

IT'S FINALLY SUNNY IN WREXHAM

Hollywood heroes buy fifth-tier Welsh club in bid for glory. It sounds like a movie idea, but this story needs no scripting. Wrexham may have a bright future under Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, but as *FTT* hears, it took 20 years of unbridled misery to make it this far

Words Ryan Herman



And boy do Wrexham have a story to tell. The fifth-tier club's arduous climb back from the brink features covert recordings, gagging orders, court hearings, convicted criminals, a transsexual producer of 'adult films', and would ultimately lead to an extraordinary takeover by McElhenney – aka Mac from *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* – and Reynolds. Is it any wonder there's so much excitement in north-east Wales? After all, it was the latter's foul-mouthed superhero Deadpool who once said, "Looks are everything! Ever heard David Beckham speak? It's like he mouth-sexed a can of helium."

But new reasons for cheer aside, Wrexham have endured plenty of days in the darkness. As ever, it's a story with their long-suffering supporters at the heart of it...

THE GRUESOME TWSOME

"This sounds a bit naff, but we also wanted to buy somewhere that deserves it," reveals Ker. "Wrexham needs a break, the fans need a break, and the same goes for the town."

The story begins back on December 3, 2004, when the Welsh side made history by becoming the first to be docked 10 points by the Football League. Under the disastrous reign of Alex Hamilton and Mark Guterman, the club had gone into administration with debts of more than £4 million. By the end of the season, they'd plunged into the fourth tier by a margin of eight points.

Around this time, one supporters' group started a 'donate a beer' scheme where fans would hand over the weekly equivalent of a pint to raise money for the club. That group would later become Wrexham Supporters Trust (WST), who would play a seismic role in the Red Dragons' future.

But there were also supporters like Lindsay Jones and Kenny Pemberton, a local cabbie known as 'the man in the pink taxi'. Long before administration, the pair had grown increasingly worried about the club's future, so recorded a series of meetings with owners Hamilton and Guterman.

"A football club is unlike other businesses," says Andy Gilpin from the *Fearless In Devotion* fanzine and podcast. "Say you've been to the same hardware shop for 20 years, somebody buys it and puts a garage there. That's not going to change your life, because you'll just find another shop."

"If you start messing with a football club, it's such a major part of people's lives that they're not simply going to give in. Hamilton didn't understand that 100 people would be outside his house every Saturday. He didn't understand the depth of feeling."

Gilpin also covered Wrexham for local and national media, and was briefly "banned for life" by Guterman after running a story that the players had been paid late, accompanied by the headline 'Cash, Bang, Wallop!' "There were moments when I wished that ban had stood," he says, half-jokingly.

When Jones and Pemberton attempted to make their recordings public, the tapes were seized by police and became the subject of a gagging order. Pemberton spent £35,000

Below The club's Racecourse Ground was saved only in a High Court ruling **Right** Wrexham's *Van Wilder: Party Liaison* branch has just doubled in size

of his own money challenging the decision, which was later repaid by the club. The two fans eventually settled with Guterman out of court, but the hearing set in motion a chain of events that would achieve Pemberton's aim of ousting Wrexham's toxic owners.

Eventually, it came to light that Hamilton and Guterman had made an agreement – in writing, no less – where their "main and sole objective" of owning Wrexham was "to realise the maximum potential gain from the [club's] property assets".

Upon purchasing the Red Dragons in 2002, Hamilton had immediately transferred the ground to his company, Crucialmove, in the hope that a superstore chain might offer him millions for its land down the line. Wrexham would then move to an unspecified location on the edge of town.

Luckily, administrators David Acland and Steve Williams were wise to the ruse: they successfully contested that Hamilton and Guterman had been acting unlawfully, and a judge ruled that the Racecourse Ground should be transferred back to Wrexham in 2005. Pemberton passed away in 2012, but fans still hold a day in his honour to celebrate the cabbie who saved his club.

Not that things got much better. In 2006, local businessman Geoff Moss took over with a masterplan to turn the car park into student flats, then plough those profits back into the club. But Moss overreached on the pitch, and in 2008 Wrexham were relegated from the Football League. To shore up mounting debts, the Racecourse Ground's proprietorship was transferred to Wrexham Village Ltd – a firm owned by Moss.

Wrexham were put up for sale in 2010, and a series of prospective owners came forward.

Former Chester chairman Stephen Vaughan – the first person to fail the FA's fit and proper person's test in 2009 through his involvement in a £500,000 VAT fraud – said he was part of a consortium bid to purchase the club, mere months before he was handed a 15-month prison sentence for assaulting a police officer on his driveway.

