

Hamilton Academical Fans Forum – Monday 22nd June

Top Table

Rob Edwards (RE) – Owner
Ross Latimer (RL) - Event Organiser
Darian MacKinnon (DM) - Manager
Rebecca Nutall (RN)* – CEO
Ben Paterson (BP) - Head of Media and Communications

*Throughout the transcript please note Rebecca is referred to as Beccy.

Also attending from club;

Connor Ferguson - Head of Commercial and Creative Arran
Lamont - Head of Operations

RL introduced the top table and other club attendees

RL: Rob this is the first time you have spoken to the supporters collectively at an event like this. Can I just ask you to begin with a quick insight into where the interest in the club came from for those who may not have heard you discuss this before.

RE: Hamilton has always been a club I have known about and I think they are a well known team. I remember I got absolutely battered in the first interview I did because I didn't know the exact history of Hamilton Football Club over the last 150 odd years, but for me that's the perception that I knew Hamilton growing up as a kid.

It's a name that you always remember, you always remember them playing in the top end of Scottish football, one of the oldest clubs in probably not just Scotland, but the world, I guess, and the challenges that the club faced were public knowledge amongst football fans. Even across the pond, when talking to people about Hamilton back in probably the week or so before Christmas, when I was actually in the US, and people knew of the Accies over there, so it's a massive brand. Initially MSMs interest was to see what was happening, and it was just basically an inquiry to see what the situation was, and whether there's anything we could do to help.

Actually, Ben won't mind me telling this story, because I only found out today that the first point with Hamilton is I didn't actually know who I needed to speak to. There were obviously multiple people mentioned in terms of running the football club. So, do I speak to Mr Towers? Do I speak to Mr. Strain or Mr Zengin? So I chose to speak to Ben instead. The media guy was pretty much the only person I could see that was still there, so I sent Ben a LinkedIn message, and I believe he was playing Call of Duty with Conor, and basically was gonna absolutely blank me thinking it was just some random but fortunately he responded and put me in touch with Ross and Brandon who volunteer with the Supporters Association, and that gave me an understanding as to where we needed to go to have a conversation.

So the challenges are initially, who do we speak to? How do we even understand what the situation with the club looks like? The due diligence was kind of non-existent. Basically, we did everything that you would not do when taking over a company. We actually did completely the opposite, because the information was either not available or if it was available, it didn't really make a huge amount of sense. We were also running out of time, because ultimately the club was in the hands of the Funding Globe at that point, with the previous ownership

deemed not fit and proper, so I think the intention was obviously not to continue funding the club from their point of view. If we hadn't taken over at 9pm at the start of January it probably wouldn't have been in much of a position to take on by Monday morning. So we backed ourselves.

We have a great team at Haverfordwest, and within MSM in general, and we just decided to take the plunge and try and fix what we could. Deep down did I think we would even be in a position to reach this point now? I wouldn't have looked anybody in the eye and said that we'd still be here in June. It was a case of just stepping in, negotiating a situation to get rid of the Funding Globe and just try and use fundamentals to take every challenge as we came on.

The main issue, aside from establishing who we needed to talk to, was obviously the club was under the control of a charge holder, and contrary to some of the media, we didn't miss any deadline. There was no threat of administration because the initial loan agreement that was signed was not in default. It was a 16 week loan, by which point we were only probably four to six weeks in before we managed to negotiate that release, but there was never any threat of administration from them. They were never in a position to put it into administration, and there was never a deadline missed because we never signed an agreement. They wouldn't release a charge without a signed agreement, and we wouldn't pay them without a signed agreement. It doesn't make sense, you wouldn't pay for a house if you didn't have an agreement that you actually own that house. So the minute that we had that agreement, and within the required deadline, which I think was 48 hours, the payment was made and they walked away.

So that first period, we were pretty much hamstrung in terms of being able to run the company properly. We didn't have a bank account that we had control of, which again is not a great basis to be able to bring in income and pay people, but fortunately we managed to move them on. We've had subsequent challenges, which we'll probably get to further down the line, but the initial period was pretty tough because we were trying to work for a situation where we didn't really have a huge amount of the background.

We didn't have a lot of control over decisions that were being made outside the general running of the club, but fortunately we got to a point where we were clear and slightly less hamstrung. We've been able to deal with every challenge as it comes so far, and although there's probably still a few more lingering and a few more around the corner, I don't believe we could have really been in a better position than we would be now if we look back then. A lot of that obviously is not just down to me but it's down to Beccy, Daz, Ben, the ASA and the people within the club that have played their part.

One person in particular who is not here that deserves a huge amount of recognition, is Chairman Allan Currie. A lot of his remit was to get rid of the Funding Globe and get us back to Hamilton and I genuinely can't think of anyone that could have done a better job. It's a shame he's not here to take the plaudits because he's been a massive part of what we've done and he deserves as much recognition, if not more, than anybody else.

RL: Fantastic, thanks very much. I think that probably leads us on to the return to Hamilton. Obviously, I think one of the things that Allan said at the last quarterly meeting for the Supporters association was about one of his rematch, being the return to Hamilton, and I think a lot of people are keen to know what that return looks like, what sort of deal is in place, and what the long-term plans are for the stadium.

RE: One of the things that was very obvious, even before we took over, was the situation with regards to the stadium and where Hamilton were playing. That was a massive story amongst football. We had to go in with a clear idea. There's always two sides to every story. We're not suggesting that one is wrong or one is another but from our point of view we have to take everything at face value when going into any relationship and we have to make our stand that we're genuine. We'll honour every agreement, and we'll say what we'll do, and we'll be

good tenants. And we hope that the person that we have signed an agreement with is a good landlord and we can work happily together because Hamilton Academical Football Club can't exist outside of Hamilton. It may exist to an extent but it's never going to be something that is going to get to where it needs to be.

