

Sporting Director: Football's most misunderstood job?

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Frank Arnesen and Monchi

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What exactly does a Sporting Director do? And why does the role arouse suspicion and even hostility in this country?

Ramón Rodríguez Verdejo (above, right), better known as Monchi, is revered in Seville. English football has never had a Sporting Director who comes close to him in terms of public affection. We asked **Dr Dan Parnell**, who leads research on the Master of Sport Directorship course at Manchester Metropolitan University, for his lowdown on the role:

WHAT DOES A SPORTING DIRECTOR DO?

Dan Parnell (right): "There has been some confusion about the role. I think a big reason is the title, which can shift from Director of Football to Technical Director to Performance Director. Many profess to know exactly what a Sporting Director should do, but often the specification is designed and developed 'on the job'.

There remains no definition of the Sporting Director in academic literature. The following offering aims to give an insight into how the role should work.



Dr Dan Parnell from MMU

The Sporting Director is the person responsible for the overall performance of the various sporting departments, which include first team, Under-21s, academy, scouting, medical and sport science. This responsibility ties hand-in-hand with the Sporting Director's role, which is to develop and deliver the strategic plan towards achieving success in the club's sporting aims. The Sporting Director should report directly to the Owner and/or Chief Executive Officer.

The key priorities for the Sporting Director are:

- Support the first team and head coach
- Maintain and manage a positive working relationship with the owner
- Employ the best people within budget as department heads
- Oversee the implementation of the club's DNA and identity a suitable playing philosophy across all teams, from first team to Academy.
- Implement and maintain a scouting network
- Manage the movement of players in and out of the club
- Oversee the academy and development teams (extending to community foundations for talent identification)
- Oversee the performance departments including medical and sport science
- Oversee the training ground

The Sporting Director is the custodian of the club's sporting performance and must have:

- Football industry knowledge
- Business and financial acumen
- Ability to lead and develop a high performance culture
- Ability to develop and deliver a strategy both strategically and operationally
- Understanding of - and the ability to deliver - good governance

- Ability to manage change and innovation
- Ability to manage research (monitor and evaluate) on relevant performance measures

They are the person employed by the owner or board to be the guardian of the club's future, to protect their investment and bring on-field success through effective leadership and decision making in the short, medium and long-term."

IS THIS A GOOD MODEL FOR CLUBS TO ADOPT?

"Clubs need to develop a competitive advantage. Through the Sporting Director position, they can develop a strategy to improve both on and off-field performance success.

The increased finances in football have brought great rewards for all involved, including owners. Yet, with great reward, comes great risk: relegation for one,. Gary Neville was quoted as saying "the era of the gaffer is over". Yes, too right. Things have changed and where they haven't, they need to if owners want to protect and strengthen their club's position.

Owners and investors are seeking a new breed of football person who can protect multi-million pound investments but also bring further success and rewards. Yes, the first-team head coach is integral to this, but clubs need a Sporting Director to fulfil a strategic role."

IS THERE RESISTANCE TO THE ROLE IN ENGLAND?

"There has been a huge amount of resistance to the Sporting Director role in the past - and there still is even now. This is because of a lack of understanding about the role and also a lack of trust I think.

I'll address some of these. A Sporting Director is not someone who picks the team, takes training or chooses the tactics employed. This is the domain of the head coach. It could also be argued that the head coach should have the final say on signings. There is no benefit in forcing an unwanted player on a head coach.

One of my students, who had worked in elite football for more than 20 years, highlighted an issue with using the Director of Football title, as opposed to Sporting Director: "The Director of Football term undermines the manager directly. Who is in charge? It cannot be the Manager, as the Director of Football has the final say – they are the ones who direct football.

"The title should be Sporting Director and this role should be responsible for the strategy of the football club from the first team, through the U21, academy, scouting and recruitment, medical and sport science – and in some cases extended to in some cases the community foundations of football clubs who can play a part in recruitment and talent identification."

A Sporting Director is someone who, along with their recruitment staff, will present to the head coach the best options for a particular position in addition to all relevant due-diligence material (video, data, stats etc) and the head coach will select his preferred choice. However, as the Sporting Director is the custodian of sporting performance and has the final veto on all sporting matters, he does have the authority to block a signing.

