a lesser paid job which is a great opportunity, or take a non-football part-time job to enable them to coach in a position which will ultimately, open up more doors in the long run, then they will not succeed.

I'm not being a cock about this, I'm talking from experience of what I had to do through my years in Taiwan, and I'm talking about the coaches I see moaning on social media or putting their CV up on LinkedIn, asking people to contact them. As much as I wish it was this easy and this would happen, it just doesn't. Nobody is going to see your post begging for someone to contact you and think 'hey yeah I will overlook the 1,000 people messaging me

or trying to connect with me personally and I will reply to this lazy post'. Take more action and put yourself out. It will work and it will be worth it, just have faith and keep plugging away. This is why I created the course [FROM ZERO TO PRO IN 4 YEARS](#), to try and help coaches and share my blueprint for getting into professional football at a professional club.

The season continued to have more highs than lows including an upcoming match with the new league leaders and big spenders Tianjin Quanjian. They had the famous Italian defender Fabio Cannavaro as their coach and their attack was spearheaded by one of the highest scoring Brazilian players of all time, ex-Sevilla player and the then current league top scorer, Fabiano. For the match itself I was suspended, from an incident in our previous Away match. We went to Dalian for what would have been our 3<sup>rd</sup> straight win and from the start, things didn't go well. Our players got food poisoning from the hotel we were staying at (hhhhmmmm how convenient), then we had to face the good old 'fouls around our penalty box', then our owner called the Team Manager to tell us, we had to change a defender and it wasn't a request. Then we did, then we conceded soon after the change and then after some shocking decisions from the official, we lost 4-3. I mean come on, who the fuck scores 3 goals in an away match playing really well, but still lose?

It was another Away match shit show and I was getting tired of it. A little turd from the opposite staff ran across to our technical area. No idea what he was doing but it seemed like they could do what they wanted, while we was shouted at by the officials for even breathing. In the professional football world, who actually runs into and across another team's technical area? For the 90 minutes of any match, the technical area is your fortress and you should defend it. So, I did. As he ran towards us, I kicked him to try and trip him up and move him away. From the momentum he fell back and then someone pushed him over.

The final push hadn't come from me, but this little weasel got up and went crazy. He must have weighed around 40kg but a big show was made and five guys came to hold him back. The ref came over and showed us both a red card. Unbelievable! I walked back to the changing room with thousands of fans calling me a wanker in Chinese and in the tunnel, the guy is behind me. I kept turning around because if this idiot was running around in our technical area, he's probly going to try and have a run at me in the tunnel. Instead of waiting for the probable to happen I turned around to face him and said in Chinese "come here", wanting to say, "com on then". I'm stupid and it was unprofessional and I'm not even that much of a hard man, but the adrenaline and the annoyance of yet another Away circus had got to me. 40kg man wasn't as quick to come at me this time and then before anything happened, a policeman came and walked me to the changing room. I was happy about that because I didn't even know what I would have done, it was just hot air from me. Still, better to try and face a potential problem head-on, rather than being jumped on from behind.

So that was how I ended up watching the Cannavaro match from the stands and it was painful. I was more nervous watching from the stands than I was sat on the bench and when



we went behind, to a Fabiano bullet header from around 20 yards out, I started to slump in my seat. Fabiano was a nasty bastard and although 36 years old then, you couldn't get the ball off him. He was a winner and was world class. His weakness though, was his temper. Our lads were getting stuck into him and he was getting wound up. I can't remember the match unfolding as it was a blur, we pulled one back, we went ahead, they pulled one back, I honestly thought I was going to have a heart attack. Who knows how everyone was feeling on the bench!

At half time I was heading up the stand to take my seat again and an agent shouted from the crowd, "hey Matt. Matt, did you see Tony? Tony is here!", Who the fuck is Tony, what's this guy talking about. I looked up and I think it was Tony Adams in the stand waving and I threw a quick wave back. I'm not 100% sure because my head was buzzing, but I knew he's involved within China and it looked like him, and he was called Tony! I wish I had gone over to say a quick hi, it would have been an honour, but I just couldn't focus on anything else, my stomach was in bits and there was still 45 minutes heart attack potential to go. In the end, it got too much for me and I walked inside the stadium, paced up and down whilst listening to the crowd. We were winning 5-3 and minutes were left. I'm sure my watch had stopped, it felt like hours. The security and ground staff was watching me walking around like a mad man. I was holding my cock because I needed a piss but didn't dare to go. Other than my time in the Philippines jail cell, it was the longest 45 minutes of my life.... Then the whistle went, we had won 5-3 and I ran to the toilet.

Eventually we had moved away from the relegation zone and at one point, was fighting for a top 6 finish. We ended up in 9<sup>th</sup> place but we were only 9 points off a promotion slot which was an amazing turnaround overall. Before our final match, there was of course still some time for some drama. The time had come for revenge against the Barcelona wannabes, who had beat us 2-1 in our very first match. They were now back at the top in the league and they needed the points. It didn't happen for them, as we destroyed them with beautiful football and a tactical masterclass. Their patterns of play were broken down piece by piece by us, knowing that they built up from their Spanish centre back and the other centre back wasn't comfortable on the ball. So what did we do? We man marked their foreign centre back which left the other one to receive the ball and to make some fatal errors – one leading to a goal! It was a comfortable 3-0 win in the end. At the final whistle, Vinyals went berserk, running on the pitch towards the ref. The gaffer went to shake his hand like a gent and the offer was refused. Vinyals kept going on and on and as I was right next to it all, I will always remember my feeling of seeing a man lose all of his dignity in defeat. It happens to us all at some point perhaps. The victories over Ciro Ferrara's Wuhan Zall and Fabio Cannavaro's Tianjin Quanjian, along with this one where probly the biggest highlights for little old me and my B licence. Great satisfaction!

Before the season came to an end, another chance to get a '3 wins in a row' bonus came along at Home against Yiteng (the team we got a 10 minute red card against). The tables

had now turned, and it was them who was fighting in a relegation battle and we was looking for another 3 points. We were in great shape, at Home on a great pitch and our lads were enjoying their football. Confidence was high and then we heard some devastating news! The referee was to be the same one we had at Nei Mongol, when we had our 92<sup>nd</sup> goal ruled out for offside. That in itself may not seem like a big deal, but when it's put together with the team we were about to face, I had no doubt we was heading for some fun and games and I was right!

It took around 12 minutes for us to get a red card! Now remember, our previous match we got a red in around the 10<sup>th</sup> minute so, at least we did better by two minutes. The sending off was a farce. One of their players pulled the dreadlocks of Danny Chima and when he turned around and got in the player's face, yet again the ref couldn't wait to get the card out. It made me sick and I think this was the time when I started to fall out of love with the game...again. It left a big sour taste and I thought what the fuck is the point in everyone's effort, day after day and week after week, when 90 minutes can already be decided by certain external factors or individuals you have no control over. It was rotten and if I needed any more confirmation, Yiteng went on and got their token red card yet again at around the 88<sup>th</sup> minute. We lost at Home and funnily enough, we never did get that 3<sup>rd</sup> win in a row!

Our final match came and went with no dramas. We won at Home comfortably and everyone bowed out on a high. Despite backslaps and handshakes and big smiles, deep down I knew our time was done at the club. I'd been living in Taipei since 2012 and I had quite a good grip on how things worked in this area of the world. The more smiles and handshakes there are, the more you must be on your toes. From the beginning, I knew my job would always be under the spotlight, as I was the unknown guy with only a B Licence to his name. I believe behind closed doors the Gaffer did a great job in defending me and fighting my corner when telling the powers that be, what I brought to the team. In all honesty, I think I had already accepted that my contract wouldn't be renewed and although it 100% should have been, I had a strong notion that everyone's time at the club would be over once our contract would expire.

Within myself, I was ok with me not getting another chance. I had become drained with our efforts and all I wanted to do was get home and be with my wife, who was due to give birth at any moment. For those who think that working in professional football is all about a couple of hours a day, playing golf and enjoying the spare time to do what you want - there will be a big drop back down to reality. Every single one of us worked our asses off from the minute we woke up and to the time we could no longer keep our eyes open. That's how it should be, the work rate should be smart, but it should be there if you are a professional in any industry. Be prepared, that if you want to get as far as you can as a professional coach and you don't have a big playing career or name to fall back on, get ready to devote every minute of your day to achieving the goals you need to, for the team and for each other.

After the previous 3-1 win against the Ex-England staff, I went to watch our reserves the next day. As the match was going on, Ciro Ferrara was sat on the far side in deep conversation with his club owner. As Ciro sat chugging stylishly on his cigarette, the owner was waving his arms around like crazy, showing some kind of formation with his fingers and was obviously schooling the once Italian legend, of how the game should be played. Fucking hell I thought, no one is immune in this industry. Work hard or go home!

The season had come to an end and I said my quick goodbyes. I'd left some boots and trainers outside my hotel room in our stadium, just in case by some long shot, I was back there the following season. They might still be there!

It was great to get home knowing that I wasn't a father yet and I hadn't missed the action. The next couple of weeks were tough, wondering what was happening next, then things were made a lot clearer when the Gaffer called me. He explained that the club was looking at other options and if we were called back, it would be with staff of their choosing. That was basically the nail in the coffin for me and it was a matter of time, until they chose a whole new coaching staff again. After all, even when the season was still going on, we would get random ex-footballers looking for their chance at the big time in China. One day there was this solid guy walking around with a club representative. It was Hernan Crespo, the great ex-Argentinian striker and he had one of our club scarfs wrapped round his neck. Apparently he was just there to network..... I bet he was!

