

Sport

FIRST OF MANY

● Tony Cascarino: Footballer of the Year
Haaland will win plenty more awards

● Alyson Rudd: Why I voted for a different Norwegian
Pages 2-3

Anderson injury scare

England seamer fails to appear for Lancashire with suspected groin problem

PAGE 18



LEXY LILLEY/MANCHESTER CITY/GETTY IMAGES

Ratcliffe closing in on United

Ineos set to enter final talks with Glazers unless Qatars increase takeover bid

Matt Lawton, Matt Dickinson

Sir Jim Ratcliffe has moved a significant step closer to securing Manchester United, with the Glazers and their New York bankers ready to discuss details of a sale with the British petrochemicals billionaire.

Sources close to the deal have indicated that the Glazers and The Raine Group are willing to enter final talks with Ratcliffe and his team at Ineos to thrash out the world-record purchase.

As The Sunday Times revealed last month, Ratcliffe moved ahead in the contest with a Qatari group, fronted by

Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, and other rival bidders when his final offer represented the highest valuation — it could reach as much as £6 billion — for the Premier League club.

Insiders believe that valuation, and Ratcliffe's willingness to agree a deal that enables Joel and Avram Glazer to retain a 20 per cent stake in the club, has proved a significant factor.

The Qatari's third and final offer for a 100 per cent buyout came in below £5 billion, despite claims to the contrary. Sources close to the Qatars believe they remain part of the process and it could yet be that they respond with an 11th-hour bid that forces the Glazers to reconsider.

Raine also oversaw the sale of Chelsea last year, when at least one rival group believed they were about to receive preferred bidder status only for the Todd Boehly/Clearlake Capital-led consortium to emerge as the winners of that contest.

However, there has been minimal contact between Raine and the Qatars since those third and final offers were submitted last month, with the Ratcliffe bid understood to be the one favoured by the six Glazer siblings.

The Qatari bid was seriously undermined by the collapse of Credit Suisse in March, which is understood to have cost Qatari's Investment Authority billions as the second-biggest share-

holder. It did not help the case of Sheikh Jassim, the bid leader, who had close links with the failed Swiss bank.

Initially, Ratcliffe and Ineos had indicated a desire to purchase the 69 per cent share held by the Glazer family.

But it became increasingly apparent that Joel and Avram, the executive co-chairmen, were more reluctant to sell than their siblings.

The deal is complicated by the split between B shares, which carry powerful voting rights, and the A shares on the New York Stock Exchange, and it is likely that more talks will be needed to thrash out the exact terms of the deal, which could take a number of weeks.

Ratcliffe came up with an alternative offer that enabled them to remain involved, though the billionaire and his associates will have control once a take-over has been completed.

Given the animosity between the Glazers and United's supporters, the prospect of a continuing connection with the present owners was not met with a great deal of enthusiasm by fan groups.

But any deal would almost certainly conclude with Ratcliffe purchasing the stake retained by Joel and Avram over two possible phases in the next two to four years. A staggered deal would enable Ratcliffe to part with a

Continued on page 8

WEEKEND BRIEFING

Ones to watch

The season-defining, nail-biting drama of the Sky Bet Championship play-offs begins with Sunderland hosting Luton Town in the first leg of the sides' semi-final
5.30pm, Sky Sports Football

Sam Allardyce faces another tough game in his survival job with Leeds United, as Newcastle United come to Elland Road looking to tighten their grip on a top-four finish
12.30pm, BT Sport 1



Guess the star

This tennis player seemed to be realising her potential when she won her first grand-slam event, but has got past the quarter-finals only once in the 20 majors she has featured in since
Answer on page 19

Guess the season

Arsenal pip Preston North End to the league title on the final day Blackpool beat Bolton 4-3 from 3-1 down in the FA Cup final England lose their first meeting with Uruguay
Answer on page 13

Eyeing a hat-trick

Chelsea and Manchester United put the title race to one side for the Women's FA Cup final. The London team are looking to lift the trophy for the third straight year, United are in their first final
Tomorrow, 2.30pm, BBC1

On the box

TODAY

11am Surrey v Middlesex, County Championship
Sky Sports Cricket

3.30pm Chesterfield v Notts County, National League play-off final
BT Sport 1

TOMORROW

10am and 6pm Rome Masters, day seven
Amazon Prime Video

3pm Sale Sharks v Leicester Tigers, Gallagher Premiership semi-final
BT Sport 1

4.30pm Arsenal v Brighton & Hove Albion, Premier League
Sky Sports Main Event

Haaland is unique – and

Tony Cascarino



Winners panel

MEN

- Erling Haaland (Man City)
- Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)
- Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)

WOMEN

- Sam Kerr (Chelsea)
- Rachel Daly (Aston Villa)
- Lauren James (Chelsea)

time for them to adjust to Guardiola and his ideas.

