



Steve Cook tells us how Eddie Howe's faith in unproven talent is reaping rewards at Bournemouth

Words Amit Katwala

At Bournemouth, loyalty to the manager runs deep.

When central defender Steve Cook plays Football Manager, he copies Eddie Howe's high-pressing style, and instructs his virtual XI to play the ball out from the back. But he never takes control of his own team.

"I usually start unemployed," says the 25-year-old with a grin. "I don't like taking someone's job, to be honest. I wouldn't want to be Bournemouth manager and then Eddie Howe not have a job."

It probably wouldn't take Howe too long to find another anyway - he has won plenty of admirers for guiding his team up the divisions to ninth in the Premier League. Cook, a ball-playing defender with a knack for scoring spectacular goals, is one of a

number of players who have contributed to that rise. He says the manager's faith has helped the players grow in confidence and ability on their journey from the Football League.

"It's about getting the best out of players," he says. "The manager has done that here - and the belief he has shown with us is massive. For young English players, it takes a lot of belief from managers to let you go and perform on the highest stage. You see it in other teams as well - you look at players who have come from the Conference: Jamie Vardy, Andre Gray, Michail Antonio - it shows that it doesn't always happen first time around. You have to have a bit of trust and a bit of belief in players, and they can really show the ability they've got."

Cook came through the youth system at Brighton, but made only made seven competitive appearances in a four-year spell largely spent on loan. He's one of many in Bournemouth's squad - Charlie Daniels, Adam Smith, Harry Arter - to receive a second chance after failing to break through at bigger clubs.

Cook joined the Cherries in October 2011, initially on loan, and has been a regular under Howe, who returned from a frustrating spell at Burnley 18 months later for his own second bite. "An awful lot has changed," says Cook, reflecting on five years with a once financially troubled club that was transformed from a League One side with a three-sided stadium and no training ground to an ambitious top-half Premier League organisation. "It's crazy,

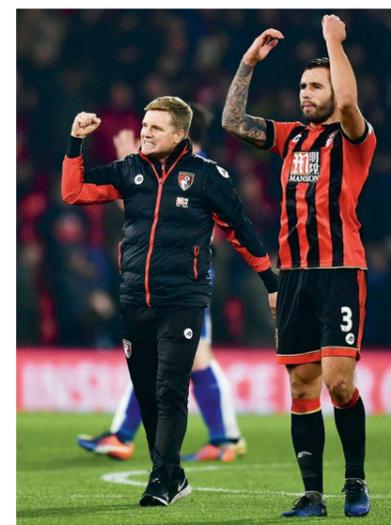
but there's still a lot more to be done to take this club further," he says. "The fan base is growing - and it's had to, because the team was kind of outgrowing the club. Hopefully the young boys and girls around the town will start wearing Bournemouth shirts instead of Man Utd and Chelsea, the fan base can grow even more, and we can turn into a big club."

METICULOUS MANAGEMENT

A lot of things have changed in the past five years, but Howe's approach has stayed constant. "He's always been thorough," says Cook. "That's why he's so good. He gets the best out of everyone by not missing a thing. When he first came here he didn't record training; now he does. There's no settling for second best. That's why we're sitting ninth, because he doesn't leave any stone unturned."

Cook - who is working on his own coaching badges - got a first-hand look at Howe's commitment when they were neighbours. "I've seen how hard the manager works," he says. "When I was up with the baby he'd be leaving at 6am, and then sitting down at night I'd see his car going down the road. His approach is obviously his life."

Few expected Bournemouth to survive their first season in the Premier League, but in the end they did so comfortably, collecting some high-profile scalps along the way. Their final league position of 16th came due to an alarming slump in the closing weeks of the season. "Naturally you take your foot of the gas," Cook explains. "But the fixtures were hard, so that



was a factor as well. We were obviously disappointed - we ended up 16th when we could have finished 12th or 13th, so we will learn from that. Hopefully we're in the same position come March-time, where we're safe and able to enjoy those games. We want to finish in the top half ideally, which is a massive task because you look at the sides all around - but we definitely feel we're capable of doing that."

FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

For fans, it all still feels a bit surreal, even in this second season in the top flight, but the players are just going with it. "We're kind of riding the wave," says Cook. "We're enjoying everything. The pressure is not really with us."

It's a couple of days after the astonishing 3-3 draw with Arsenal when *Sport* sits down with Cook at Dean Court, and the sense of disappointment surrounding that result is a good indicator of progress. "Being 3-0 up against Arsenal is unbelievable," he says. "When Wee Man [Ryan Fraser] rolled in the third I thought it could be four or five. If we'd got the win it would have been one of the best results ever - it just shows how far we've come."

It also, however, highlighted Bournemouth's defensive frailties, which have certainly made for some interesting scorelines, including the see-sawing 4-3 win over Liverpool in December in which Cook scored the equaliser (a fine control, turn and shot) and provided the assist for the winner. Those issues have been exacerbated ahead of this weekend's visit to Hull, by Chelsea's recall of loanee Nathan Ake and Simon Francis' suspension.

Only relegated Aston Villa conceded more goals than Howe's team last season, but it's something that perhaps comes with the territory for sides that play the adventurous way Bournemouth do. Howe spends numerous hours going through recordings of games and training sessions, and is quick to call out players who deviate from the game plan. "He goes through your clips quite intensely, and if you are going long and you don't need to he will spot it," says Cook. "You can be having a bad day on the ball and sometimes you don't want to take risks, but ultimately we need to play football. Players who are not willing to do that have moved on."

"It's about getting the right balance," he continues. "We want to control games here. We've done that to get out of League One, the Championship, and now we're doing it in the Premier League." ●

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RED SUNDAY

Jose Mourinho has faced Liverpool in 24 games as manager. He's won 11, drawn seven and lost six, facing only Barcelona on more occasions.



THE WEEKEND'S FIXTURES

SATURDAY

TOTTENHAM v WEST BROM
SKY SPORTS 1, 12.30PM
BURNLEY v SOUTHAMPTON, 3PM
HULL v BOURNEMOUTH, 3PM
SUNDERLAND v STOKE, 3PM
SWANSEA v ARSENAL, 3PM
WATFORD v MIDDLESBROUGH, 3PM
WEST HAM v CRYSTAL PALACE, 3PM **BT SPORTS**
LEICESTER v CHELSEA
BT SPORT 1, 5.30PM **BT SPORTS**

SUNDAY

EVERTON v MAN CITY
SKY SPORTS 1, 1.30PM **BT SPORTS**
MAN UTD v LIVERPOOL
SKY SPORTS 1, 4PM

sky SPORTS

Everton v Man City Sunday 12.30pm



sky SPORTS

Man Utd v Liverpool Sunday 3.30pm

