



THE POWER OF SCOTTISH FOOTBALL

INTRODUCTION

Gordon helped the Scottish FA found the Grassroots Awards and has worked on them for the past 17 years, he has chaired the Scottish Sports Awards with sportscotland since 2005 and is also a trustee on the board of the Falkirk Foundation.

To accompany the Power of Football Podcasts we've done, we asked him to do what he does best, with 30 years' experience in sports journalism, and write about the subject rather than just talk.

BY GORDON WADDELL

At last. In the midst of all the tribalism, all the reconstruction angst, the cycloptic he-said-she-said minutiae of asterisks and unfinished seasons and relegation legalities, a recognition of the true greater good of Scottish football.

It should be lost on no-one, the beauty of James Anderson's multi-million pound altruism and the fact the right vehicle to carry the Hearts-supporting philanthropist's benevolence was, in fact, the SPFL Trust, the umbrella organisation for the charity arms of all 42 league clubs.

He could have done it differently. Could have demanded the trumpets and fanfares and got them. But he didn't want pictures with a comedy-sized cheque, he didn't want quid pro quos, didn't want to do the rounds of interviews to have people tell him what a great guy he was or ask him what his motivation was when it was already abundantly clear.

All he did was plant a Vegas-sized neon signpost to the notion that a sense of community belonging in Scotland that was once completely societal now finds its last true bastion in football.

And that his biggest fear was the idea that it could be lost to any corner of the country if clubs went to the wall, post-Covid.

Already a quiet and generous benefactor to his own club's charity, Big Hearts,



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with his wife Morag, his understanding of the power of football is clear.

That it doesn't begin and end at three o'clock on a Saturday and its duration is a damn sight longer than 90 minutes.

Civic society has changed in Scotland. The things that used to bring people together in communities, social clubs, working men's clubs, welfare clubs, they don't any more, The fabric of the country is different. Where schemes and tenements prevailed and were always portrayed as communal, now housing estates are far more impersonal. Town centres are bereft.

So many times now, a football club, professional or grassroots, is the only true manifestation of that sense of community in a town, village or city, one that brings people together regardless of their status.

The hard bit is getting people to see it. To look below the surface. To remove the blinkers and remember the game as a force for good.

Because it's there. Believe me, it is. I've been involved with the Falkirk Foundation for seven years now, the Grassroots Awards for the past 17 years and the Scottish Sports Awards with sportscotland since 2005.

I've seen how much is done, from the Hebrides to Hawick, from Campbeltown to Cove, and all points in between. In every corner of the country so many of our clubs are doing so much good work in their communities, using the power of football, and sport in general, as their catalyst.

Motivating, educating, inspiring.

Engaging the disengaged, helping people get back to work, keeping kids safe after school, rehabilitating prisoners, tackling chronic obesity, providing comfort and support for dementia sufferers.

Too many look at who we support on a superficial level, see them as everything from a 90-minute release to an obsession but always as a team, occasionally as a club, and never as what they actually should be - the soul of their surroundings.

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But it's amazing what can happen outside of a Saturday afternoon. When the ball goes away and the badge comes out.

The badge that should be the lifeblood of its town or city. That should hold open doors to its kids, their parents, everyone who wants to be even the smallest part of something bigger. That's what James Anderson sees, and good on him for the clarity of his vision as well as the size of his heart and bank account.

Charity for him and his family may start at home, and when you look at brilliant projects like Big Hearts' Kinship Care, an incredible support programme for families in need, it's a fantastic thing to support.

But thankfully it doesn't end there. Our own foundation is proud to play home to not just 1000 local kids as part of our participation-for-all football programme but also a sector-leading employability programme and an alternative school.

Aberdeen won 'Best Professional Club' at the UEFA Grassroots Awards last year for their force-of-nature presence in the north east.

Clubs like Montrose, their Trust's engagement figures with their local community are incredible. They work with 25 per cent of the people in the town every week, whether it's on their award-winning education initiatives, drug recovery, child poverty, dementia or a host of other projects.

For all the people who look down their nose at 'the wee clubs' and say there are too many of them littering the leagues, who claim an Angus United would be fine, take that contribution away from the Links Park community and it's not just football you're removing. It's a town's beating heart.