I was without a job however, I had become a father. A beautiful little boy was born, and I was so grateful to be there for it, as I had already been a vacant husband for the time my wife was pregnant. Talk about not being there when someone needs you! Christmas came around and I made a short trip home to see my parents and family. I went to watch a local match at Lincoln City, where the Cowley brothers were just starting to make a name for themselves. I sat in the stand with my dad and brother promising, to try and watch the game in peace and not bore them to tears. It was difficult. Very difficult. Not so long ago I was out during our warm ups in a fantastic stadium, with quality players, gleaming green grass and the same theme songs blasting out over the speaker. The buzz of being out on that surface, being in the mix and the facilities we had at our disposal..... I looked around my current surroundings and at the coaches and the players, with the English weather in my face.... and I wanted to cry.

I wanted to be out there in the Lincoln dugout, I was watching the game and dissecting it and getting more and more frustrated. After the match at my parent's house, I went on twitter, just to catch up on the latest scores and happenings. That's one thing I miss about Saturdays in the U.K. The football world put out in front of you! Scrolling down my twitter timeline, China Football News popped up and it had our badge on, the Shanghai Shenxin badge. I stopped and took a more detailed look to find out that we had indeed been

replaced by a Spanish entourage. It was some ex-coach of Real Sociedad or something and apparently the owner loved Barcelona sooooo..... yeah, I didn't see the connection either.

That was the final nail drilled in and at least it gave me the clarity to move on. The whole experience was amazing, and I will again be forever grateful for having the opportunity to be in such a position. Being able to learn from two UEFA Pro-Licence coaches, gave me an education you can't find on any course or in any handbook. The work was hard, intense and at times frustrating with all the external, uncontrollable factors, but it was one hell of a ride. The other coaching staff moved onto do things they were happy with and as mentioned before, Martin the GK Coach ended up getting promoted from China League One with Shenzhen F.C – A very nice bloke and always gave me great support during my time with him. Olav, the Sports Scientist started a PHD, Gary White moved on and as I write this, he has been named the new Head Coach in the J2 League with Tokyo Verdy. Louis 'Swiss Army' Lancaster (for the ability of doing anything and everything connected to coaching on a whim, to a high standard), has now become the new Head Coach of the Taiwan National Team, aka Chinese Taipei. A top top bloke and anyone with him, on the same pitch as him, can feel relaxed that everything is covered. Now, the greatest battle would start.... The one from within.

## 6. The Low After the High

The mind is one of the most powerful things on this planet and if it's not ok, then you are not ok. From working with great players, being in amazing stadiums, working with staff you liked, staying in the best hotels, having your meals all set out for you, having flight tickets and logistics done for you, getting bonuses and facing a number of big-name coaches.... The reality of just being a normal person again hit home HARD. AT first, I had got over the initial disappointment of not getting our contracts renewed and I was kept busy looking at different options. Agents were contacting me, some of them chancers from LinkedIn and some of them with genuine opportunities. It was nice to feel like I at least had a few apparent options, but I also knew, it wasn't going to be easy for me, due to the fact that I was still a B licence coach.

Days and days came and went, being linked to roles and then them not happening or me turning them down because I was so used to what I had in China, I should have known to lower my expectations slightly, if I really needed to. My little man was now in the big bright world and although this amazing little person was the greatest gift the world could ever give to me, I was starting to become detached from everyone and from life in general. If I could go back in time, I would have done things so differently. I would have got back into something just to keep my mind and body busy, even if it was something, I couldn't see myself doing for long. The worst thing I did was stay idle, waiting and trying to open up the right move for me.

Weeks were now passing, and I was slowly slipping into a dark hole. I did my best to get myself to the gym and to keep connecting with people, but I was losing interest. At that time, nothing could compete with the competitive buzz of preparing for a do or die match, and then being in the technical area feeling every single second of a match with all your body and soul. My attentions were all wrong and I was unhappy. What should have been the happiest time of my life, turned into one of the unhappiest times in my life. What type of person was I turning into, a vacant distant husband to my pregnant wife and now a father who's focus was somewhere else? Of course, my priority was to get back in the mix and get earning again for my family, to keep providing for them. Unfortunately, I was getting dragged down deeper and everything became an effort. Even waking up and going out to face people seemed a pointless venture and I started to become comfortable at 3am, when my son would wake up and I could sit and watch a movie whilst feeding him his milk.

For those who are blessed enough to have married a good woman and to have beautiful children, you may be able to understand what I'm saying here. It may be taken as a given that things aren't so smooth when a new arrival joins the family, and with my state of mind

not being focused on what my family needed from me, home life turned into a chore. Every day I was still plugging away trying to get that next opportunity I felt was right for me. 'neh too far, nope too low salary, no I don't like the sound of that'... I was becoming someone I now suggest other coaches not to become. Something had to give and as I wasn't being of any use to anyone staying at home and becoming more destructive, I decided that no place was too far. I needed to get off my ass and get back in the game and do it for my family, get success and give them the life they deserve.

Expectation and the thought of needing to please others, is also something you shouldn't concentrate on. It was nice to have people asking what I was doing next and saying they was excited for me etc etc, but for me, it just added to the weight of expectation and increased the unhealthy pressure I was already putting myself under.

My wife has always been amazing and has never once complained about me working away, never once tried to stop me from achieving my dreams. As hard as it was, we talked, and I said that I would have to start looking further away for work. At that point even for the sake of being able to see my son every day, I couldn't bare to do anything else what wouldn't be involved with a football team. As far as I was concerned, this was now my road map for the rest of my life, and I would accept all of the sacrifices that came with it. Giving myself this closure, I started feeling more upbeat and started to get a spring back in my step. I was actively talking through some offers and out of them all, there was one on the table to become a Head Coach again. My time with the Royal Blues was a top time for me, in terms of confidence and belief in what I was doing. I suppose that comes with being the guy in charge.

My two stints as an Assistant Coach especially in China, had me feeling uncomfortable at times. This was down to my own doing and I guess, not having solid confidence in myself. If I'm confident then I believe I can achieve anything, and I enjoy working with players under my own terms. If I feel that I'm being judged or watched or scrutinised, that effects my psyche and it shows in what I do. The chance to be confident and have belief in my coaching again, was an offer I couldn't refuse. The opportunity to have Head Coach of a professional club down on my cv, was also a necessity..... Ghana would be my next destination!

Poor mental health is more common than people realise and depression can often be a word used too often without being understood. People might be having a bad day or be lazy or feel like they just aren't having anything fall for them. They will claim to others 'I'm depressed'.... Then they go onto medication that numbs the pain a little while and then ultimately, prolongs unhappiness that people feel. Coming from a health & fitness background, I already knew the power and importance of keeping both body and mind in shape. Regardless, nobody knows themselves more than themselves and you don't need a doctor to confirm what you already know and most importantly, you don't need pills to make you feel even worse.

There's been a few times so far in my life when things just get overwhelming and I hate myself and the world and even so, I've always pulled myself back and I'm telling you this straight out.... **THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN BRING YOURSELF BACK TO THE SURFACE IS YOU!** No matter how many loved ones are around you, not matter how much money you have, no matter how many amazing children depend on you, words they say and actions they tell you to do is all just noise, and it's only YOU who can make the choice to change the habits that have led you down a dark path.

Our life can be determined by the habits we make and break. It's not a coincidence that those who have greater success or stability, all tend to have a few similar habits which crossover. True to this, you must also find habits, rituals or routines what also work for you.

Here are some actions to take if you feel you need some light brought back into your life;

- Stay connected with people in the real world, not in the digital world.
- Stay active and exercise. Even if it's just a walk to get out the house. Do not stand still.
- Eat as healthy as possible.
- Read or if you don't like reading, listen to some educational podcasts.
- Each day, wake up in the morning with a definite plan or a task you must achieve in the day.
- Put life into perspective and realise that a life is so precious, no problem in the world should make you worry so much that you don't want to use your life for the good.
- Don't leave anything until tomorrow. Take action today!

## 7. Ghana is Great but .....

Ghana is great, safe, colourful, vibrant, amazing people and outstanding football talent but seeeerrrrriously, no need to make things so dam obvious. The 'foul around the Away Team's box' tactic seemed to of followed me.

My medical card was updated, signed and stamped at Taipei hospital and I was on my way to my next gig, Head Coach in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of Ghana. I'd already been researching my new squad; the club's background and I was already building up imagery in my mind. Sat on the plane with a heavy heart having to leave my wife and beautiful little boy at such an early age, I had a job to do and it started immediately. My agent had given me all the data I had asked for and this helped me to start arranging the players, for what would be their first session – my first chance to see what I'd inherited. With a 1<sup>st</sup> team, reserve team and a few youth players, I was aware straight away, that I'd need to trim the fat off the edges and because the season had already started, I had to waste no time getting in there and getting my 1<sup>st</sup> team squad up and running.

The trip was long and draining with a big stopover in Turkey and then heading to Accra, the capital of Ghana from there. Already prepared for some fun and games at the airport, I had a few dollars in my pocket, just in case any 'fees' popped up unexpectedly. What a great idea, as it only took a few minutes for it all to start from getting off the plane and getting to a tight, crowded immigration office area where our visas would be checked.

I can't remember the exact reason I was kept waiting for 2 hours in that office, but it would have been quicker to smash my head through their glass window and ask "is this ok"? They were farting around with some wording or contact on the 'visa on arrival' part and they couldn't for the life of them put 2+2 together. Each time I asked in my politest manner considering the long flight, the people behind the desk said they must wait for the supervisor to make decisions, before they could even do anything. It was ridiculous, like an octopus with the supervisor as the body part and the tentacles just there motionless, being no use what so ever. Finally, in the slowest fashion possible, supervisor looked through my paperwork at a rate of 10 minutes per page, and after 100 phone calls and another round of flicking through the same papers again, I was waved on. Perfect, let's go!

A few steps out of the immigration office I get to a gate where they are checking people's medical certificates. Ha easy! As I held mine out with pride that there will be no hold ups at all. I handed the certificate to the lady and she looked at it for half a second and looked back at me and said, "I think you are sexy, I like your eyes". I wasn't sure if it was the bald head, ginger beard or big nose or all, but never mind, surely there will be no problems here. "Come with me Mr Matthew Sir" as she pulled me back into a separate office by my arm.