Other bidders included Colin Poole, the CEO of Claims Direct when the company collapsed in 2002 who was later struck off from acting as a solicitor, and ex-UKIP candidate Stephen Cleeve – the focus of a BBC land sale sting in 2006 and previously suspended from being a company director for eight years after an investment scam involving champagne. He has since become a successful chairman at National League side King's Lynn, joining the Linnets in 2016.

And then there was Stephanie Booth: born Keith Hull before undergoing transformative surgery in 1984, she ran a beauty salon for transvestites but was given a suspended sentence for prostitution services there, and later spent three months in Askham Grange for selling soft porn without a valid licence. Booth was a pioneering figure in the trans community and a local celebrity, but pulled the plug after citing abuse from supporters.

"I'd known Stephanie for many years," says Gilpin. "I'd even judged wedding competitions with her – she was a real force of nature. But however well-meaning she may have been, you certainly wouldn't want her in charge of your football club."

Meanwhile, the WST was desperately trying to raise enough funds to run the club itself. Former board member and honorary club vice-president Spencer Harris remembers the overwhelming sense of helplessness.



"Fans can be buffeted by decisions from a few people that have big ramifications," he says. "And you get into a situation whereby it doesn't matter what you do, no one seems to be helping you."

Wrexham's future was in doubt. The money had run out and, agonisingly, it seemed like their time as a club might, too.

TEN ROUNDS WITH TYSON

Ahead of the 2011-12 campaign, Wrexham were still £100,000 short of the £250,000 bond they needed to guarantee their fixtures or be kicked out of the league and into the abyss. Moss, he insisted, had no money left to inject, and the deadline to offer up the required proof had passed.

But fans came to the rescue again, which featured one moment at the Turf Hotel – the birthplace of Wrexham AFC and focal point for fundraisers – that read like a scene from a feelgood film. As donations were frantically counted, a 10-year-old walked in and handed over £35 towards saving his beloved team.

As supporters offered up their pocket money, wedding funds and even the deeds of their homes, the club met their £100,000 target in a whirlwind day.

By December, the WST had completed their takeover of Wrexham. Glyndwr University had bought the Racecourse Ground earlier that year, but the WST secured a 99-year lease on it in 2016.

"What united the fanbase was having some credible people fronting the bid," says Harris. One of them was Barry Horne – a former Wales international, Everton captain, FA Cup winner and former head of the PFA. "Instead of being hostage to somebody else's fortune, it was a moment when people were ready to unite and believe we could do this ourselves."

"But we also knew it was going to be very tough. When we took over, just about every relationship that a club could have within its community, with local administrators and leagues, was burned. We were also losing £750,000 a year and were £500,000 in debt. We had absolutely nothing in terms of legal practices and policies."

"The club had virtually no commercial income. There had previously been a fire sale of season tickets to bring a bit of money in. We didn't have a proper kit. And we all had full-time jobs! It was a monumental effort from everyone, not just the Trust."

In the space of three years, they had paid back the debt and broken even.

"Sometimes, the highlight of going to the game almost became how many people were in the crowd," says Harris. "If an extra 100 supporters were paying £11.40 a head across 23 games, that was £250,000 a year. You'd have this feeling in the pit of your stomach when you had to do the budget around April ▶

"THE HIGHLIGHT OF SOME MATCHES WAS COUNTING THE CROWD. AN EXTRA 100 PEOPLE AT £11.40 A HEAD WAS £250,000 A YEAR"



umphrey Ker still struggles to get his head around the past 18 months.

One moment he was a writer and actor in Rob McElhenney's comedy series *Mythic Quest*, the next he was being sent back to Britain to find a football club for McElhenney and Hollywood icon Ryan Reynolds to buy.

During the opening season of filming, Ker would occasionally spend his lunch breaks watching Liverpool's live midweek matches. McElhenney is a sports fanatic, but couldn't fathom the appeal of football beyond playing FIFA with his kids.

"Rob saw how much me and another guy on set were into it," Ker tells *FFT*. "But the big shift was during lockdown. I recommended he watched *Sunderland 'Til I Die*. I thought, 'That's the key to this. He's a storyteller. He needs to understand the story of football'."

"The *All Or Nothing* documentaries are very good, but they don't cut to the heart of the game, which is the fans. Rob being Rob, he devoured every documentary. He's a doer, so he said, 'Let's buy a football club'. I said, 'Er yeah, OK'. He replied, 'No, really.'"

Ker established a set of criteria, among them facilities, fanbase, history and finance. Wrexham scored highest, with 38 marks out of 50. The scoring mechanism also included a column for 'narrative'.

or May. I used to come out of that meeting with the finance director feeling like I'd gone 10 rounds with Mike Tyson, thinking, 'We've got to put more in than that'.

"During COVID, we had no income but still had costs. Yet we handed over a debt-free club [to McElhenney and Reynolds]. Fans don't expect to see Wrexham in non-league, but we simply couldn't get back up into the Football League. Some people lose faith and that can cause tension."