So it's something that had to happen, and I'm aware there's concerns or there's history around the club's relationship with the stadium, but it is something we had to do and to be honest, I think we've got a good deal for the club. Our position is a license to occupy where we rent the space as and when we need it. We've signed that agreement for two years with an option to extend it, and obviously our intention is to build a positive relationship because we want to be there and we want to be able to operate the best we can and attract as many people back to watch the club as possible. The relationships young, we have to take at face value that the stadium company and those that are part of that want to build a positive relationship. We're going to do our bit and we hope they do theirs. We hope that it works out to be a productive relationship and it's something that's going to be a massive benefit to the fanbase and hopefully to the town. We've obviously had to be aware of the situations that's happened before, but we've got no choice really but to lay our cards on the table, say exactly what we'll do, and we'll hope that they do the same.

RL: Whilst supporters will be pleased to learn more about the deal to return to Hamilton, supporters are naturally curious about the current financial position of the club. Is administration still a realistic possibility?

RE: Realistically very few football clubs can say administration can be ruled out given the way finances are in football right now. Hamilton remains fractured because we're still dealing with legacy issues, although we are in a much stronger position to establish exactly where the club sits financially with regards to historical debts and agreements that the club has entered into previously. But we still need people to continue to work with us.

There's been a lot of situations that have come up against us that are probably not genuine, not warranted, or not the right approach. Dealing with such situations incurs legal fees, and puts us in a position where we're battling winding up petitions and the threat of Hamilton's existence. There is a belief that the main challenges are pretty much behind us now, but to look everyone in the eye and say that administration is not going to happen would be a lie, because although we're in a much better position than we were before there's still issues that affect the club day to day.

Now issues like Funding Globe are put to bed and MSM have complete control and clarity of the clubs running day to day, it is now at a point to create something that's investable. MSM can evidence their ability as very good operators in terms of building a club from the ground up. Haverfordwest are obviously different to Hamilton in terms of history and size but the fundamentals to rebuild a club's foundation is pretty much the same. MSM will back ourselves to do that, but I think to get to where Hamilton should be, and where we want to be in the next three to five years, we're going to need to attract outside investment, and that's that's really where we're in a position now and I think we are considerably more investable now than when we were in January.

The club was literally hours away from going out of business, so investment is something that we've been able to kind of take a bit more seriously and make moves over the last few weeks. There is hope over the next few months that is something that we can tie up, because that will not only secure the longer term future but also enable us to invest in rebuilding the academy, integrate the women's team, invest in the community and give those in charge a budget to get us back to where

we want the club to be. So investment is definitely on the cards, but we need to make sure it's right for the club and anyone who comes in shares the same values as MSM.

RL: Beccy, could you tell us about your role to date, what you've been involved in, and some of the challenges that you've faced?

RN: Just before I answer that question, I just want to thank everyone for coming tonight. It's been a roller coaster and while MSM have only been here for six months, much of the credit lies with everyone in this room for sticking by the club so thank you to everyone attending the forum. Pretty open question, challenges have been nonstop over the last six months. When working in football, it naturally takes over your life so the small wins become something that you look forward to. A highlight has been being able to introduce new staff members in the last few weeks. The process at the moment means we can't make huge strides but hopefully small steps like this are going to be impactful in the long term.

RL: I think supporters are really pleased to see the announcement of the strip launch being so early. Sponsorship is obviously going to be a massive part of things and we don't yet have that on the strips. Can you tell us about what the plans are for growing sponsorship for the club?

RN: I think it's important to start answering this question with our new kit provider. So, Tor Sport is owned by somebody called Will. Will set up a kit company in his bedroom in lockdown. He had no experience in the industry. I was introduced to him by the FAW, and they said, "Would you be interested in potentially trialing the kit and seeing if it's something that you're interested in?" From meeting Will I felt like I had known him for years. His ideas, his vision of football kits was exactly what we wanted. We wanted some bespoke ideas, we wanted the kit to mean something to our fans. I promised him if we ever took over a bigger club he would come with us, and when Rob eventually told me that he'd taken over Hamilton, I had a text from Will straightaway. I think you'll all agree that the kits he's designed in the last six months, they're special and mean something to the fans, and that's really important for us to have an identity back as well.

Sponsorship, it's a tricky question at the moment. We're more than aware of the fractured relationships we've got in the community and it's probably an important topic tonight, because we're probably looking at people in this room to help us change the narrative locally. You speak to a lot of people in town and the wider area, and their perception of us is, "it's Hamilton and they've not been in a great place" but we really need support to shift that. We're heavily going to rely on community engagement and community sponsorship to help us get back on our feet and to move forward with us.

Ultimately what we're asking is that those sponsors become part of our story moving forward and we're more than aware that the typical sponsorship in football doesn't really exist how it used to. You don't get huge front of shirt deals, and football's exposed on so many platforms now. We have to give something different to the people that are working with us, so it's a narrative that we've adopted in Haverfordwest, and it's a similar one that we'll adopt here. We want sponsors to come with us on this journey, be part of it, make a difference to players, supporters and the community. We're a very open management team, open staff, and willing to engage in relationships that support sponsors as well.

RL: Supporters have been very concerned about the relationship with governing bodies., There is a perception about quite a fractured relationship between the club and the SFA and the SPFL. Can you provide an update on that relationship with the governing bodies?

RN: I can only speak about my interactions with the SPFL and the SFA, but I can't speak highly enough about them. From the minute I started in January to now, the communication has

been transparent. They have helped us a lot. I think potentially that the narrative has been skewed over the last year or so in terms of blame and culture. I'm not going to name people, but they've picked the phone up to me on bank holiday weekends, Friday nights at 9pm and Sunday mornings to support us with what we're trying to do. I can't provide any opinion on how those relationships were previously and how they may have broken down, but I can assure you that we have a very strong relationship with them.

RL: Before Daz comes in Rob can you provide us some updates on the well documented FIFA registration ban and whether or not the club are still under the transfer embargo imposed by the SPFL over a year ago?