The 'Health Officer' took me into a backroom and closed the door asking me to sit down. What the hell is going on here, I was thinking - unsure if she was making a move on me or if I was about to be held up for another 2 hours. As I sat with an awkward, nervous smile, she said that my medical certificate wasn't signed correctly. "It's a Chinese doctor, that's her signature". "No No Sir Matthew, it is incorrect and we cannot let you into Ghana because we do not know you are safe". I sat there and stared at her and said it's been a very long day, I just want to get through the airport and go on my way. She went and brought in a supervisor who requested that I stayed patient and didn't get annoyed otherwise I will be held for 48 hours. "So I'm going to sit on this chair for 48 hours and you are going to watch me? Please get me some water". I called my agent and told him I was going to lose my shit very soon and said outright in ear shot of everyone "do I just need to pay them money then I can be left alone"? Twenty U.S dollars did the trick and I was let go. When I arrived at the luggage collection, I'd been kept for close to 3 hours, my luggage was nowhere to be seen. Absolutely perfect start!

The Chairman and his brother had drove 3 hours to pick me up from the airport and after stopping off for some food, we talked football non-stop until we stopped at my new town - the totally opposite from the capital with restaurants and shops as you would expect in any other capital. I was in 'real' Ghana and it was beautiful! The streets were vibrant, friendly people and warm night air, it felt safe even though it didn't look safe. Apparently, Ghana is one of the safest countries in Africa so that was already reassuring. For the first week I would stay in a hotel near our training ground and stadium, with a T.V which had all the Premier League matches on. One thing was for sure, they love their football as much as any other country in the world.

The next day I went to watch us play in an away match. I wasn't a registered staff yet and the away team wouldn't let me inside. One of my assistants got me a deckchair and I sat in the long grass, peering through a chain fence with the locals who hadn't bought a ticket. It was my first taste of Ghanaian football and it was a big eye opener for things to come. As I sat there watching the Home team pump the ball up as quickly as possible, waiting for something to happen and then get the referee's decision, I already had a feeling that Away matches were going to be difficult to win..... just like in other parts of the world were and suspiciously or not, decisions would favour the Home side. We lost the match and as bad as it sounds, I was glad that we hadn't won. Going into my first match on the back of a defeat would set my entrance up nicely, especially as it would be at Home.

After the match, the same evening, I was whisked away to the local radio station for an interview. Friendly as always, all smiles, I met the crew with our media officer and we sat down to talk about footy. They asked me a few questions about what I was hoping to bring and about my background and then out of nowhere the host asks, "coach, will you cheat on your wife here". In reply I asked if that's what 'you guys do' and they simply said "yes". "I don't need to because I have 30 lads working under me so I'll be just fine"..... I'm not sure if

they got my humour or not. There was already a rumour going around the town that I was earning \$5,000 a month. I laughed in their face and thought you slimy fuckers, looks like you're trying to set me up. "No, I'm on \$10,000 a month"... that shut them up. Quickly realising that they again might not get my humour, I told them that if I was on that much, I would I'd take them out for a meal of their choice and as I wasn't, I wouldn't.

In all honesty, I enjoyed being the center of attention and it was a good challenge and experience for me, knowing I'd have to handle different aspects of management in the role. The next day couldn't come quick enough, I couldn't wait to meet the lads and get started. The team was laying around 6<sup>th</sup> place and were expected to battle for the title and win promotion. Although realistically, there were a few other stronger teams than us with better 'bargaining power'. The squad was made up of lads who had grown up and played together, in addition to a few new signings. We were one of the youngest squads in the league and we was full of talent.

Training was to start at 7.30am to beat the afternoon heat and I was up at 5am to go for a run. Thinking I was a hero getting out at this time, I wasn't even close to being the earliest riser. The locals were already going about their business, smiles on their faces, waving and shouting 'oblini' (some translation for white man/white devil, but in a nice way....apparently). Where else in the world would you get that at 5am in the morning! Back to the hotel, shower, breakfast and then to the training ground, I was so excited, and I was there early so I could watch every single player coming in, and judge their attitude from a far. I took a seat outside my office looking onto the pitch at 6.45am and waited.... And waited.....

And waited..... it got to 7.10am and the lads started to come in drips and drabs and by the time I had got down to the pitch at 7.20am, everyone still wasn't there. My past experiences with some (only some) African players whilst in Taiwan, was that their time keeping was very happy go lucky. There would be times when I'm waiting one last minute for a player to turn up and they would come strolling in with their giant headphones on. In my naivety, I thought this would be different I guess, assuming that they would want to make a good first impression on the new coach. I said hello to a few lads and then stood in silence, starting to form a circle with those who were there. The lads who were still walking down to the pitch started running and got changed on pitch side. I stood there and ignored them, didn't say a word. I was fucking fuming and I had to use all my effort to hold it in, because I wanted to handle this a different way.

Once we finally all got in a circle, I didn't tell them off like a teacher talking to a load of kids. The best thing to do in my opinion, was to give them an option. *"Gents it's a pleasure to meet you all and it's a true honour to be here in your country and at your club. And now it is my country and my club too. Before we continue, I need everyone to make a choice right now, you wont have much time to think about it. Those of you who want to be a professional*

*footballer and achieve great things with the team and I, you need to commit 100% to being a professional footballer. Nothing less will do. That's non-negotiable. I will respect your culture and your views and your heritage, and I will respect you as people and players. I will not stop until I can get every last drop of talent out of you guys and If you trust me to guide you, I promise that together we will become even stronger and one thing is for real, I haven't travelled all this way to leave my family and my home, not to win and not to be serious about improving you as players and as humans. We will become one of the most competitive teams in this league and at the end of it all, I want to be fighting clubs off who want to buy you ... but hear this..... the gates to this training pitch will be locked 15 minutes before we are due to start. Anyone who is not here, on this turf ready to train can fuck off home".*

A few of the lads laughed thinking I was joking... I looked at each player in the eyes "I'm deadly serious, if any of you get locked out of training, then go and be a taxi driver, or work in a shop". There was no more laughing and after the captains talked me through their local ritual of prayers and handshakes, I clapped my hands and said "let's go"!

The talent on show was outstanding, I was taken a back and I was excited. The technical ability on the not so great surface was sublime and I couldn't help but wonder what they could do on a better-quality pitch. Everything was 100mph and was done with aggression. This was all well and good, but I knew we would have to be more controlled, need more game management and choose how we would control the game at our own pace. The lads were perfect learners, no hassles at all. They took in every word, challenged me at the right times, and the teams who lined up against each other for the in-house friendly, could of both started the upcoming match.

I would say that Judging player's ability and placing them into selection categorize was one of my strengths as a coach and even so, I had already told myself I needed to get as many opinions and as much information as possible from people around me. Why would I not? the chairman himself had known some of the lads for 10 years and I would be ignorant and a fool not to use these resources. What I didn't want to happen, was to make it seem like it was open season, and have too much conflicting information to start clouding my judgement. At the end of the day and when the axe would fall, the final decisions would come down to me and I was lucky enough to have been left alone when it came to team selection.

The week was coming to a close and game day was approaching. There was an extra buzz around the town to see the 'White Man's' first match, some excited with eagerness to see how the team would improve and others, excited to see me fail with my lack of local footballing knowledge. The group of lads I had at my disposal was strong and I had two players for every position I needed filling. Great depth. There wasn't any need to start forcing square pegs in round holes and I was full of confidence, that the lads would perform. Every position was filled by a player who was comfortable in it and who already knew their

job - under a week with the players was nowhere near enough time to have them prepared to play in any different style.

In addition, I was trying to be mature, to KISS (keep it simple stupid) and I had listened to some great input from the people around me. With the chairman's blessing, he admired my selection and was laughing at how I had chosen my team in under a week and within my first week in Ghana. "One thing though coach, you are going with this striker"? was his only comment.

Match day was here and my excitement had now turned to 'need a shit' nerves. Expectation was high and my assistant told me that every Home game must be a win because Away matches would almost certainly be a loss. Just what I needed to hear before kick off. This wasn't helped by the news I'd learned in the week that the opposition's coach, was the ex-coach of my new team..... he already had the inside edge on me. The game started and we were looking good, strategies working, and we hit the woodwork twice in the first half alone. We had also missed some good chances and although we were in total control, the fans and players were growing restless. We went in 0-0 at half time. "Lads if we keep playing like this it's going to be 3 or 4, keep the pressure on and don't worry that it's 0-0. However long until the goal comes, keep playing the way I know you can, then that first goal will come. You are better than them in every single area of the pitch, now we just need to show it in the score line....".

I was quietly confident now, but I got an uneasy feeling that something wasn't right, the lads weren't happy. 2nd half came and again, we hit the post, we had a shot cleared off the line. I said to David my assistant, "mate what fuck is going on here, is this goal coming"? yes boss yes boss it will come..... it didn't and we had drawn 0-0. We played well, we should have won by a big margin, against a mid-table team who had a history of keeping things tight at the back. In the dressing room after, I didn't want to spend too much time on it and I normally don't think it's the right time to talk after a match, best to leave it until the following day. But I couldn't leave it, the lads looked like we had just been smashed 3-0, their heads were low, and they wouldn't look me in the eye. "Davey, mate why's everyone walking around like someone's died? we played great and this is a start of things to come". "Boss, to everyone, this draw is like a defeat. For the fans and the players this home draw is a loss". He was right. I was so naive thinking that playing well at home was good enough, but it wasn't. Only a win at Home was good enough and here I was in a job a local coach could be doing and I couldn't get them a win when a local coach probably would of.