After 12 years of non-league football, there was a growing sense that WST had taken the club as far as they could. The relationship between board and supporters resembled a marriage where the parents stick together purely for their kids' sake. Harris says there had been dozens of enquiries about buying Wrexham, most of which sounded more like phishing scams. But last May, Portsmouth CEO Mark Catlin got in touch. Would Harris be interested in speaking to Steve Horowitz from Inner Circle Sports?

"Once we'd done some reading, we knew this was different and they were serious," he recalls. Inner Circle had previously brokered deals to purchase Liverpool, Portsmouth and Crystal Palace. Being debt-free paid dividends.

"In very preliminary talks with other clubs it was like, 'Well, it will cost you £2m to buy this club off me'," explains Ker, who is now Wrexham's executive director. "You can give a rich man £2m, or you can put it into the operating budget of a community-run club. The objective was to use it as a philanthropic engine; a way to generate more positivity and investment in the town."

The other positive legacy that WST left was a commitment from the Welsh government to invest in a major redevelopment plan that includes the Racecourse's disused Kop stand. The Wrexham Gateway project may also be bolstered by the government's Levelling Up Fund - the town became a Tory seat for the first time in 2019.

"This began in October 2017," says Harris. "Me and a couple of other directors went to Cardiff to present to the Welsh Assembly and highlight Wales' unequal distribution of facilities. That began the Wrexham Gateway partnership. The Welsh government has already purchased the land for it to happen."

LOOK MUM, WE'RE ON THE TELLY

McElhenney and Reynolds finally completed their takeover on February 9. While many fans rejoiced, others, like Gilpin, were hardwired to disappointment. They wanted evidence of a plan beyond the new owners' goodwill community gestures, and a documentary series called *Welcome to Wrexham* that will air early next year.

"The question I kept asking myself is, 'Are you making a documentary or are you buying a football club?'" he says. "It was 50-50 for me, but the thing that tipped it in favour of buying a football club was the appointment of Phil Parkinson as manager. He's not box office in the sense that they could have given it to Casey Stoney, who was reportedly in the frame. They've gone for experience."



"I'VE TOLD ROB AND RYAN THAT, EVENTUALLY, THEY WILL GET CALLED CTS. THAT'S JUST FOOTBALL"**

Parkinson, who has won three promotions and took Bradford to the 2013 League Cup Final, contacted ex-Southampton vice-chair and FA technical advisor Les Reed, who now sits on the board at Wrexham.

"I worried that when I arrived they would think, 'Who is this posh wally?'," adds Ker. "But since then we've also brought in Fleur Robinson [recently of Burton Albion] as our CEO, and Shaun Harvey [former Leeds and EFL CEO] has become our strategic advisor. It's a piece-by-piece process."

New boss Parkinson was equally convinced. "I looked at the ambition of Wrexham and wanted to be part of something," he tells *FFT*. "I wanted to go somewhere where there's a real chance of making a difference. I had a great conversation with Rob - he outlined why they bought Wrexham, and his passion for it just blew me away. A successful club, especially in a football town like Wrexham, can bring a sense of pride to the community. It's an honour to try to make that happen."

Parkinson saw the *Sunderland 'Til I Die* team leave shortly before his spell at the Stadium of Light, but has had time to adjust to Wrexham's new normal.

"Coming in at the start of pre-season helped me get used to the cameras," he says. "We know they'll be around and we know we have to play our part in all of that. We have to work together to tell the story. It's part of the overall package of Rob and Ryan buying in."

"Wrexham fans talk about the Arsenal FA Cup victory in 1992. Every time I bump into Bradford



Above "Stand up, if you love *Deadpool*"
Below McElhenney and Reynolds are bringing Hollywood glamour to Wales

fans, they talk about the 2012-13 League Cup run. You want a parent taking their child to a packed house and giving them something they'll remember for the rest of their lives. I want to create these sort of memories for the people of Wrexham."

Parkinson's arrival, along with Paul Mullin, who broke a League Two record last term by scoring 32 goals in 46 games for promoted Cambridge, resulted in Wrexham's odds being slashed for the National League title.

We're all familiar with new owners waltzing in having the best intentions, only to then use their business acumen for immoral ends. But in Hollywood, where image is everything and ideas get binned if there isn't a happy ending, failure isn't an option. Parkinson knows from Sunderland what it's like to lead the team that everyone wants to beat.

Now, Ker is trying to educate his new bosses on some finer points. "One of my main jobs is explaining football culture to Rob and Ryan," he says. "They are both very astute. But I told them that at some point, you'll be at an airport or train station and someone will call you a c**t. It doesn't make any difference if you're a good guy. That's just football. That's life."

Welcome to Wrexham, Mac and *Deadpool*. And welcome to football. 🍷