RE: The domestic embargo has been in place all season, and we've had to manage that as much as possible. Obviously, it hamstrung John previously, and now Daz since stepping up to the big chair, so that's obviously something that's been in place for a while. Unfortunately, more recent, has been the FIFA ban, although when reading local press on the subject it was absolutely mind blowing. Every club in European leagues has to complete a compliance assessment as part of FIFA Clearing House which forms part of training compensation, shows club structures and various other financial information. The club had not been compliant for some time.

They were issued a final notice back in October, which obviously led to a disciplinary, which was on the 20th of May. We were given access to that portal in April, once the fit and proper test was complete, and we obviously realised that there were matters not dealt with in relation to notices and compliance. So we were already in a position where the club was going to be punished in April when we got access, so we kind of knew that was coming. We tried to complete everything we needed to do as quickly as possible, but it's a process. There's information to load and there's financial information policies structure. They obviously need to know exactly what the breakdown of the club's balance sheet and loans and money's owed to other clubs, so it's a process.

I think FIFA has got close to 10,000 clubs that they deal with on that platform, so it's not a case of just someone waiting there for Hamilton to send their information so they could take action. So we were at a point where effectively everything was in place towards the end of May, but unfortunately the sanction was already issued and that sanction for non compliance is a global FIFA transfer ban. The way to fix that is complete the compliance assessment, which we had done, and that was subsequently reviewed and completed over the last few weeks. The club was issued a fine for non compliance, which was \$3,000 which the club has since paid, and on completion of that the ban was lifted.

There's no ongoing fraud investigation as part of anyone currently existing within the club. If there is an ongoing fraud investigation from anyone related to the club previously, that has absolutely no bearing on the club right now. So it was literally an administrative situation. It was an easy fix in terms of what we needed to do. It's just obviously the timings where we were not privy to, so the FIFA ban was lifted last week, and where we have provided everything we needed to do from an SPFL perspective, and while we are waiting to hear on a board decision as to whether the domestic ban will be lifted, of which we're extremely hopeful it is going to be the case, and as Beccy said, the communication of the SPFL has been incredible, and we're not aware of anything that will prevent that from happening. So we're hoping that's going to be something that we can have a decision on, hopefully a positive one in the next 24 hours.

RL: Daz, obviously the season 25/26 was a bit of a rollercoaster for yourself, going from assistant manager to taking over in December after John Rankin stepped down. What's your reflections now, a few weeks after the playoff game against Clyde?

DM: When I assess the season, John and I set out at the start of the season to build a squad capable of winning the league. Then obviously the embargo comes in and rips the plans apart. John then leaves in December, I take over, and then you realise how hard the job is. We can't

sign anyone other than very young players, and it was tough. Then every week there was something in the press, just people trying to take us down, so it wasn't so much me and the staff it was the players who got us over the line. I was chuffed for them the way the season ended, and I know supporters want to know about last season, but I really want to draw a line under that and fully focus on this season. Hopefully, there's good news coming. Hopefully fans can see what the club is trying to do. I'm hoping when the window closes we will be much stronger by the end of the window than we were at that time last season.

RL: You have been part of the club for a long time, and been involved previously in the youth setup. Is bringing more young players through something that's a key focus for you over the next season?

DM: We've got Marcus Syme and Aaron Eadie who are pushing to be in the squads. Dom Shields, Josh Carson, Jamie Herd, Josh Lane and others there who have come through the academy and we want to play them. Last season without the games programme, they couldn't play as much and develop so I'm sure Rob and Beccy will discuss long term stuff but if the youngsters are good enough, they will play. I don't want to be playing champ manager going out to sign every 28 and 29 year old. You want your kids to come through, and let's be realistic, the size of a club we need to bring our kids through and sell them like we did previously. We've sold a few like Ryan One and Cormac Daly in the last few years but they'd all be playing for us just now.

I just want to touch on Beccy and Rob, they've been magnificent since I took over. I think I'm a bit of a pain on the phone all the time. Can I get this? Can I get that? I've learned that Rob says yes to everything football and Beccy's good for all the off the pitch stuff so they try and not let me get them on their own, but they've been excellent.

My hats off to the players. They were being told that they weren't getting paid, pensions, tax stuff, it's a lot on anyone. They've got partners in the house and their own bills to pay. They didn't know if the money was coming in, so for them to stick by us and get us safe, because that's ultimately what they do. We got safe, did we want to make it as nerve wracking as that? No, but that was a good way to end with a good night in the Bay Horse after the game.

RL: We'll move on to a couple more topics, just before we move on to questions from the supporters tonight. For Rob and Beccy, can you tell us about longer term plans for the youth academy and any conversations you've had with the women's team about integrating them back into the club?

RN: I'll start with the women's team, because I think Lindsay is in the room somewhere. On my first visit to Hamilton back in January, Bobby and Lindsay were actually two of the first people I met here, and wow, they're impressive. What they do with the budget they have with the first team and the academy, hats off to everything that they do. It's absolutely something we want to bring into the club. What we don't want to do is bring them in while we're not completely sustainable in our own right. We need to make sure that everything we do is sound and proper, and you know we're on a good trajectory. And then we'll bring the women in, and I am in regular conversation with Bobby. He would be here tonight, but I think he's on holiday.

There are positive conversations happening there, and it'll happen when the time is right. Probably similar to the youth academy, to be honest, that's absolutely something that we want to bring back to the club, but having moved back to New Douglas Park we need to get all of our things sorted and make sure we're sustainable, but also that we can offer a provision that is good enough. Running an academy is hard. Anyone that's involved in football, anyone that's involved in youth football, you will appreciate how hard it is to get good and appropriate coaches that are actually going to develop talent. When I first went to Haverfordwest, stripping the academy back to bare minimum was one of the first things I did. We identified quite early on that we didn't have enough of the right level coaches to deliver the provision that we wanted and if we go head first into an academy in Hamilton with people that aren't appropriate, we're just going to get a lot of backlash, so it will be integrated hopefully from next season, but at a very slow pace to make sure we do it right and make sure it's sustainable.