After the match, the Chairman took me for dinner and he said I had got everything right apart from one thing. I had chosen the wrong #9 to play as the lone striker who was central to my two wingers. I had gone with the guy who was better at holding the ball up and inking play and as I saw, his finishing wasn't his strong point. He had missed some good opportunities to score. The guy who I should have started and who is now a good friend of

mine, was a clinical finisher and what I know now, would of put the game to bed before HT. The only advice I pushed back on was the choice of the striker. I had wanted someone to link up the play more than someone who could actually score. My fuck up. If you get everything 90% right, you still get it wrong. The pressure was already on. People were picking holes in my player judgment and to make matters worse, our next two matches were Away!

After a 4-hour journey I was at the start of my first Away match and the opposing team were all absolute giants. I'd been told before hand that they would be and that they would be looking to take advantage of their size, the officials and their pitch. The information had already been relayed to me and although I was under more scrutiny to listen to some 'selection suggestions', I had prior experience facing Away teams who's aim was to put pressure in and around the box and get some decisions going their way. I made some bold, unpopular selections to the starting line-up, by leaving out the smaller, more technical players and I brought in a huge defender and played him as a single pivot, to protect the back 5 (GK and defence). There was outrage, why was I leaving out our star players, why was I playing a defender who doesn't get in the 1st choice 11 at defensive CM and the biggest cry, why was I starting the same #9 that I started in the previous 0-0 Home bore draw?!

To make matters more 'interesting', our 1<sup>st</sup> choice GK was sick and I made a call to leave him on the bench and start our 2<sup>nd</sup> choice. In the hotel before the team meeting, I met with the staff, but I didn't invite the GK coach. This guy was a slimy snake and I had my eye on him since the first moment I met him. I would watch as he buzzed around the players, whispering in ears and trying to force his religious beliefs on everyone. We had a mixture of religions and any time we prayed, players practicing different religions would each take turn in leading a prayer. It was a nice touch and kept our bond tight.

The GK Coach was poison and he'd already seriously fucked me off on my very first home match. I had walked out onto the pitch to check up on the warm up and he was wearing jeans and a random black T-Shirt. "Where's your kit mate? Why are you wearing this?", "I didn't have any uniform coach, so I wear this". "ok but working with a football club you don't have any football uniform at all? Get kit from now on for all or trainings and matches, I would like you looking like a GK coach at least". – "yes coach". My trust in him was zero and for this second match, he turns up in his jeans again. Changes were going to happen very quickly.

With my team selection, I wasn't being stubborn, I wasn't trying to prove a point, I genuinely felt that this was the best way through my experience, to combat such a team. My strategy for Away matches would be to play one or two big guys who were strong in the air as my DCM's and I knew if we could clean up everything that was launched at us, we could stop the ball even getting close to our 18 yard box, get the ball to our magicians and

let them play. We had not won an Away match for 2 years... it was going to take a lot of convincing that this would work. My reasoning was that there was no point playing our technical players on a pitch which wouldn't allow for any running with the ball or even passing. Also, if the officials were going to play hard ball with us, we needed to change things up and be ready for it. What's the point in not using facts? Not to sound like Benitez in one of his famous Liverpool interviews but; the opposition were all giants FACT, the pitch was unplayable FACT, the opposition play long ball FACT, the game would be won and lost in our Defensive 1/3 FACT.

The plan was going well even though the defender in midfield started to tire. Then, out of nowhere and from horrible GK mistakes, we were 2-0 down at HT. Holy shit. I was ready to walk home and pack my bags straight away. The ground was horrible, no shade and the crowd was behind a fence and right behind my back. All through the match I was getting "Fuck you white man, go home white man fuck you, fuck your mamma". Nice! Maybe I shouldn't have done, but I was playing the movie villain, throwing my arms up and shouting with decisions and each time I did, the supporters went wild almost breaking the fences down - it spiked them up even more with pure hatred. I best not wind them up any more I thought, stay professional and concentrate on the match. Although that was difficult. The decisions were disgusting and it was plain to see that the match was already fixed. The 4<sup>th</sup> official was shouting at me like he was some guy from the street and I was a piece of dog shit, and the game was seeming impossible to win. Even though, if it wasn't for our GK, we would have still been in the match. What to do, play our sick GK who also used to play for our opposition (this made me wonder if he was really sick or if he had been offered dollar and didn't want to play) or do what I did? It was a lose, lose.

Half Time came and I walked in early and the 4<sup>th</sup> official came and sat next to me. "coach I'm telling you now, you need to change your GK, you must change him". I told him our other GK is sick, why was he saying this? "Believe me coach, change him. You will not win this game" Oh really, ok then let's see about that. I made a couple of changes and we got it back to 2-2. Final minutes of the match, our GK messes up again and we lose 3-2. We had paid the price for me not listening to the HT warning to make the GK change. The GK had possibly taken a bribe and after looking back at the whole match, it was too obvious. I should have put an outfield player in the nets!

Before the final whistle had blown, I heard GK coach snake going around to all the staff, chairman and others complaining about things behind my back. David my loyal assistant came up to me, "coach this guy is speaking bad of you behind your back, he's saying you changed GK and it's your fault and you didn't include him". "Thanks Davey, I'll deal with this". After the match I called the GK snake over, and said he was no longer on my coaching staff and he was finished. Standing there with astonishment he asked why. "Your poison for this club, talking behind people's backs and you think I'm going to let you talk behind my back when I'm 2 feet away, you're a fool. You are finished, I don't want you near any of my

players again. I will discuss your termination with the Chairman". "I swear on the great Allah himself, I didn't, I swear on the mighty Allah I never did this". My mind was made up and even the mighty Lord himself wouldn't change it.

As I approached to tell the Chairman that we needed a new GK Coach, he called me into a circle with the staff and a few other 'shareholders'. It was an intervention of some sort. We now had 1 point from my first two matches and yet again, my team selection was under scrutiny. "Why is he playing defenders in midfield? why is he leaving out star players?" Fair enough, they had the right to question me so I told them that they could see things are coming together. First match was my error in selecting the wrong striker and we should have won 4 or 5-0. This match we had just been cheated and when the linesman stopped me from making tactical subs because of our player's studs, then with our GK handing them 2 goals, we were very unfortunate again. The Chairman then shared with the circle of trust, "and now coach has fired our GK Coach, so we need to take a vote on that". I told them that the GK snake had to go, no vote needed. Luckily, they agreed and it was to be a very long ride home, with the Chairman driving me like he mostly did.

I needed a win and I needed one fast and with another Away match the following week, I wasn't feeling great about it but one thing was for sure, I'd be paying more attention to 4<sup>th</sup> official warnings! I would also play the same way as the 3-2 defeat because the strategy worked... apart from the ugly poison which is viral in the so called 'beautiful game'.

When I arrived home, I laid on my bed and started thinking about racism in the world and in football. It was nice to get back inside, I was provided with a new, 2-bedroom detached house and although new, I would often be visited by a few friends such as lizards and other things which moved too quickly for my liking. As I sat staring at the corner, watching this small lizard who wasn't moving, I felt stupid wondering if I had been racially abused today by the crowd. It's hard to explain and judge. Through the town people would greet me shouting "Hey white man, hey coach, coach good morning to you", in the most pleasant way possible. There was a lady I used to buy spring rolls from, and she would always come to me laughing and smiling saying "white man how are you, come and get your lunch". I even started greeting her back with a "hey black woman, how have you been, how's your day"? and we would both laugh. From her and the other locals view, calling me white man was not offensive and also, I wasn't offended by it. So, was there a difference between being called a white man with better intentions and being called "fucking white man", with aggression?

For some parts of the world, they haven't been educated about how things are perceived in other countries but on the same hand, is ignorance or lack of education an excuse? One thing's for sure, already hating racism in any walk of life before, I hated it even more now. Being on the receiving end of the abuse didn't bother me at the time, but subconsciously it must have done, as I was thinking about the topic. Having a taste of being a minority isn't pleasant at all and in Europe or anywhere else, the vile people who still think it's 1950

throwing racial abuse around, I hope they could be put in a reversed role for a day or two. Give them a taste of their own medicine. Chairman and I even talked about it, he had visited Europe and he was quite worldly in his thinking. He said that the term white man isn't meant to cause any offence and also saying black man or woman isn't offensive either. He said don't worry about the crowd, they are just trying to put you off.

It wasn't a one off, every away match I'd get the same treatment, by fans and officials so I suppose, I just got used to it.

The next day we had a recovery session and as I was walking from my office to the pitch where all the players were now turning up nice and early, I couldn't believe my eyes. GK snake was doing some warm ups with our GK's in them fucking jeans again! This guy was taking the piss now and as I walked down the hill towards the pitch, all the players stood and watched me. I called the snake over and shook my head laughing to myself. "Put down the ball, and please remove yourself from this pitch and facility and please don't come near any of my players again". He stood there and stared at me, as to challenge me or to think I was going to say something else or ask him a question. "Did you hear me, I've asked you nicely, please don't make me throw you out myself". The snake slivered away, and I would see him a few days later, picking up his pay-off from the club. The players and staff later thanked me because they weren't comfortable having him around. Like in most walks of life, if there is a snake in your circles, cut it's head off and throw it away.

Our next Away match came and I stuck with the same strategy. It was the F.A Cup against lower opposition but we were expected not to win. Although I had made the selection error in my first match and I knew it, right now I felt that I had to stick with what I knew and what I believed in. 'Unwinnable' Away matches could be won if played in a certain way and I was sure the strategy would start working. After 35 minutes when we got a red card for a normal challenge close to the halfway line, I wanted to drown in the red sand I could see in the distance. Then it happened, finally something went our way and we went ahead. We held on and we won 1-0. We had won an Away match, the first one in years and we had also made it through to the next round of the cup. There was no "yeah but it was against a lower league team", the whole buzz was about actually winning an away game. Now I understood, now I could see why it was unacceptable to lose at home and why any away result was pure gold.

I wouldn't say "I told you so" to anyone. However, I had this feeling that playing the way we tried to set up in away matches, would bring success and it did. We went on to win two other away matches, we drew one and we lost one by a 1-0 which was another 'suspicious' adventure. Two club records were broken with the most Away wins in a season and the longest unbeaten Away record. My "Beat the Cheat Away Match Strategy" proved a success and to think, I was so close to bottling it. I needed the thickest skin ever not to buckle under external demand and external expectation.



Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Cup match was again away, against a team we had already beaten 4-1 at home. This time the match was a lot tighter but the same shit, different match. Decisions were disgusting. ...I should of been used to it by now but as I sat there with the sun beaming onto me, I just lost my head. A vital cup match and decisions which seemed like they was from some kind of fantasy novel with rainbows and unicorns were being made. I turned to the 4th Official who was sat to my left, "I'm bored of this shit now, you've just witnessed what I have and you're going to sit there with your eyes fucking closed cos your pockets are full of cash?" The reply was cool like ice and cutting with no flicker of emotion, "it's what you do so shut your fucking mouth white man".

We was 2-0 up at the time and it should of been one of the best feelings ever, considering it was an Away match we shouldn't of been winning. My heart started to feel less about the game and less about the sport on a whole. What was the point in it all?! We had a really bad lapse at the back and with more bad decisions, they pulled it back to 2-2. We missed a penalty which I was surprised we got, and then we scored which should have been the winner. Our Team Manager nicknamed 'Punisher' because his arms were massive, jumped up and starting dancing like crazy on the pitch, swinging his white sweat towel he's always wearing around his neck. I was screaming at him to get off the pitch, the match wasn't over yet. This Punisher plonker was a friend of the Chairman and had no football background and right now, he was making us look like clowns. When I finally got him off, he sat back down and it must have been seconds later, they went and equalized to make it 3-3 with the last kick of the 90 minutes. I turned to Punisher and shouted "you see what's just happened, you dancing around like we've won it made this happen"!

I called Davey over to discuss some strategy for extra time and how to use our subs. "Boss, there's no extra time, cup matches go straight to penalties". "Davey mate serious, you don't think it would have been good to tell me this before"? I guess it was my fault for not asking and there went my extra time plan, straight out the window! During the penalties I made sure everyone including Punisher, stood still with our arms linked together. I told them what ever happens, we all keep our composure and we generate the positive energy and faith for the win. We smashed it, scoring all of the kicks and getting through to the 3<sup>rd</sup> round of the F.A Cup! Our GK (the one who was sick before) was the star saving two penos, but he was grumpy as hell. Someone had blamed him for one of the goals and he wouldn't shake it off. Nothing like other people causing more work for the coach!

After the match their supporters had surrounded the walkway from the changing rooms to the carpark and they were trying to attack the ref. I couldn't believe it, they thought the ref did bad for them! What a laugh. Even so, I was a bit nervous to step outside, surely it wasn't a good idea? Chairman was laughing, he said to go with him and when I asked where his car was, "up the hill coach, through the crowd, no problem haha". The Chairman's offer was refused and I walked out with the players and shared the team bus back home. It was a good choice, we were singing and dancing all the way home.

The lads were doing great and I was growing fond of all of them and the club. We were winning both home and away and we were up to 4<sup>th</sup> place at one stage. With minimal resources available, I still did my best to professionalise the club. We would have team meetings with video analysis where I would go to the player's villa, which housed most of them. We would eat together, watch some Premier League and then I'd do some unit meetings. The lads had their own cooks who would prepare their meals and, meat and rice was perfect for me. Considering the restrictions that African players are met with, I felt fortunate to be at a club with a nice setup. Or at least, one making the most of what they had. Club policies were being followed and discipline wasn't really an issue, until I found out some inside knowledge from reporters.

Apparently, some of the lads would be out late at night around some clubs, thinking they were big time. I wasn't sure I believed it and I thought it could be 'fake news', from the not so trustworthy media. Chairman and I was out for a meal and afterwards we decided to go for a beer. I asked him to take me where some of the players go on their down time or 'where they would normally go'. We got to this club that was inside a large villa and we went through the lines of people waiting, as Chairman was popular in the community. Settling in with a beer, the place was packed. Some decent dance moves being busted out and any guys out there who can't pull in clubs, it would have been the place for you. The reason for this, was as I watched everyone having fun and dancing like crazy, people would literally make contact and then that was it. You were grinding partners.

As I was scanning the room half looking out for any players, I spotted our Right Back who had been sick for a few weeks with Malaria. I turned to chairman and said, "hey that's Annem isn't it"? Chairman was laughing saying "yes coach, yes it is". The little shit. I caught his eye and as soon as he saw me move forward, he turned and ran away. I chased him through the club, pushing through the sweaty heap of grinders and it didn't help, Annem was one of the quickest players we had! I did a couple of laps with no success and went back to Chairman, "did you find him coach"? "No did I fuck, he was too quick and I couldn't see anything". Chairman replied, "and because everyone is black in the darkness right coach"? We both laughed and finished our beer. I'd sort this out in the morning.

At training the next day, I threw down the law to everyone. In our team circle I told them that I knew the ones who weren't keeping the promise of being professionals and as I said it, I stopped and looked at the culprits in the eye. They didn't know it yet, but the next two matches, I would leave them out of the starting lineup. This wasn't an easy choice because one of them was Chairman's son, one of the best players in the team. For Annem, he was ordered back to training as he obviously wasn't sick, and he trained on his own to regain basic fitness and then was sent to train with the reserves. I'd already replaced him and although he was a likable lad, he had broken my trust. It proved to be a decision I got right but of course, I got some wrong too.

Early on in my role I was faced with an issue with one of my foreign players, a Nigerian lad called Barry who played like a European playmaker. He was a new signing and I liked him a lot, wanting to try and build some strategy around him. One day, Chairman called me across to talk with him and Barry, as Barry wanted to have 8 days leave for his sister's wedding. I should have said no right away, when Chairman said it was my decision. Barry gave me a sob story about him being the one who brought his sister up and he needed to be there. He promised he would come back as he was excited to be part of this team. I let him leave, did he come back? Did he fuck! I was left holding cock in hand and looking like a mug. The funniest part about it was, when I left Ghana, I got a whatsapp message from Barry asking if I could help find him a club..... good try mate!

With performances going well on the pitch, there was many challenges off it. One of them being Punisher! In a role of Team Manager, who should be taking care of logistics and organising our away trips, this guy was a nightmare (although a nice guy with a good heart). His arms were massive and he would carry a small, white sweat towel around his neck everywhere he went. He didn't have any input on the football side of things and one of his main roles should have been, to take care of the team's off field needs. It was apparent from my first away match in charge (on the way to play the cheating giants), that this was going to be a struggle. Although I appreciated that our resources were limited, I still wanted as much detail in our preparations as possible, meaning our nutrition, rest, accommodation and timings of travel.

Apparently, the accommodation was already set up for us as we parked up to head in and rest for the night. After an hour of waiting around and then some, it was obvious that there had been a cock up with the booking and there was no room in the inn. Time started getting on and with the match being tomorrow, I was really desperate to get the lads their food and get them to bed. Another hour had passed and we're all still stood around, nothing happening at all.

Time kept ticking away and it's getting on for 8pm now and if only something, we needed to get some food. I go looking for Punisher to get an update on what's going on and where our meals will be, and as I walked up towards a mobile burger van, Punisher was stood there stuffing his face. I couldn't believe it! While we were all stood around hungry and tired, our Team Manager was taking care of himself! "Manager, everything ok? You got your food ok yeah?" "Yes coach, thanks". By this time the lads were annoyed, they had gathered behind me which I wasn't aware of, "ok that's great, while you're feeding your fat head, do you think it's ok for our players to be stood around with no food and no fucking place to sleep. We need to be setting examples and leading them. What is it with some of you guys who think the players are below you, you think they are the 2<sup>nd</sup> class humans. You want respect from the players, and this is how you gain it"? I didn't intend for the team to all hear me but when everything else has failed more than once, maybe a public call out is what some people need.

Soon after, Chairman pulled into the vicinity and I headed straight to his car. “Everything ok coach”? “No not really, there’s no place to sleep, the players haven’t eaten anything and fat head over there is stuffing his face while the rest of us are standing around”. He got on his phone and sorted out other accommodation closer to where the match would be. When we got there, he dropped me off and said he was going to look for a hotel for the staff. The place where we had stopped would be for the players and it was acceptable, but still no food. Punisher was rushing around frantically but wasn’t achieving anything and the only thing he needed to do, was to look at his list and put players into their rooms. Oh, and I forgot, get the food ready. As I stood watching in amazement, another hour must have passed. Still no food had appeared, and the players had already got in some kind of room sharing order.

I’m still stood in the pitch black, none the wiser about the food or anything else and Davey my Assistant is shaking his head, “it’s always like this boss, they don’t care about the players”. “Davey we’ve been stood here for an hour now and it’s been a total mess. I’ve been told nothing apart from wait here and that was ages ago. Wait here mate...” Things went silent and everyone had disappeared, where the fuck had Punisher gone?! I went around the rooms checking the lads were ok and to also look for Punisher. I got to one of the last rooms at the bottom and pushed the door open. Punisher was stood there in his underwear about to get into bed, literally in mid yawn and stretch before he climbed in. “Maaaaate you’re joking with me now surely”? “What coach”? “Come with me and I’ll show you...” I brought him to where me and Davey had been standing and asked if there was anything wrong with this picture. Punisher replied, “light”? Finally, I got the only chair we could find and let Davey take a seat while Punisher called Chairman to see when he was coming back. Another 40 minutes passed, and it was almost midnight. “Away matches always like this boss”, said Davey. Awesome I thought, can’t wait for more!