Mistrust of the role could be the result of previous Sporting Director appointments that were not suitably qualified or experienced.

It is my belief - a belief that is shared by many within the industry - that the right person can actually provide the head coach with their best ally and ensure everything around the first team is geared for success.

Compartmentalising the role in relation to the head coach, the Sporting Director is there to implement a strategic scouting network throughout the UK, Europe and even Worldwide in some cases, to identify and recruit the best players within budget.

It is the responsibility of the Sporting Director to ensure the club is at the forefront in terms of best practice, best recruitment and most effective strategies. This will allow the head coach to spend all his time on man-managing the 25-30 players in the squad, taking training, picking the team and selecting the right tactics."

ARE ATTITUDES CHANGING?

"There is a definite growth in the interest and adoption of the Sporting Director role. The smartest will be learning from colleagues in Europe and from the success stories in England. Recently, we have seen Celtic, Rangers, Arsenal and Norwich scouting for their Sporting Directors (with varied expectations and understanding).

Clubs approach the recruitment of a Sporting Director for a number of reasons, including as a figurehead (ie a club legend), a technical director (ie to advise a weaker head coach) or a go-between (ie linking scouts, transfers and deal making).

The Sporting Director should not - and cannot - be viewed as a chief scout or head of recruitment. Their role should be much more significant, reporting directly to the chief executive and looking after recruitment strategies and the delivery of the club's sporting strategy.

Yet the role seems to be defined by recruitment at the moment. We must remember that for every Kante there is a Kramaric. It is imperative that a Sporting Director highlights the full breadth of work they undertake alongside the immediate demands of success."

WHERE HAS THE ROLE WORKED PARTICULARLY WELL?

"Many commentators cite examples in Europe or in others sports. However, we have seen many different, yet quality examples in England - like Brian Marwood at Manchester City, Dan Ashworth at West Brom and Les Reed at Southampton. Many others in the role are fighting day-to-day to deliver strategic goals amidst a culture hesitant to change as well as poor leadership and governance at executive and owner level.

Recently, Norwich outlined a clear expectation of what their Sporting Director would be tasked with. This transparent approach is welcomed, and no-doubt many will be hoping to see Stuart Webber lead the Canaries on to success."

HOW DO YOU TRAIN SPORTING DIRECTORS ON THE MASTER OF SPORT DIRECTORSHIP COURSE AT MMU?

"Over the past couple of years, I have been fortunate to lead the research module, Sporting Directorship in Practice, as part of Manchester Metropolitan University's Master of Sport Directorship (MSD). MSD is a two-year, part-time executive level course aimed at professionals who want to gain a unique qualification that prepares them for the role of Sporting Director.

Our students' insight, expertise and experience have helped shape and develop my understanding of the Sporting Director role. They are eager to stress that the position should not just be someone who has had a playing career or been high profile. It should be someone capable of leading an organisation.



Former England cricketer Ashley Giles was a student on the MSD course

The course has been developed in response to need for sport businesses to gain a competitive advantage and the demand for skilled professional, within business acumen and high quality leadership skills to drive positive change and greater performance in sport.

Our students study in part-time blocks, consisting of seminars and high quality guest speakers that make up our masterclass programme. Our students undertake learning that combines the latest thinking on leadership practice, sports governance, innovation and change and research in applied settings.

One of the strengths of the MSD is our high-quality students, who share best practice, collaborate and enhance one another's learning experience. Here are some of the students from our first of three cohorts:

- Joel Roberts, Asst Head Coach England Women u23/Next Gen. Senior Scout for an EFL Club and consultant
- Lee Darnborough, Head of Scouting at Norwich FC
- David Moss, Assistant Head of 1st Team Scouting, Celtic FC
- Michael Appleton, 1st Team Head Coach at Oxford United
- Steve Round, Sporting Director at Aston Villa
- Becky Easton, Professional Football Players and Previous Assistant General Manager of Doncaster Belles.
- Dave Parson, Head of Performance at the ECB
- Ashley Giles (right), Sporting Director at Warwickshire County Cricket

I could carry on this list, as each and every student on the cohorts is reputable, successful and has, or is, operating at the top end of sport. You can read more about the course [here](#)."

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