RE: At Haverfordwest, three years ago our under 19s in our academy, we finished bottom of the league on minus three points because we didn't have players as the standard was awful and the production into the first team was non-existent. Within 18 months, we became the first Welsh under 19s to win the domestic treble, and we went on to play in the youth champions league. The U19s had lots of 16 and 17 year old kids at that point, and we took them to the capital of Montenegro to play the national stadium against what can only be described as six foot five inch guys, they were absolutely massive, and our little kids from from Pembrokeshire done us proud.

I think we lost 5-3 on aggregate, but we were ahead in both games. I mean the striker who scored two goals since signed for Chelsea for 4 million euros, so for us to have an academy that was close to closing down to becoming the first Welsh youth team to win the regional, the national, and the Welsh Youth Cup in 18 months is pretty incredible. Beccy deserves a lot of plaudits for that, and definitely building the academy from effectively the ground up again, because although it's got the reputation in terms of what it's done before and the players that it's brought through, those coaches and those players are not here anymore, so we are effectively rebuilding something. With the added benefit of the legacy that the club has had previously, I think we can be really excited by where that can hopefully be in the next two or three years.

RL: I think a lot of people in the room would have been at some of the high profile youth games a few seasons ago, and I'm sure Daz probably remembers them very well. The night against Basel, was probably one of the best atmospheres we experienced at the stadium, it was incredible. So it's really great to hear that the youth academy will be a focus. Rob, you have spoken about community aspirations. What does that look like in your head just now? And what's the long term aspirations?

RE: I think something that gets lost in football that I think a lot of clubs are now realising is that a football club is a community asset, it's not a business first and foremost. From a community asset point of view the impact it has on people's lives is pretty significant. So, I think you have to be visible, you have to invest in the community and you have to show that you're there. Ultimately, then that relationship will build, fans will come back and they'll tell their friends who will tell their business owner friends who will sponsor the club, and ultimately the commercial comes off the back of that.

I think for us to come into Hamilton now and start asking people for money is probably not going to be met with the warmest reaction every time, particularly with what we've brushed on the disconnect between Hamilton the Football Club and Hamilton the town, particularly over recent years. So I think we need to be visible first and foremost. We have to invest in the town, and then at which point there's evidence for them to come back and support us. And along with Ben and Connor taking up a kind of a combined role, we want to tell stories of family businesses that are in Hamilton. How they've interacted with the club in the past, how they want to interact with the club going forward because that creates a real affiliation to the club.

Although Hamilton has got such a great draw from my point of view, there's a lot of clubs around Glasgow and surrounding areas, so there needs to be an emotive reason why you come to watch Hamilton, or you sponsor Hamilton, rather than East Kilbride, Motherwell, or Clyde. So we need to do something different, and by that, that's investing and being visible and giving people to share their stories and put that on our platform, and vice versa. It's something we've had success in Wales.

Haverfordwest has 14,000 people, and we've had 4000 plus attendances for league games in the last 12 months. Quite a high portion of the demographic actually come to watch Haverfordwest, because we're the only professional club in Pembrokeshire, but there were still attendance of 80 or 100 people when we took over. So the catchment we have in Hamilton is really exciting, because if we can achieve a similar percentage, then there's no reason why we won't have 1500/2000 fans coming to watch a match day again. It's not a quick fix, because the relationship is fractured, but we have to do something different. We have to be visible and invest in the community, and hope that they pay us back, and come to watch and bring their friends.

RL: At this time I am going to give the top table a bit of a break. I want to invite forward Alex Kerr, MSP for Hamilton Larkhall and Stonehouse to say a few words. Alex was recently elected to parliament in the Scottish elections.

AK: Thank you so much. So, as has been mentioned, I got elected just in May there so to give you that kind of frame of where I'm coming from. I used to work for the previous MSP, Susan McKelvie, before she passed away, and there's community engagement and business engagement and it's from that frame that I'm kind of approaching this, so there'll be no politicisation or any of that. It's all about what I can do to promote the communities in Hamilton, and in doing so, support the club as well. So, I think I met Rob around April and I was really taken with how direct and focused he was on just overcoming each obstacle, totally unstoppable, and I can from what's going on today, just everything, I mean, if I'd be facing half the problems that you face, I'm probably hiding under a table.

From what I've heard from Rob and Beccy and the Supporters Association, they have totally turned the ship around, I mean, this is absolutely amazing, what you've done here, and just again, if there's any issues that people need help with, please come and see me afterwards. I'll be hanging about, and just to let you know, I'm here to support the club, and crucially, I think this club has a huge part to play. There's a lot of work going on in regenerating Hamilton Town Centre. This is something that was really key to my election campaign as well, and I think it's something I'm keen to push forward. So, any links folk can do to reach out to that regeneration effort to support local community groups and businesses, that's something I'm happy to facilitate as well. I appreciate you didn't come to hear from a politician, let's be honest, so you can catch me afterwards if needed.

RL: Thank you very much Alex. So, I think just a last point before we open up to the questions, I'm going to ask Rob, just to touch a bit on the relationship with supporters and what supporters can do for the club. I know formal plans haven't been made in terms of the partnership with the supporters association, but what sort of role do you see supporters playing in this journey over the next few years?

RE: I think it's massively important, particularly with what the club has been through, and not just the disconnect we spoke about in terms of the club and the community, but the club and the fan base. I'm a Leyton Orient fan, so I've been involved in a catastrophic time where the ownership effectively was very close to ending the football club, which had been around for 125 years and was a massive part of my life. My late dad used to take me, I now take my son, so we're now third and fourth generation Orient fans, and the thought of losing that football club at that point was something that I mean was not really something we wanted to consider, and the people that I have met and the fans that I have met from Hamilton, you can see the passion for the football club is huge.

