

INTRODUCTION

I HAVE ALWAYS been an avid reader and have read many footballers' autobiographies. Unfortunately I have found a lot of them to be pretty bland and, more often than not, they do not really tell the public anything they do not already know.

I had a very modest career as a lower-league footballer and you could label me the proverbial 'journeyman' as I went from one modest footballing backwater to another, despite starting at the top. I thought my story was pretty unremarkable until, over the last year or so, I wrote a blog about my thoughts and experiences that was well received by the small group of people I interact with via social media.

As a result, I decided to write this candid book about my experiences within the football industry. People who know me well will already be aware that I find it hard to express my feelings openly, but I will use this book as a channel to give an honest and balanced view of my working life and the people I came across during a career punctuated with a few highs and many lows.

Here we go...

Ben Smith

Witham, Essex, 2012

CHAPTER 1

THE END

15 SEPTEMBER 2012

It is a late Sunday evening and I am, without wishing to sound too dramatic, at a crossroads in my life.

My professional football career is officially over.

I've known this has been coming because I have endured a drawn-out divorce from the game over the past twelve months. The 2011/12 season was personally an unmitigated disaster.

Last summer I signed a new one-year contract at Crawley Town after a successful season that saw the club crowned Conference Premier champions. Not only that, but we also set a new record for the highest ever points tally (105), plus added joint records for most consecutive games without defeat (thirty-one), fewest defeats over a season (three) and biggest goal difference (sixty-three). I had a good season and secured a £12-a-week pay rise – more about that extravagance later! – but deep down I knew maybe it was time to move on. Crawley had huge financial backing and it was clear the owners would invest heavily to strengthen the playing squad. As one of the elder statesmen within the team, I knew I was ripe for replacement.

As any professional sportsman will tell you, however, total faith in your

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own ability is a pre-requisite and I was confident I could have remained a regular member of the first team if given a fair chance to do so.

Unfortunately that scenario did not happen, with some of the reasons down to me and some not ... anyway, I digress.

I have always been pretty level-headed and appreciative of how fortunate I've been to earn my living from playing football, but the transition from footballer to 'employee of the real world' has proven to be more challenging than I could have ever imagined.

I have become a business and ICT teacher. This came about after I volunteered at a local school (the one I had attended as a youth) on my Wednesdays off throughout 2012. The aim of this was to simply gain some work experience. I was working with the school's football academy because coaching is something I really fancy doing, but unfortunately there wasn't a full-time role within the academy so I've taken this teaching job in the hope a sporting opportunity will come up in the future.

But I constantly feel like a fish out of water. I soon found out the Year 7 pupils know more about ICT than me and the sixth-form students look at me as if to say: 'What does he know about business?' They do not vocalise it but I can see it in their eyes – and they're right.

This is a horrible situation to be in.

I am also used to being a well-respected member of football club dressing rooms whereas I am an 'unknown quantity' within the school staff room.

Another reason I took the job is because it's local. The last thing I want to do is move house again after leading such a nomadic life to date.

I was offered three different roles within the football industry over the summer of 2012. Two were as a coach and one was as a manager. I rejected them all because I still had a burning desire to play and did not feel ready to make the move to the other side of the touchline. That seems pretty ironic now, though, as I could not feel more unprepared every time I stand at the front of my classroom.

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But, being fair, my desire to continue playing has begun to dwindle as well. After being part of a club that had been promoted in consecutive years I thought I would be, if not inundated, then at least sought-after by semi-professional clubs.

But I was wrong and that was one of many mistakes I made over the summer.

Billericay Town wanted to pay me £160 per week – the same money it pays to twenty-year-olds who have played only a handful of non-League games at best. When I was twenty I was certainly not getting the wages of experienced professionals. Needless to say, I rejected that particular offer.

I've eventually ended up at AFC Sudbury, which means playing in the Ryman Division One North. By the end of last August we were already out of both the FA Cup and FA Trophy competitions. Being honest, I didn't even realise these tournaments start so early in the season.

Sudbury is a nice club, however, and Chris Tracey (the manager) is a decent guy. I do not personally think he is cut out to be a manager, though: he's put together a good squad of players for this level of football, but we're a crap team.

Since I've joined I've played terribly. It's strange. I thought playing at this level would be easy for someone of my experience, but I was wrong. I have always had to play with my brain to make up for my lack of pace, but I am not on the same wavelength as some of my teammates. At this level, the things I do well on the pitch can look bad when, for example, my colleagues make the opposite run to the pass I play.

Players also do not show for the ball as much and I end up pirouetting, looking around for options until I get dispossessed. Maybe I should just lump the ball down the pitch like everybody else, but my principles will not allow for that. I think people expect me to go on mazy runs but I've never been able to do that at any level.

I also find it hard to comprehend that in 2011 I was playing at Old

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Trafford, home to Manchester United, in front of 75,000 people, while just eighteen months later I'm playing – quite poorly – against the likes of Ilford and Heybridge Swifts.

It is amazing how quickly a career in football deteriorates. At this moment, I would be happy never to kick a ball again but I know, deep down, things will improve and that I cannot keep playing so badly.

Although it might not sound like it, I do feel I am one of the better-prepared players for the move into the 'real world'. I have earned a degree (a 2:1 in business management), studied for my UEFA B coaching badge and FA Youth Modules 1 and 2, and have been learning Spanish for the past two years.

This all sounds fine on paper, yet none of it has prepared me for the emptiness I feel at the moment. People tell me things will get easier and I hope they are right. I would give anything to be able to have a few more years back in the safety of a dressing room with my teammates – somewhere I've always felt comfortable.

Another problem I have is I find the money I'm earning at Sudbury really useful. I will not be put on the breadline if I don't get it, but I want to protect my savings. As a teacher I earn just over £21,000 a year, which is half what I earned in 2011 and only a quarter of what I was earning during my best days at Hereford United. This wage alone nowhere near covers my monthly expenses.

The £210 a week after tax that Sudbury pays me makes life a lot easier but, for the first time in a long while, I am not enjoying playing football. I feel like I'm stealing money off the club because my performances are so poor. I will be very surprised if I'm still playing for them by the time I finish writing this book. Some of my time on the pitch has been so inadequate that, at this rate, I will honestly be surprised if I see out this month.