Within my heart, even though I was loving the team and we was winning, I was losing motivation for the game. The cheating was too obvious and there were limited attempts to hide it at times. Out of all the away matches we played (6 in total), we had only lost 2 and that was against some blatant paying off, of the officials. The worst example was when we headed to a newly promoted team who were dreadful. We had already been tipped off that the officials would be with the home side and in preparation, Chairman brought along one of his friends from the GFA (Ghana Football Association). Great I thought, surely nothing dodgy will happen now? How wrong was I! It was the worst match I’ve ever seen or been involved in! Every time we had an attack there was a foul against us. Apart from long shots, we couldn’t get within 25 yards of their goal. It was the total opposite for them, with their players being allowed to man handle us until they got close enough to either, get a shot off, get a freekick or get a would-be penalty. It was so obvious that I was embarrassed to even be part of it. Not surprisingly, they scored and was able to hold on with help from the constant whistles to break up all of our pressure and attacks. The darkness came and play continued without lights, just to make sure we wouldn’t get a miracle goal.

This was the worst crowd I encountered. They were abusing me and the players. Screaming at any one close to me, “you are fucking white man’s slave, look at you”. I couldn’t wait to get off the pitch and get back home. It was a disgusting place. Some reporters came to me while I was still on the field and while I would normally make an effort to give good feedback, when one of their local guys asked me what I thought of the officials today I replied, “you saw the game, you answer it yourself” and I walked away. I wasn’t angry, I was sad. This match had made me sad and empty. I walked off the pitch and through the crowd who had come down from the stand. I stared at everyone directly into the eyes. I wanted to see if anyone had the bollocks to say to my face, what they had been shouting while I was on the pitch. They all parted and made space for me to walk through, with no words exchanged.

In the car park it was even more of a laugh. Chairman and their Chairman were arguing, almost coming to blows and nobody was hiding what had gone on. “we needed the points”, they guy was saying..... well, nothing like an admission of guilt, not that I needed any confirmation. He looked at me and tried to reason with me that they needed the points. I simply looked away in disgust. From the other side, the reporter who had asked that daft question to me on the pitch, got in my face, “fuck you white man you think you are the only white man to ever come to this country, fuck you I’ll fight you”. I just stood there shaking my head even more. I felt even more sad now. This country of great footballing talent was tearing itself apart through greed and corruption. A beautiful country pleading for progress, but only holding itself back. One of our club reporters stepped in and squared up to their reporter guy and said, “why should he give you any respect, look at you, you look like shit man, a reporter looks like me. Look what I wear”. I had to chuckle, he had a point because our guy was looking sharp.

As if things couldn’t get any worse, on the way back, Chairman’s care broke down in absolute darkness on a roadside. We got out and stood there staring at the engine with a mobile phone as a light and I couldn’t help but laugh. Chairman, GFA man and me, in the middle of nowhere and for some reason, it was freezing! My knowledge of cars is less than zero and I didn’t even pretend, so I held the make shift torch. Travelling was always an experience in Ghana, and it was important I made extra efforts to keep a sense of humour. Chairman was brilliant and would drive to all the matches and have me as his passenger and he looked after me. Sometimes, I would ride on the bus with the lads and that was a giggle. We would stop off on the roadside for a piss, and I would shout out to them “anyone looking at me will be dropped from the team, you won’t see much anyway!”. They would all crack up and one of them once came to me and told me it’s so fun to have a coach stand with them taking a piss. I guess that’s real bonding right there.

After a home match against the league leaders, it was another obvious game that had outside influencers. We had to face it Away and now we had to face it at Home at our own ground. This team had some money behind them, and it looked like they wanted promotion

any way possible. We were the better team and we bossed the match and they had one shot from 30 yards that went in. We ended up drawing 1-1 and that was proof to me that we were the best team in the league, but there was no way that it would ever mean anything. After the match, some of our fans and our 'Directors' tried to get into our GK's face, blaming him for the goal conceded from long distance. At the time, I went berserk and threw them off the pitch side away from the lads. Now I look back, I know exactly why they was angry – they think our GK was got to and that the long shot that went in was too suspicious. They could have been right, but I was past caring. Losing points and killing our lad's and mine efforts through paying, bribing and cheating had worn me down. These evils in the game may control a country, but it wasn't going to control me.

Without any biased, there wasn't one team we had played that got the better of us and every game we dropped points in, there was some kind of misdemeanor happening. I could write a big list of them all, but you wouldn't believe me. Like the time when our striker was 1 on 1 in the box and the ref whistled to stop the game and brought play back for a free-kick TO US, for an incident that happened 5 minutes before. China had become too much and now with this, I had as much as I could stomach. Working with your team each day, putting effort in morning until night to try and get positive results, there's only so much you can do. When external or uncontrollable factors are the deciders of getting the right result or not, you can't have them controlling your destiny.

You can't put all the hard work in through the week, just to have the result already decided for you before a ball is kicked. The clubs, their cheating and their bickering was like a bunch of children. It was all about trying to stitch each other up and seeing what they could get, out of writing letters to the GFA. The final and dark cloud was about to move over me and put my whole spirit under a shadow and down the drain.

Training was about to start, the training ground gates were locked and I had only five players and Davey standing with me on the pitch. A few players were heading down like zombies pleading for me to let them in. I wouldn't open the gate. Since the first ever training session, nothing like this had happened. They were all spot on with their attitudes and then out of the blue, this happened. How could it be? What had happened? The players outside the gate was begging me to let them in, the players and Davey inside the gate were begging me to let them in and I wouldn't.

Needing time to think, I went for a walk across the pitch and I still couldn't make sense of it all. After around 30 minutes, I told Davey I'll let them inside, but he can do the training. More late zombies turned up and I pulled them in and gathered in our circle of trust. "Ok someone tell me what on earth is going on"? ..... silence. Lads please, if you don't tell me, I can't help you. Silence for a long few seconds and then finally one of them broke down, he went onto his knees and pleaded for forgiveness. I ushered him to his feet and asked him to please tell me what's happened. Then it all came out.

Some players hadn't been paid for months, some of them for longer than a year. Some of them hadn't been paid money owed from years ago when they first signed for the club. Their food was being rationed and any small salary they did get, was paying for the food which I was originally told, was free for the players. Looking around in disbelief at the other faces to try and read the truth, I could see it all in their eyes. Now I know this goes on around the world in football, not only in Africa and I wasn't naïve to this. What had me fooled was the attitude and the quality of training and performances the lads would put in. They had been hiding it all, mostly for me, because they didn't want me to find out and leave as I could be one of their hopes of escaping. There was also the obvious notion, that they had been threatened not to tell me because then they would lose me and their chance to escape.

Immediately I walked to the player's villa to investigate what was happening with their food. When I got there, the staff helpers who take care of the meals were nervous. They didn't know what to tell me and they were scared, because I had found out. As I continued walking around the villa to look for other players, I found a couple of lads, and they told me the same story. They didn't want to come because they hadn't been given enough food that day or paid for a long time. This isn't to say they wasn't being fed at all, as I had been there for meals and most days when I wasn't there, I would ask the players and David to tell me how everything was.

There could be a small part of it, where the players were tired of it and felt like finally rebelling, and perhaps they saw me as someone who could help. But I couldn't. I'm sure if I turned a blind eye, kept my nose out of what really happens behind the scenes in the world game and concentrated on winning matches, I would of probly been snapped up by a bigger club somewhere, maybe even with the youth's National team squad what was spoke about. But I couldn't do that. It's not in my makeup and although there wasn't much I could do, I would make sure that I wasn't playing the part of Slave Master any more.

Running around trying to find all the 'wannabe staff, managers, owners' who normally have so much to say, I wanted to confront them and ask if there was any truth in what was being said. They all kept quiet apart from when they tried to blame the players of lying. I pulled a Church Reverent to the side who was part of the club's board, "as a holy man with faith, can you tell me the truth"? He agreed that there was some truth in what was being said and then tried to claim that things are very different in Africa. Yes, I get that, but just because everyone else is doing the wrong thing, doesn't mean that's how it needs to be done forever. Finally, I got through to Chairman on the phone and he asked me to stay cool and wait until he got back from business the next day. I couldn't wait. I asked him outright on the phone and he couldn't give me a straight answer. Fuck this, I was done, I wanted no further part in this. These fuckers playing games, all the face to face dishonesty, no thanks. I'd rather be at home with my baby boy.

If I had my passport on me, I would have got my bags and left straight away. It was at immigration or at least that's where it was said to be. Trying to do all I could for the players, I called a meeting with all the staff, players and anyone else who was around and usually wanted a piece of the action. I opened up the deadly secret which was forbidden to talk about. It started with me pointing to players and asking them the last time they were paid. One after the other was the reply, "two months boss, not since last season coach" or, "I haven't been paid yet coach". The 'board members' and the fat Punisher fuck tried to put all the blame on the players. How dare they. It was the first time I had ever seen the players speak back to any staff, and I was happy to see them calling out their lies and pointing the finger back at these assholes.

What a mess and what a shame. How could I have missed it, and the most annoying thing what pissed me off about the whole thing, from a footballing perspective was, can you imagine how good these players could be if they were getting paid what they were owed and getting properly fed?! Instead of trying to make quick gold and cutting back to try and gain more, how about giving more first to then create the more consistent and sustainable gold?

My passport was waiting for me to be collected from the immigration office in the capital, and I was being picked up the next day to collect it. I was now in a bad situation because at that moment, everyone thought I was pissed off and I would pick up my passport and come back to sort everything out. Having heard more and more revelations and then hearing of some more disgusting truths from my trusted assistant Davey, I decided enough was enough. I wasn't coming back. My contract wasn't even valid as the club had delayed my visa application, so I was also illegal in my position as Head Coach for most of the matches we played. It was all one big farce. Not to mention, my visit visa expiring!

The morning came and my bags were packed. I was in the car and the driver saw my cases were packed and he drove me to the stadium and called the Chairman. From that point on, it was operation don't let the white man go and everyone tried to stall me. The not so faithful Reverent came and tried to talk me out of leaving, then the driver refused to take me anywhere. No problem, I got out with my two huge suitcases and carried them down to the roadside to get a taxi. At that same time, a group of the sports reporters were walking towards me having just had breakfast... that's just what I needed! "Coach, coach what are you doing, where are you going"? I had no patience left for this falseness and my blood was boiling about these cheats and lairs taking away from people what they had earned. All the player's contracts I had looked through and made copies of, were all pointless and broken.