Celtic's foundation work with food banks is unparalleled. Rangers' 'Towards New Futures' programme with four prisons to re-engage young offenders is a brilliant piece of work. Annan Athletic do similar with HMP Dumfries.

Hibs are one of the most active and ground-breaking clubs when it comes to their community outreach. Their 'Changing Room' project, tackling men's mental health issues is just the latest, and it's an area which has been tackled

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by the likes of Queen's Park and Stenhousemuir as well.

Motherwell, Clyde, Morton, every club in fact, they've all got stories to tell about the greater good.

Then there are the national projects like Football Memories, a phenomenal organisation inspired by Michael White, which has had amazing results for Alzheimer sufferers stirred by an emotional response to their memories of games and players.

Or FFIT - Football Fans In Training to give it its full title. A brilliant, award-winning idea Nicky Reid, the outstanding chief exec of the SPFL Trust, piloted and nurtured to award-winning status, bringing fans together to lose weight and live better.

Fans who might feel intimidated mingling with the lycra-clad look-at-me fitness freaks in their local 40-quid-a-month gym, but who'll feel the support of kindred spirits all with the same issues and wearing the same badge if they turn up for an encouraging workout at East End or Firhill or Station Park.

The idea was so good it's now licensed throughout the English Leagues and the Bundesliga. Walking Football is another phenomenon, 30,000 participants who've found the true meaning of the Scottish FA's Football For Life mantra under the stewardship of another UEFA Award winner in chairman Gary McLaughlin. These programmes are life-changing, and life-saving as well, for those struggling with personal issues, maybe with isolation, who find camaraderie and purpose.

If you want a wider look at the good the professional game does, have a look here <https://spfltrust.org.uk/annual-report-more-than-90-minutes/> and download the annual report. See what James Anderson sees.

Even if you just want to find out what everyone has been doing for their communities in lockdown, then take a look here: <https://spfltrust.org.uk/trusted>. It's inspiring

Stenhousemuir, for example, are just a few miles from my doorstep and their commitment has been beyond belief, putting in more than 15,000 volunteer



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hours in the past three months to help the most vulnerable in their area.

And that's just the professional game. Up and down the country, there are hundreds of clubs in the Scottish FA's community pathway who are just as significant, who mean just as much to the people they involve, from kids to pensioners, especially those fighting the good fight in areas of social and economic deprivation, where sport is often their only escape from a far harsher reality.

Spartans have been a beacon of hope and inclusion for years in their corner of Edinburgh under the guidance of their brilliant chair Craig Graham. Bonnyrigg Rose have been community saviours in West Lothian during the pandemic. Cumbernauld Colts likewise. Others like Pollok United, Gartcairn, Turriff, Jeanfield Swifts, the Jimmy Johnstone Academy, Musselburgh Windsor, their constituencies would all be a hundred times worse off without their presence, now in the midst of lockdown or at any other time.

There's also the work being done to engage those suffering from disability, to make football accessible for kids with autism, to encourage multiculturalism, to keep kids off the streets with midnight leagues.

One of the most frustrating aspects for football in this country, and sport in general, is the government's lack of acknowledgment of its immense power in all these areas. Success stories in other countries are so often the result of big, joined-up thinking between government, national and local, and governing bodies.

Not enough of it goes on in Scotland. Too often, despite proving their worth over and over again with successful outcomes, Foundations and Trusts have to put the begging bowl out to external charitable funders.

But for what football can deliver, there has to be a better way to harness that potential and exploit their ability to engage, to include, to attain.

Surely those in power can see the correlation.

Too often their only engagement with the game is to confront it for its perceived problems - which exist, for sure, but not at the exclusion of the good stuff.

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And if the current crisis has shown us anything, it's that more collaborative effort is needed. Sadly the days of vested interests and self-preservation are still here, making every decision predicated on what's good for you, not for everyone.

There has to be a reckoning, though, and maybe Mr Anderson's decision to channel his funds and his energy to more charitable aims than the all-consuming 11v11 will help everyone arrive at it sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, ask yourself what your football club can do for you that reaches beyond the blinkered monotheism of your Saturday afternoon religion.

And maybe ask what you can do for them while you're at it. Trust me, it'll be worth it.