When I first saw Haaland at Borussia Dortmund I thought he was strong and quick but a bit of a bull in a china shop: just charging his way past defences. But it worked for him and it would have been easy for the young man to say, "This is what I'm good at and successful with so why should I change at City?"

But he had to change if he wanted to play for Guardiola and he has more than repaid his manager's faith. Haaland has adapted to become a team player, linking up brilliantly with Grealish, Phil Foden and, of course, Kevin De Bruyne. And they have all helped to improve him as a player.

One of the weirdest and more ludicrous conversations that I was involved in this season was the idea that somehow City were a better team without Haaland. Well, that nonsense has been put to bed now.

Haaland has shown incredible ability, hunger and desire and he has scored all sorts of different goals. And he will win more awards because only injury can stop him from achieving more records in seasons to come.



2022-2023
ERLING HAALAND

It's nuanced Odegaard for me over Erling the battering ram

Alyson Rudd



on loan in January 2021 that he was my new favourite player as they understood I have a weakness for all things Nordic. I would protest that he was deeply average and highly unlikely to become a player I would praise.

Indeed, many Arsenal fans probably felt the same way, but this season the player who had an air of a suffering wonderkid when he arrived has proved to be the beating heart of a team who could still take the title. Odegaard makes himself available for teammates under pressure and can cut through the most adept defences with a clever pass. He changes the mood, he turns uncertainty into adventure. He is only 24 yet is palpably nurturing.

It looked a little odd when Mikel Arteta appointed him captain last July and yet it proved a masterstroke. Odegaard is unflappable and an improved player for wearing the armband. He is also Arsenal's joint-top scorer with many of his goals as aesthetically pleasing as his passes and assists.

Haaland is a force of nature, but Odegaard treats his habitat as would a craftsman and, weirdly, in spite of his many goals, I cannot help but think City would be in contention for the Treble even if Haaland had never signed for them.

Arsenal, without their own Norwegian, would not even be close to hunting City down in the title race.

Norwegian and Kerr get

Paul Hirst

Erling Haaland has been named men's footballer of the year by the Football Writers' Association after receiving a



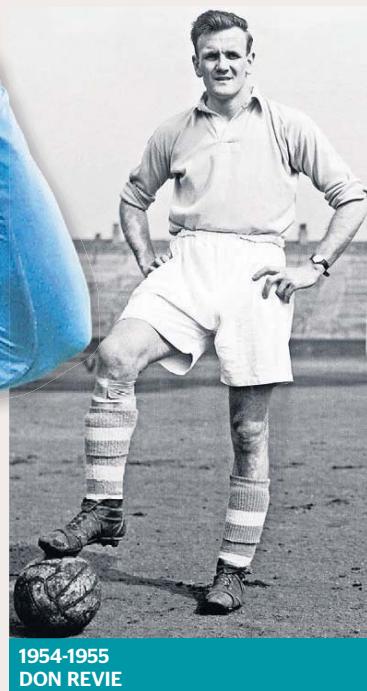
Sam Kerr won the FWA women's footballer of the year award for the second consecutive season. The Chelsea striker received twice as many votes as Aston Villa's Rachel Daly, who was second. Bukayo Saka, the Arsenal winger, came second in the men's vote ahead of his Arsenal team-mate Martin Odegaard.

"To win the football writers' award in my first season in English football is an honour," Haaland, 22, said. "I try every single day to be the best I can be."

Kerr won women's award for second consecutive season

will be even better next season

Manchester City's FWA winners

1954-1955
DON REVIE1955-1956
BERT TRAUTMANN1968-1969
TONY BOOK2018-2019
RAHEEM STERLING2018-2019
NIKITA PARRIS2020-2021
RUBEN DIAS

top awards

When did defenders go out of fashion?