So I think with what the fans have been through, I think it's important. It's very easy to say we want to listen, we want to do this, we want to do that, but I think it's really important that we show that by actions. It's actually something that I spoke to Ross and Brandon about probably even before we actually took over, it was something we wanted to make a real kind of instant point with. It was difficult to do anything formally early on, because we had so many challenges that threatened the club's existence, but once we were past that point, it was something we wanted to formalise and make a statement that obviously without fans, there's no point in us sitting here, because we're just talking to an empty room, an empty stadium, players running around on a pitch with no purpose.

So I think if somebody wanted to make a statement that, fans are going to be listened to, we may not always make decisions that you want to know, but I think the most important thing is you'll understand why we're doing it and where it forms as part of the bigger picture, and that's something that we will formalise and share more details on as the season goes on and beyond that. But it's important that we want everyone to know that their voices will be heard and will have a clear idea on where the club is going.

As I said, I read the forums, I know there's a lot of people asking why we're not saying or updating certain things. The reason is because it's either a sensitive point by us telling everyone exactly what's going on mid process, or there's nothing to tell. So, I think we've had to be really patient. I'm quite an emotional person, Beccy will tell you that, and I get into trouble from time to time so I've had to restrain a lot during this time, but when something is a genuine concern, that's when we'll communicate, when something is clear, and and we've moved past, that's when we'll communicate.

I think it's important that we want fans to know exactly what's happening within the football club, but only at the right time. So, I think it's just important that you, I think we say it on every post, and I think it's retweeted by so many people and I know the SLO retweets it all the time, like we will make sure everyone knows exactly what's going on, when the time is right, and if there is an immediate threat or an immediate situation that we need to address, then we will address it, but we've just had to be really patient and just focus our time on fixing problems, and then telling you when we're fixing it, rather than communicating all the way through. So, we want to make sure fans are completely in the know of what's going on, but certainly when the time is right and it doesn't jeopardise our position with any of the challenges that we're overcoming.

RL: Just as an additional point you wanted to clear up the situation around Lanarkshire Live.

RE: Yeah, Lanarkshire Live are not banned. Ben was very careful when he sent the email. Our communication was, we will not engage with you (referring to Paul Thomson). That doesn't mean we won't engage with Lanarkshire Live or Daily Record. So if any journalists are here, or you know any journalists that work for Lanarkshire Live or Daily Record, give us a call and we can have a chat but unfortunately we won't engage with Mr. Thomson

RL: What we're going to do at this stage is just open the questions to the floor.

Supporter: Can I ask a question about the ACAS Community Trust? Like every club in Scotland, we have a community trust. Ours has been sitting almost in absence for the last two years. No accounts submitted or accounts submitted and not accepted, and I expect the charity regulator to be coming in shortly to have a look, but to my mind, the community trusts are your equivalent. The foundation is a vehicle for fan engagement. As a vehicle for fan engagement, have you any plans to get your hands on the community trust or set up a new one?

RN: Yeah, really good question. The bank account has actually been closed for the trust, it was one of the projects we looked at really early on, but we are in the process of bringing in a community manager, and one of the first things on their remit will be to look at the charity and the trust and recondition it and have a look what it serves.

Supporter: Do we still get money from former players who have come through the Academy or did that all stop when the academy went out of business?

RE: No, it doesn't necessarily. I will let Becca advise more on this one

RN: Part of this FIFA embargo that Rob spoke about earlier is really how all of that is delivered, so you speak about if they go on to other clubs and we've got agreements in place. So when any club in the world is FIFA compliant and players are sold or they've moved on, everything goes through a system called FIFA Clearing House, so in the past, maybe like three or four years, they've really heightened the responsibility they hold. We don't actually have to do very much work with a lot of it now. So once a player is registered on FIFA Clearing House, you automatically get sent an email or a letter through the legal portal, and that explains then to you what percentages of money you've signed up for, so everything is collated in one place, everything goes through one platform, and we would be notified. There is some discrepancy if they stay local, so if they move to clubs in Scotland, but they sit with the SFA, SPFL, and the club as well, so there's always ways to find out those agreements that were made, but the FIFA system is pretty good compared to where it was a few years ago.

Supporter: I would just like to ask, did the club ever receive the £70,000 or so that was withheld from two seasons ago by the authorities, and have you received any subsequent money from the season just finished?

RE: Yes, it was basically the SPFL wanted to understand that the club was going to complete the season, so we had to provide and demonstrate that we would be able to complete the season, and that was paid over to us after licensing, so it would have been the end of March, early April. The club did receive that.

Supporter: Just a query regarding the fan engagement, as you mentioned, is very important. How are season ticket sales going? Obviously, to me it's a really good value season ticket. It compares well to other clubs in the league and league above. So, are we as fans responding enough?

BP: Yes, season ticket sales are going fairly well. Last time I checked it was just over 300 so we should be around 350ish. Compare that to last season we sold 80. When half season tickets were introduced when MSM took over, we sold 120 of them. We will be doing more stuff locally, advertising as much as we can but around 350 so far.

RN: Just to add to that, when we asked supporters to express interest that we had around 620 responses, so if the other 300 or so could buy that would be great.

Supporter: How refreshing to have a proper agenda given out in advance. How refreshing having people that we trust. How refreshing this is around us. Many years ago, I was part of helping the SLO many years ago when I retired early after taking ill health, and the fans were at each other's backs. Five or six of us went and did leaflet drops all over Hamilton, and they did really well. Motherwell's done well, which I don't like to say, but they've done well. Ayr United's supporters liaison has engaged with the companies all over Ayr to invest in season tickets for people. Could we not do that? Get out to every company in Lanarkshire. I bought two under 18 tickets, I've always done it, or every time I bought a season ticket, I bought two under 18 tickets, and I'm doing it again this year. That's what needs to be done. Somebody just be a wee bit extra, get somebody out of the streets, and into watch Accies. Thanks and best of luck.