All of them had joining fees and basic salaries and my findings told me that hardly any of them had been received. "Get out my way you wankers, the lot of you. All you do is try and ruin people, how about supporting your team for once. You're all two faced pricks".... Not the nicest goodbye I've ever said.



Whist in the taxi, my good old agent called me and said that they are going to stop me leaving the country and that I owed them money. Yeah yeah, I knew how it would play out from here, I was now public enemy no.1 and that also put my agent, on the list of people I couldn't trust. My contract was void from the moment I had stepped foot in Ghana. I had found out that anyone looking to work in the country legally, needed to have a permit prepared before entering. There was also the fact that I was told to use a different name, when giving my name to match officials before the match .... If I didn't, then we would all be in a world of shit, and that was the position I was put in without even knowing it. The contract was built on false pretenses and by contractual law, was void even before I set my eyes on it. Not the first time one of my contracts had been a load of nothing!

Every checkpoint we got to when leaving the town, I was crapping myself. It would be no trouble at all for some message and some little 'fee' to be passed onto the guards and I would be stopped in my tracks. My only priority now was getting my passport and going home. The taxi driver must have thought he was carrying an escaped convict or something, I kept telling him to drive and then shit! We got stopped at a checkpoint. My heart was beating through my chest and the guards were talking to him, looking at his I.D. After a quick inspection, we were let through and the driver told me it's because he is using the wrong paperwork. I didn't care, let's keep going.

Throughout the journey my agent was turning more and more against me and I told him to meet up with me in the city. When we met in a café, he tried to get me to go back and let the club explain. No way, I said and one more thing, who's got my passport. After some phone calls, he told me that my passport was waiting to be collected from the immigration office, so that's where I headed. Once arrived at immigration, just as I had suspected.... My passport wasn't there. I'm not sure what games were being played or if it was even there in the first place, but it wasn't there now.

The best thing to do for the night, was to get into a hotel and go to the British consulate the next day. I couldn't travel without a passport and Davey had told me that a player had told him, 'they had seen my passport in the Chairman's bedroom (he had a room at the player's villa)'. Well at least I knew where it was and at least I knew I wouldn't be getting it back. The funniest news was still to come. The club was then demanding I pay \$2,000 (U.S) to get my passport back or, I had to meet them and sign some bullshit release papers. Neither option was going to happen. Still, the best was still to come..... my agent then started to try and get money out of me for damages, saying that the club wanted their money back because I didn't stay for the whole contract period. "No chance, mate there is no contract, there is only an illegal foreigner using a different coach's name, who's visit visa has expired and who

has no passport. You've now chosen which side you're taking so now, me and you are done".

Davey was messaging me and updating me on the situation. All of the players were worried about me and the powers that be were questioning him on my whereabouts. They said that they had alerted the airport and authorities that I had broken a contract with them and that I was without a tourist visa or work permit. How dumb was that in itself, they were contradicting their own story but I wasn't daft, I knew it didn't matter what made sense or not. Laying on the bed in the hotel I wanted the time to go quickly, so I could get up the next day and go straight to the British Consulate. The same feeling as I had in the Philippines jail cell came to me again, isolation and just wanting it all done with so I could go home to my family. My mind was playing tricks on me, had I run away and left the players with no hope of making things right? But then I would look at the facts and would again realise, that I wouldn't of been able to do anything against a whole nation, with their shared values. The time had come now, to look after myself and make sure I was safe.

In the morning, I was the first person waiting outside the consulate, waiting for it to open. I was so paranoid that people were looking for me, my mind was convinced that there was some kind of manhunt going on. Through the night, the agent and club officials were all trying to get me to meet them, threatening me and asking for money for my passport. I took great pleasure in reminding them that stealing a British passport, is considered as stealing from the Queen herself. British passports are property of the British Government. I finally got into the consulate and they were really helpful, giving me information about my options and telling me how I would have to apply for an emergency passport, which would take 48 hours.

What I wasn't aware of, was that because I had over stayed my tourist visa from promises that my work permit was on it's way, I would have to stay in the country for another 3 weeks, while all the paperwork was processed. I couldn't do that.

The consulate representative was great, a South African/British lady and she wasn't taking any crap. She called up the club and spoke with them directly, informing them that they had stolen from the British Government. The club then made some bullshit story up, about me assaulting the driver who was originally meant to take me to the city. I had pushed his arm away when he put his phone to my ear to talk with the Chairman, but this, was enough to make me worried even more, knowing that any fabricated story would be paid to be made true. The consulate representative did tell me that they didn't have the power to intervene with anything dealt with by local law, but they could help with lawyers if I needed.

This is the last thing I needed. I had already booked a flight to the U.K and I needed to get my emergency passport and get out of this place. After explaining the full story to the consulate representative, she conformed that I was doing the right thing, as if I got caught as an illegal immigrant, while the club kept stalling on my work permit, I would get in even more trouble. She was also disgusted to hear about my findings of the player's treatment. "Ok I know a guy in the local CID, who will be able to help us. He's trustworthy and I'm in close contact with him". She called the CID guy and told him I would come to meet him and discuss my situation. I was to meet him tomorrow at his office and call him once I was there. After the confirmation that I would have to wait another 3 weeks, this was my last chance and I was still not hopeful. How much could I trust a local CID officer?

On arrival at the immigration offices, I first went to see if I could actually get a visa extension there and then. The officers were not helpful at all and they told me it could take a month to be processed. I had no choice, I had to call CID and he gave me directions to his office. When he came to greet me, I wasn't feeling great, as I didn't know what the deal was but I should have been cool, as he was working closely with the consulate. I quickly told him my situation and he gave me his business card. "Go to the airport as normal and if anyone stops you, show them my card and my name. Get them to call me". He wrote his name and number in pen to emphasise it was him. "You won't have any problems", he said. A huge feeling of relief came over me and I thanked him and shook his hand.

Still Sitting there, I was looking at him and I leaned towards him and I asked "do you need anything else from me?", meaning if there was a 'fee'. CID smiled at me and said "no, no I don't. Go get yourself home".

Bouncing back to the hotel, I was so happy and started to feel safer. The day went slowly, and I called my son, watching him crawl for the first time and told him daddy was coming home soon. Although things had turned better, I still had a big worry. What happened if I was stopped before getting into the airport or inside the airport, how will they know to let me through, do I just give them the card, will he be there to answer the phone? Just to make sure, I called CID and asked him to confirm. "No problem Mr Matt, I will call them today on shift change, so immigration at the airport already know". That was comforting. The only issue now was to get inside the airport and not get picked up. I was still paranoid, that the club would send people to try and stop me from getting inside and I was anxious. My anxiety was to see if I would make it, I couldn't wait any longer and I decided to go to the airport really early, just incase I hit any problems that delayed me.

Inside the taxi to the airport, I was already put in a negative mind frame. The hotel receptionist had tried to rip me off claiming that prices had changed through the night. The manager was called, and the receptionist was arguing saying I was calling her a liar. I told the manager that's exactly what I'm saying, as it's her signature from when I checked in and paid the agreed fee upfront. I wasn't going to argue over a few dollars.

The taxi driver was talking too much. He was trying to exchange mobile numbers because he wanted to get to Europe. "Please my friend I'm sorry, today is a bad day. Please can you just get me to the airport as quickly as possible". He got me there in one piece and he was going to pull up right outside the security area. "Just drop me here, I'll walk the rest of the way".

I've never carried two heavy bags so quickly and whilst trying to remain calm with a hat on, I gingerly walked through the security checkpoint. Trying not to look at the officers, I walked as calmly as I could. Made it! In my haste to get to the airport so early, I had forgot that you can only check in 2 hours before. I still tried, and ....failed. Shit! I would have to sit in the café for another 3 hours , until I could check in. Should have stayed at the hotel longer. Finding a chair at the back of the café, I slinked low to keep my head down. It was impossible to relax thinking that I could be picked up at any time. Looking back at it now, I shouldn't have been so worried, but at the time and seeing first hand what contacts and offering of money can do, anything could have happened at any time. I wasn't safe.

The time came for me to line up for check-in and the line was longer than I needed. Waiting at the back, was exposing me and giving me no place to hide. Each time a security or police officer walked my way, I was convinced my time was up. After 30 minutes panic, the line moved up and I got to the desk. Typical I thought, there was two other security checks after actually checking in. After my bags were taken, I then had to show my passport to two more desks, and this was a potential disaster. The emergency British passport is pink and basically looks fake. I doubt many people have actually seen it and there was a chance, they would deny it's use. Inside the front page of the passport, I slipped in some local currency. All four of my trouser pockets were full of different money amounts, ready for different needs. Each pocket increased in value depending how serious the need was.

The desk officer opened my passport, saw the money and gave it back to me. He then waved me through. Phew! That was a good result.

Getting closer to the finish line, I just needed to hold my nerve for a little bit longer. Then I saw in front of me, two more security check points. What the hell was this?! How many more security checks were needed? Now all of my panic came back to me because, these officers were teamed with an army guardsman in camouflage fatigues. This was not good news at all! I walked past the first one with no issues and then I saw ahead and to my dread, I saw them checking every single passport with detailed scrutiny. I was surely fucked now!

I walked up, stopped and handed the mean, looking bastard my fake, pink passport. "what's this"? "It's a British emergency passport". "Why is it pink, where are the stamps, where is your old passport". After explaining that I had lost my original passport and I got this emergency one from the British Consulate, I then had to explain to him why I didn't have any visa papers or visa extension. Before he could ask any more questions, I got out the CID card. "This officer has said to call him if you have any questions". Angry man looked at the

card and flipped it over, "Go to that office over there, they will deal with you". So here it was, crunch time. I was about to see if CID had kept up his end of the bargain.