FWA award's 76-year history



Pep fears Eurovision could hinder City

Paul Hirst

Pep Guardiola has blamed the Eurovision Song Contest for Manchester City having one day fewer than Real Madrid to prepare for the second leg of their Champions League semi-final.

Real play Getafe tonight, while City play Everton at Goodison Park at 2pm on Sunday. Given that the second leg against Real is on Wednesday, City would have preferred to play today, but Merseyside police would not let them do so because Eurovision is taking place in Liverpool that night.

"We play Sunday. Thank you so much [for that]," Guardiola, the City manager, said. "We can't play Saturday because of Eurovision or something like that in Liverpool, and we don't have [enough] police to handle two important events at the same time."

"I don't understand it. We'd definitely prefer to play Saturday so we can prepare more, but now we have to adapt. If you look at it in a positive way, we have one more day to recover for the Everton game."

Real were always going to have an advantage when it came to preparation time as, unlike City, they have little to play for in their domestic league.

Carlo Ancelotti's side trail the leaders in La Liga, Barcelona, by 14 points with five matches left, which means that the Italian can rest some players when they host relegation-threatened Getafe.

City's match against Everton will be their 55th game of the season. Real have played one more, primarily because of their participation in the Club World Cup in February.

Guardiola is sure that his players will be able to cope with their schedule in the final month of the season,

Dyche hopes patience has helped striker

Paul Joyce

Northern Football Correspondent

Sean Dyche is hoping his patient approach over the fitness of Dominic Calvert-Lewin will help tip the balance for Everton in their fight for survival.

Calvert-Lewin has provided Everton with a much-needed focal point in attack in recent outings after returning to the line-up following a frustrating ten-match absence.

The forward suffered a hamstring injury in Dyche's first game in charge—the 1-0 win over Arsenal back in February—but has now started each of the last four. That run includes the 2-2 draw with Leicester City, and the 5-1 demolition of Brighton & Hove Albion last Monday, when they discovered some potency and took a major stride towards avoiding relegation.

Calvert-Lewin's absence was prolonged by a setback in his recovery, but Dyche resisted the temptation to pitch the player straight back into his plans despite Everton's season teetering on the brink and hopes to now reap the rewards of that approach.

"It is not patience in the sense that we have been holding him back for the sake of it," said the Everton manager, whose side host Manchester City on Sunday. "It is patience in the sense of the risk and reward scenarios that come in football and it is difficult sometimes."

"You are very tempted to push players back in, maybe too early. In my experience, that doesn't very often pay you back. More so with Dom's recent history, we were trying to get him to a point where he was almost as close to being fully match fit as you can before you drop him back into full training, whereas often you would use full training to get the final bit of fitness. But because of his history I felt that it needed solving properly."

Dyche confirmed Everton's captain Seamus Coleman, 34, had undergone knee surgery after the injury sustained against Leicester, but that he should be fit for next season. Coleman is out of contract this summer but will be offered a new deal by Everton.

especially if they keep stretching their unbeaten run, which presently stands at 21 matches.

"Winning helps," Guardiola said when asked about fatigue. "If you win the previous game, your mental recovery is better and quicker."

Guardiola is convinced that there will be no let-up from Mikel Arteta's Arsenal side, which means it is likely that City will have to gain eight or nine points from their final four matches to retain the title. "Definitely they are going to win the three games they have left," Guardiola said. "We know what we have to do to win the title. I would like Arsenal to drop points in the games they have against Brighton, Nottingham Forest and Wolves, I would like them to drop points. I will be honest but I think they will do nine points with the long weeks they have to prepare."