Supporter: Some years ago I remember, we started a sponsor thing through about 26-27 shops in Hamilton, where if you showed your season ticket, you got a discount on your Kentucky Fried Chicken, your Pizza Hut, your Nando's, and what have you. Now it was a fair success, but after some years we seemed to give up. So, is it something to consider for the future? I know Motherwell have very great success with this, where they get things with their season ticket, they go into certain chip shops, they get 10% off, or whatever it may be. We had Nando's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's the whole lot of them.

BP: Yes, to answer your question, I think clubs like Motherwell do it brilliantly, their community stuff is excellent. Part of Connor and I's job will be to go around local businesses and speak to them and that was part of the reason we did the poster campaign as it was a chance to go down the town centre and speak to people which we did. As Rob spoke about earlier on, a lot of the relationships are fractured and right now some people don't want to speak to us which we totally understand but that's part of the job is to try and rebuild that relationship. In terms of specific things like that, in terms of getting discounts from your season ticket, is something we're talking about, as part of sponsorship, that's something we're hoping to do at some stage, so these businesses we're reaching out to, we're trying to get some sort of agreement where the club benefits, that business benefits, and hopefully the fans who buy season tickets and supporters will benefit as well, so yes, that is something we're trying to do, and try and follow some of the models that other clubs do, because they do it well.

Supporter: I just want to ask a question about the pitch at the stadium. It must be coming at the end of its life, I would imagine, and to replace it is a fairly large amount of money. Do you know if the stadium company has any plans to replace it?

RN: The quality of every pitch in Scotland obviously sits with the club, but also sits with the SFA from a licensing perspective. So you can't get a license if your pitch isn't FIFA compliant at certain levels. It's a star rating. As part of our agreement with New Douglas Park, and it's written that when the pitch needs relaying to comply with SFA rules, it will be relayed in that period. It was something that the SFA were really keen for us to work with them and with the stadium owners to make sure that we're complying with the coming seasons.

Supporter: Just a personal thank you for all you've done for the club so far. I'm sure the stuff that goes on behind the scenes, I'm sure there's much more than we'd really want to know. Though the group that has possibly surpassed what you've done has been the ASA, in terms of what it's done in the last year in terms of its publicity, is raising money and the things it's done to try and help but at the end the day it could only do so much, and that was evident in the ASA's efforts. About 12 months ago, I stood up at an ASA meeting, and that's why I feel obliged to stand up just now, whereby the ASA put forward a 12 month plan, and one of the topics in the plan was fan ownership, or this golden share thing, because the club itself wasn't able to protect itself from the individuals involved, and despite our efforts, it was just beyond our reach. There was nothing we could do, and therefore, whilst I look forward to next season being a good season, that would be great. But, and I thank you for all your efforts in getting us out of the quagmire, but I think we've all got to make sure we never get into this state again, and therefore, whilst it's all about rebuilding the club or repairing the club. I would like to see the club rebuilt on different foundations, and I know you're talking about investors and the like, and that's fine, but I would like to see the club, whether or not a golden share has a bearing on external investment I don't know but I would like to see the supporters have a greater stake and say in the state of the club directly, and as I say, that was one of the things that the ASA was founded upon, was to try and get some sort of equity stake or representation on the board, and I just wondered where we were with that.

RE: That's one of the main reasons for announcing a formal partnership. I felt it was the right time to do it, even though we hadn't formalised exactly what that would look like, but a golden share is something that we've spoken about. A golden share is obviously there to veto, to some extent, any future ownership or individuals that get involved in the club. I think the difference - I'm not going to talk about previous ownership necessarily, but the difference is we have a lot to lose. We have a reputation in sport already, not just in football, within sports entertainment, of which, again, we've had fairly good success, and our ambition is to grow MSM into other sports, other regions.

We're not necessarily one dimensional, so for us to not be successful at Hamilton isn't just the detriment of Hamilton, it's also the detriment of us. So, I think whether we're here or not, we want to leave a legacy for Hamilton to continue to develop and push on, and who knows where we'll all be in three to five years. We've got no intention to not see this through to where we want to get to, at the very least, but I think we have a lot to lose by Hamilton not being successful, so I think there's a difference there. This was a massive risk, this is something that could jeopardise everything that we've done in five or six years, but we believed in the project and believed in ourselves to back it, but the foundation needs to be laid now for the future success of Hamilton, because even if we have success in three to five years and we move on and somebody else comes in, the last thing we'd want to see is kind of that legacy that we've rebuilt to then be tarnished. So I think we're thinking of the long term of Hamilton, not really necessarily about ourselves, and that hopefully will be seen even clearer by obviously working with the ASA, listening to you guys in terms of how you see fans sitting into the future of the club.

We spoke about having a fan representative on the board who's a spokesperson for the fan majority and giving updates on how they think we're doing, whether it could be improved, new initiatives, and obviously any new ownership would obviously need to pass through fit and proper tests, and would obviously give us as much information as we can at the right time about any people that we look to bring in to support us, but at least for the foreseeable, any people that come into the club will not be in a majority position, so they need to buy into how we see the club running and developing over the next three or five years at least. I think a lot of it's quite a lot of dubious opinions on multi club in terms of is it just a revenue generating value generating business, or can there be real economies of scale and sharing of resource, and I guess combined plans, agendas for our football clubs, and I think by having this model here and associated what we've done previously, I think we've got quite a bit to lose by getting this wrong, so we want to make sure it's here for a long, long time.

Supporter: Obviously as the last few months improved, things changed very quickly. If we're sitting here in 12 months' time, what does success look like?

DM: I think we can all appreciate that with Ross County coming down, they may throw money at it. If the embargo gets lifted we can't necessarily compete with what they spend over there but that does not mean we would be flinging in the towel. If the embargo gets lifted I'm more than confident we'll have a squad to compete. Since I've come back to the club, I've seen the numbers. I've said that in the press several times. God knows how we got through this. I'm not going to say the figures as they are not public records. Some of the figures are frightening. So when we spoke to the ownership this year, we said let's be a wee bit realistic, let's get the budget right down, and I think I'm confident in saying it's way under half, where it been before. So if the embargo gets lifted and we put the squad together, I'm more than confident that we'll be able to compete. Inwardly our aim is to get through the leagues as quickly as possible without putting the club at risk.