Heading towards the office labelled 'Customs Commanding Officer', my hope was flagging and I could feel my face starting to look defeated.

Before the Commanding Officer said anything, I passed the card to him, "Sir, sorry for the interruption and bother. I have an emergency passport and no stamps, but I was told to pass you this card and ask you to call him, if there was any problem". CO took the card and stared at it as he was leaning back. He obviously knew CID and I could tell CID held more pull than him. It felt like he was looking at it for minutes, perhaps thinking if there was anything, he could get from this and how he could do it. "Ok go, take the V.I.P checkpoint, nobody will stop you". "Thank you, Sir,". Quickly walking out of the office, I followed the V.I.P lane and I could now see the finish line. Above me, I could see the V.I.P area and if I made it in there, surely, I was safe.

Nobody else stopped me, I got to the V.I.P lounge steps and I walked up without looking back.

Sinking into my comfortable lounge seat, I ordered a cold Gin n Tonic. To my left I could see the tarmac with my plane sat there. I still needed to get on that plane and I wasn't 100% safe until we had took off, but for sure, I was in a much better place right now. The odds were in my favour.

I started to reflect on my time in Ghana and what had happened. This big fear of getting stopped wasn't about any contract talk, as this was not even a real thing - there was no legally binding agreement. My main concerns were, that I had been made to over stay my tourist visa and also, I didn't know how far they had taken their fabricated assault story. There was still sadness at how things were left. For all what happened afterwards, the Chairman and everyone at the club had treated me the best I could have hoped for, the Chairman and I had become quite close and work wise, he let me get on with managing the team how I wanted. I was grateful for that. Unfortunately, once I found out a few of the hidden truths and chose not to side with them, I became enemy of the state.

I had forfeited my last few weeks bonuses and wouldn't get paid for the last month, but that was ok. Messaging the Reverent, I asked him to give my owed money to the players and pleaded with him to see it through. It never happened. When I got home, I sent a few players some money and told them to keep it away from anyone at the club. Knowing I couldn't help them out there, I vowed to try and help them any other way I could. Not being able to 'save the planet' on my own, I felt, sending money to them was a start. I also linked a couple of the players with a club in India, where they are now playing today, receiving full salary, with food and accommodation.

The experience on a whole was full of learning. I excelled as a manager and know we would have been battling for a top 3 finish. We had broke club records and we started to make news around the country, for learning how to win Away matches. There had been talk of me moving to bigger African clubs and there's no doubt, that if I had kept my head down, I would of progressed. We had also made it to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Round of the F.A cup against one of the biggest clubs in the country, and I would have been up against another British manager. That didn't happen and to confirm why I was happy I'd left, their local media had written an article about how I left the club and stole \$5,000.

That summed up much of the mentality I was facing, just like the referees, if they didn't make it so obvious, maybe it would be believable. To help save others from falling into the mess that was left, I knew the agent would be searching on LinkedIn for a replacement, so I put out a warning message.

Many coaches contacted me for more details, as they had applied for the role and all of them turned it down. The British coach who ended up taking the role, was the only one, who had not bothered to contact me for any background. He was a coach who had experience with local, junior, grassroots teams and I wish he had asked what the score was. No offence to any junior coaches what so ever, but he had no idea what he was walking into. The club just wanted a white face and the agent, would have been forced to find a quick replacement.

I later found out that it all went to shit, with similar problems. The club wasn't paying him, then they started denying any knowledge that he was working for them at all. I saw a message exchange between the coach and Chairman and it was pure comedy. The coach even referenced that he knew what had happened with me, and Chairman pretended he didn't even know who I was. It made me laugh, Chairman would never change – a loveable rogue. We left on sour terms but deep down in his heart, he is good and we had some great laughs together. He got married to an amazing woman, after romantically courting her for years. I was happy for them.

Don't let this chapter put you off from taking chances, and taking up roles outside your comfort zone. If things had worked out differently, it could have opened up many more doors for me. Ghana is an amazing country and I would recommend anyone to go there if the chance came up. That's the same said, for taking opportunities across Africa. Although I have shared with you some of the negatives I came across, the work ethic and kindness of the people had a lasting effect on me. I'm grateful for the friends I met, and I pray for my players, hoping they have the strength to keep fighting for the career they want and deserve.

Never give up hope, no matter how big the odds are against you!

## 8. The Next Chapter

From Ghana, I stopped off in Portugal where I was enjoying walking around the airport as a free man. I then went on to England, to spend time with my parents. Some Mum's cooking was on the agenda and I needed to reset my body. My diet wasn't great out there. Food was available but choice was limited. Keeping myself so busy focusing on work, I would grab some bread here and there, maybe some rice and meat but after the same thing every day, it gets tiresome. Chairman looked after me and treated me to meals when we went out but still, I needed some different food into my system. Unable to work-out, apart from some running outside in the heat during the day, I had lost a lot of my muscle mass and needed to get back to a healthy state again. The heat, my activity levels and the limited motivation to eat, had made some room for some 'relaxed eating'.

It was nice to be back, around family and although there was no hurry to go back to Taiwan, I wanted to see how much my son had grown. My passport would be ready in 2 weeks, longer than usual as my previous one was now listed as 'stolen'.

The two weeks allowed me to properly reflect on my true feelings about the coaching path I had started, and I needed to check in with myself, if it was still what I wanted. Having had great experiences in my past roles, they were also diluted with disdain for the football world. Seeing the dark side of the game on many occasions, had truly numbed my passion for it (coaching). There are two types of people in the world; those who will keep their head down and roll with it, either to support their family through accepting terms and continuing to pick up a pay check. Or there's others, who tend to lead with their heart above leading with their head. The head is logical, 'I need a job, I need to pay bills, do what is needed, don't make waves'. The heart says 'this isn't right, this goes against your morals, you need to make a stand'... for me, I wish my head took more control at times.

No doubt, the realisation that the 'dark side' of football is present in many countries, perhaps all, and knowing first hand how destructive some uncontrollable factors are to a coach and/or staff, my numbness didn't give in. If I was going to continue on my coaching path in a professional capacity, I would need to 'roll with it', and accept the terms that the professional football industry would throw at me. This would mean; accepting that hard work would be pointless through games that could be fixed, knowing there's a chance of not getting paid on time or my players not getting paid at all. Could I accept all of this, put it to the back of my mind and collect my salary like a fraud? No. It's not for me right now.

My dream and goal of becoming a professional coach had been achieved, but once the dream had become a reality, the game started to show its true colours. Maybe it was my fault, for believing that football would remain so pure and that I could still do some good,

but very quickly, the realism is that like most sport, the football industry is full of greed, power hungry narcissists who have forgotten the beauty of humanity.

I'd like to know the number of clubs in the whole world, who still actually care about the game? One shining light is Fateh Hyderabad AFC, in India, who's owner I'm quite close with. They work endless to bring activity into the local community and offer their players, a safe environment to play in, with food, housing and salary. They are an example that many other clubs should follow.

My interest for being in a 'no win' situation again, has no appeal to me what so ever. My motivation for coaching has dropped and apart from the England matches in the Russia World Cup, I haven't watched a full football match to date (this is changing now I'm doing some scouting again). My marriage is no longer a marriage, due to my obsession with striving to achieve something in the game as a coach. This made me distant from my wife, not just in distance. She never once gave me any hardship, which would take away from what I was trying to achieve but during this time, I was changing as a person. Not only from making the sacrifice of not being there when she needed me the most, but the energy and commitment I put into what I was doing, led me to lose focus on the one thing that truly matters in life. Family.

Chasing my dream with the single mindedness I did it with, had aided football in ruining my marriage. Of course, I'm the only person to blame for this and football is not directly responsible, I was the person who changed for the worse. This goes out to a point I made earlier in this book. How far are you willing to go for success? How committed are you and how much sacrifice are you willing to make?

So, what now?

Now, I'm in a much better place. I don't do much coaching any more and this could be evidence that it's not where my true passion lays. If it was, I would have the same passion for coaching as Louis Lancaster, but I don't. In 2017 I created the [British Football Coaches Network \(BFCN\)](#), in an attempt to support other British/Irish Coaches in finding opportunities in the game. I don't just want to help British Coaches but right now, I feel we are very undervalued in the coaching world and most importantly, the recognition that a coaching world outside of the U.K, needs to be brought to more people's attention.

There are so many British coaches who are succeeding abroad but sadly enough, only ones with a distinguished past playing career seem to get any coverage (this isn't a slight on these coaches, it's just the ignorance of some of the media). When British coaches abroad are winning league titles, qualifying for International tournaments and helping to build pride of a Nation, I believe there could be more done, to immerse them within a British talent pool, and perhaps give them the recognition they deserve.



In addition to the BFCN, I also run a consulting and recruitment business under my company MW Football Ltd. with aims of opening more doors for staff and coaches abroad, trying to help get them a step up in their careers. This is keeping me involved in the game in some capacity and I hope, that I can pass on some of my experiences to try and help others who are following a path, similar to what I took. I've also start the [World Soccer Forum](#), which is open to all staff, coaches, agents and players, in an attempt to try and link everyone together, instead of scrolling through social media all day, missing out on posts that have passed by. My Recruitment & Consultancy business is picking up nicely, helping to manage some players and working with academies across China, keeping in the mix of developing China's football scene.

There are times when I see coaches who I know get a new move or achieve something great, that makes me get that excitement inside my stomach again. That fight inside you and will to win. The feeling of building something with a group of people and celebrating, when you get the result from your hard work. The adrenaline of the crowd hating you, or confrontations with other coaches. Seeing the net push back when the ball goes in and making you hungrier to see it happen again. Yes, there are these times. But right now, my buzz is being able to see my little boy grow up and I value my happiness, more than ever.

Who knows? That time may come again in the future, when I'm back in the technical area with veins popping out my bald head. Never say never!

What ever you do. Chase your dream until you achieve it. Only then you will know, if it truly is your dream and your calling.

Thank You For Reading

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