One thing I never did when I spoke earlier was to thank every one of the fans for turning up week in, week out, even some of the ones that gave me pelters. Without fans, it's nothing. I've been there as a player, coach, assistant manager, and now manager. Without supporters, it's nothing. The support of you, particularly in playoffs at New Douglas Park, honestly, when I walked out for the start of that game, I looked over, albeit to the away end, but to see the numbers there, you can actually see what we've got. I think when we're in the Premier League with 1500 to 2000 granted some will not all come back, but if we can get close to what we used to have, you could see what Alex Neil done when we were all united, when we're all together united, to the playing staff, to the coaching staff, to the supporters. If we're all united, that's when the club's successful. We're at our best. If it's fractured, as we've seen the last two or three years, it just leads to chaos, arguing, instability, and then that leads on to the pitch. So, if the embargo gets lifted, please come back and support us.

RE: I won't take Daz's thunder about on the pitch, but I think it wasn't necessarily the money that was being spent, I think it was just the value that the club was getting. It wasn't necessarily just a ridiculously high figure for this league, I don't think it represented necessarily a balance of squad or necessarily value amongst the entire playing squad. So that's something that we have to kind of strip back, what do we need to compete at this level? Can Daz build a squad that can compete within that? If the transfer embargo gets lifted I think we will find a happy medium. I think off the pitch, the more revenue we generate the more that we can give Daz to get us back to the Premiership is ultimately the only way that it's really going to be successful and sustainable. I think you've seen not just with Hamilton, but with so many other clubs across the UK, where benefactors constantly put money into a football club and when that success doesn't come, they leave, and ultimately there's huge clubs that have been left with debts that they'll probably never recover from and go into administration.

So, for a club like Hamilton to compete with the clubs it should be in and around the lower end of the Premiership, top end of the Championship. In the medium term, we have to do it by generating more revenue and that means more season tickets, more sponsorship, more innovative ways to generate income outside of the core business model, and to do that we need to do our bit to make sure it's a place that people want to enjoy to come and watch football, partner with and hopefully they'll continue to back us because I think where the foundations are strong enough to get us to a certain point but I think if we want to get to where the club should be in the next few years then we need to grow the revenue significantly and that's ultimately how this will go forward.

We obviously want to win and get as high as we can. We don't just want to exist. I don't think any Hamilton fan just wants to exist, I guess six months ago you probably just wanted to exist, but now I think we can aim a little bit higher than that. But that's ultimately down to how we back ourselves to engage with the fan base and the community to spend their money, and that will ultimately be reinvested back into the club on and off the pitch.

Supporter: I would like to echo a few of the previous speakers. Just really glad that you've chosen our club, and hopefully the results on the pitch will follow suit with an upturn of fortunes outside the four white lines. The question I was going to ask Rob, maybe just following what you're talking about with the revenue, so obviously with our non-ownership of the stadium, obviously Hamilton Academical, there's no other club quite like it, and sometimes that can work in a bad way. How do we see those revenue streams actually being reflected on the pitch? I'm guessing that for Haverfordwest you own the stadium, you've got your hospitality, your sponsorship and I'm guessing a lot of that revenue will go to the stadium owner. And as a follow up to that, is there going to be a long term plan to acquire the stadium moving forward? There was pie in the sky ideas from the previous regime about building another stadium which will never ever happen. The town can't sustain it. It's not the right thing to do. New Douglas Park is a spiritual home, that's where we belong. So, it was really just to talk a little bit more about how we are going to maximise those matchday attendances by getting people into the bars, putting money in the club, having a club shop, and encouraging folk to spend their money on Hamilton Academical.

RE: It's a great question as well, the club has assets that it can sell. It has front of shirt, back of shirt, shorts, the match day, digital, online, social. There's a significant income stream that the club can generate from assets that are its own. Obviously, in and around the stadium, there's advertising walls, there's stadium naming, there's hospitality, and there's an agreement in place with the stadium owners that means any business that we bring in to that opportunity, the club is very well looked after. So there is an opportunity to generate not just our own assets, but stadium assets and the upsell of hospitality and the match day experience.

In terms of stadium ownership I think the most successful clubs will own their stadium. Is it something that we would want to achieve? Definitely, yes. But I think we're at least kind of two to three years away from being able to specifically say yes we want to buy New Douglas Park, because we need to make sure, firstly, the club continues. I don't want to sound too grim, but continues to exist, push forward, develop, grow, get to levels where we want it to be, but ultimately I think a club should own its stadium, and whether that is New Douglas Park in the medium term or whether it's somewhere else in the longer term, I mean we don't know what that's going to look like necessarily, but I think it is important that a club owns its own home, and in reality, that the only people that would really buy that kind of ground is a football club. I don't think there's a real estate investor out there that would want to buy a football stadium. So it makes sense from our point of view, it makes sense from the stadium ownership that it's a football club that owns it, and that's something perhaps in 12-24 months we'll have a much clearer picture on.

Supporter: Just to move on from what the gentleman said, under the tenancy agreement will there be a physical club shop? Will we have the capacity to have a social club, or some kind of fan hub or other ways of generating revenue from exceptional merchandise?

RN: The club shop is an interesting one, because we've tried it quite a few times at Haverfordwest and it's just not been that successful. Not to say that won't be successful here, but we've found with the turnaround of Tor, in terms of from purchase to delivery, it can be as quick as 24 hours. So, is there value in us purchasing kits to sell on a match day? Maybe it might be something that we look at, but as part of our contract with Tor Sport, they will do a number of pop-up shops throughout the season to allow you to buy your merchandise on the day, but otherwise, it's miraculous how quickly he gets stuff to you. If it's something that we really want, we can look at more pop-ups, or you know, maybe holding some in stock, but we just need to make sure that it's the right thing for us at this moment.

BP: I don't know what the agreement is in terms of what we do have access to and what we don't, that will be for someone else to confirm. Fan areas are certainly something we would like to do. We do know that since we've been away, some of the areas around the stadium have changed, for example, the space behind the gazebo, where the gantry used to be, has been cleared and it is now somebody else who's looking after that. In terms of what had been the bar before, that sort of foyer room up the stairs, whether that's included in what has been agreed, I'm not 100% sure. We'd love

to have a supporters area, that would be great. Ideally, yes, but there's nothing set at present.

Supporter: Will Allan Currie be permanent Chairman?

RE: I obviously brushed on it earlier, that a lot of what we've achieved wouldn't have been possible without Allan. I think taking away anyone that we may or may not sign if the transfer embargo gets lifted, I think Alan would probably be the biggest signing of the summer, based on what he's achieved. I think how much we like and respect him, and how much we enjoy working with him, and I think the relationship he's got with fans is also really positive.

When Allan came in, it was a favour, and I probably owe him a lot now, but for someone who came in as a favour, he's been at every single game, home and away. He's been at Peterhead away, he's been all over the place, and I think you have to respect the impact that has on his family and his own personal life. He has a business, he works hard during the week, so as much as we all want him to stay, we're going to continue to fight that battle. It's not something that we have necessarily agreed yet, for a number of reasons. I think it's a decision that Allan needs to take for his family and his own kind of social well-being and his own business, but I think he knows how much we all like and respect him and how much we want him to stay involved. So that's something we're going to continue to have a discussion on, and when he stops holidaying in the sun and comes back, then we can have that discussion.

I think the bigger board picture is we'll hopefully be able to add a few more people formally to the board over the next weeks, months, and then you'll be able to get to know them a little bit more, and what the impact that they've had already that people don't necessarily know about. It is something we need to tie up over the next few weeks, I would say.

Supporter: I was just going to ask Rebecca what the point of difference for Hamilton could be in terms of surrounding clubs, and actually the answer I thought was in the name of the club, in the sense that we are connected to a school, and I wondered if you have any plans to try and reconnect with the schools in town, because if you look around, we're quite an old fan base, a lot of baggage. Sure, Darian and the team will perform better with the help of bigger crowds again. So, I wonder if there's any plans to get more kids in again and to reconnect with potentially younger fans.

RN: Well, I was going to say we probably need to shift the demographic, but I felt it was rude, so now you said it, I can probably open the conversation. Again I know we do keep referring back to Haverfordwest and Wales, but it was no different when we took over there and it has shifted so significantly. I'd say half of our fan base is maybe under 16 now. It doesn't typically generate the revenue instantly, but long term it will. We deliver a lot of PPA in schools, so we've taken over a lot of supply teaching agencies locally. We've got contracts for the next academic year in eight primary schools and two secondary schools, and that didn't happen instantly. We're in two years of our community cycle now, and we're really reaping the rewards from it now. Anyone that works in the education sector will know there is some disposable income in schools to deliver PPA sessions, and I think when we initially started that project, we were in direct competition with Swansea City, and you know how much bigger that club is than the likes of Haverfordwest, but it's the same in that Haverfordwest schools wanted Haverfordwest people in their schools, they wanted to have real-life role models for the children, so the players go into the schools, they see them on a match day, and that's definitely something we can replicate in Hamilton, because it's the same localness, albeit a bit bigger, it's definitely the gap that we want to get into in the next 12 to 18 months.

RL: From a personal point of view I just want to say thank you to everyone for coming out this evening. I know Rob, Beccy and Daz will be around for a few minutes afterwards if anyone does wish to speak to them, but a genuine thank you to everyone for their attendance. I would certainly encourage you, if you've not already, to come up and have a look at the new strips. I want to say thank you to everyone at the top table tonight, obviously to Aaron, Connor, and Ben for the work they've been doing, and if we're lucky enough to have a transfer embargo lifted, I'm sure we're all looking forward to the content that's produced, and fingers crossed if we can get Allan to sign on the dotted line as chairman for a while longer we can look forward to him trying to emulate Danny Cunning's recent appearance on our social media platforms. Before I pass to Rob, Beccy and Daz for final words can we have a round of applause for our top table.

RE: I think everyone has said it except me is how much we really appreciate everyone taking the time to come out. I think the last point I wanted to make is that this (forum) is something we wanted to do long before. Contrary again to recent media, I've not been trying to dodge doing something like this, but I think it's about the right moment, so that we're going to sit in front of you and be accountable for what we're telling you. We're telling you this because we want to be held accountable for it, and we want you to get as much out of something like this as possible. I think if we did this two or three months ago, I don't think we could have really looked anybody in the eye and said exactly where we would be in two or three months if we even existed, and I think for you to ask questions to us and get the most out of it, I don't think you would necessarily have got, you'd have got an honest answer, but I don't think you'd necessarily got too much from it.

So I think it was about making sure it was picking the right moment that everyone gets the best out of such situations. So hopefully this is something we can do on a fairly regular basis, and it gives you the opportunity just to see exactly what's going on, but it's something we wanted to do a long way before, but it just wasn't the right time to be able to do it. I'm glad that we could all sit in front of you and tell you what's been going on, and give you the opportunity to get as much from the evening as possible, and like I said, it's something we can look to do as the season goes on.

RN: Just out of interest, who's coming down to come to us for the fixture? We're really looking forward to hosting you. We do have a pub booked for after the game, and they're going to put on live music as well, so we'll circulate some information ready for you to join us after a competitive fixture. Thank you everyone.

DM: Just a big thank you for all your efforts as supporters over the last season, coming tonight, and hopefully there's good news in the next few days. Thanks again.

Forum came to a close.