TV: Tomorrow, Sky Sports ME, 2pm

Roll of Honour

FWA MEN'S FOOTBALLER OF THE YEAR

Year	Player	Club
1948	Stanley Matthews	Blackpool
1949	Johnny Carey	Man Utd
1950	Joe Mercer	Arsenal
1951	Harry Johnston	Blackpool
1952	Billy Wright	Wolves
1953	Nat Lofthouse	Bolton
1954	Tom Finney	Preston
1955	Don Revie	Man City
1956	Bert Trautmann	Man City
1957	Tom Finney	Preston
1958	Danny Blanchflower	Tottenham
1959	Syd Owen	Luton
1960	Bill Slater	Wolves
1961	Danny Blanchflower	Tottenham
1962	Jimmy Adamson	Burnley
1963	Stanley Matthews	Stoke
1964	Bobby Moore	West Ham
1965	Bobby Collins	Leeds
1966	Bobby Charlton	Man Utd
1967	Jack Charlton	Leeds
1968	George Best	Man Utd
1969	Tony Book	Man City
1970	Dave Mackay	Derby
1971	Billy Bremner	Leeds
1972	Frank McLintock	Arsenal
1973	Gordon Banks	Stoke
1974	Pat Jennings	Tottenham
1975	Ian Callaghan	Liverpool
1976	Alan Mullery	Fulham
1977	Kevin Keegan	Liverpool
1978	Emlyn Hughes	Liverpool
1979	Kenny Burns	Nottm For
1980	Kenny Dalglish	Liverpool
1981	Terry McDermott	Ipswich
1982	Frans Thijssen	Tottenham
1983	Steve Perryman	Liverpool
1984	Kenny Dalglish	Liverpool
1985	Ian Rush	Everton
1986	Neville Southall	Everton
1987	Gary Lineker	Tottenham
1988	Clive Allen	Liverpool
1989	John Barnes	Liverpool
1990	Steve Nicol	Liverpool
1991	John Barnes	Liverpool
1992	Gordon Strachan	Leeds
1993	Gary Lineker	Tottenham
1994	Chris Waddle	Sheff Wed
1995	Alan Shearer	Blackburn
1996	Jürgen Klinsmann	Tottenham
1997	Eric Cantona	Man Utd
1998	Gianfranco Zola	Chelsea
1999	Dennis Bergkamp	Arsenal
2000	David Ginola	Tottenham
2001	Roy Keane	Man Utd
2002	Teddy Sheringham	Man Utd
2003	Robert Pires	Arsenal
2004	Thierry Henry	Arsenal
2005	Thierry Henry	Chelsea
2006	Frank Lampard	Arsenal
2007	Thierry Henry	Arsenal
2008	Cristiano Ronaldo	Man Utd
2009	Cristiano Ronaldo	Man Utd
2010	Steven Gerrard	Liverpool
2011	Wayne Rooney	Man Utd
2012	Scott Parker	West Ham
2013	Robin van Persie	Arsenal
2014	Gareth Bale	Tottenham
2015	Luis Suárez	Liverpool
2016	Eden Hazard	Chelsea
2017	Eden Hazard	Leicester
2018	Jamie Vardy	Chelsea
2019	N'Golo Kanté	Chelsea
2020	Mohamed Salah	Liverpool
2021	Raheem Sterling	Man City
2022	Jordan Henderson	Liverpool
2023	Ruben Dias	Man City
	Mohamed Salah	Liverpool
	Erling Haaland	Man City

FWA WOMEN'S FOOTBALLER OF THE YEAR

Year	Player	Club
2018	Fran Kirby	Chelsea
2019	Nikita Parris	Man City
2020	Vivianne Miedema	Arsenal
2021	Fran Kirby	Chelsea
2022	Sam Kerr	Chelsea
2023	Sam Kerr	Chelsea

Sport Football

Allardyce can prove winning will

Much-maligned coach will be looking to settle old scores and show he deserves his big shot, writes **Martin Hardy**

There is an enduring image of Sam Allardyce standing in the technical area at St James' Park as the manager of Newcastle United with furious fans a few feet away screaming abuse at him.

It was just the 11th Premier League game of his reign at the club and Newcastle trailed 3-0 against Portsmouth after 11 minutes. Whatever displeasure there had been at the appointment of Allardyce on May 15, 2007 was vented then. There would be ten more games, five more defeats and, with Newcastle 11th and having taken 26 points from 21 games, he was sacked.

"The football was difficult and that was definitely the feedback from some senior players as well," a source from the club at the time revealed. "There was nothing personal to Sam but Mike [Ashley] wanted him to go earlier. He said he didn't like the style of football."

Ashley had bought Sir John Hall's majority stake in Newcastle eight days after Allardyce's appointment. "The Newcastle job is impossible to

turn down but, believe me, it's also an impossible job to do," Allardyce would say in a newspaper column after his dismissal.

"It was our best start in something like a decade but everything turned on the 4-1 home defeat by Portsmouth on November 3. From then on it was hostile at St James' Park. Up to that point everything had been rosy in the camp. I have to be careful blowing my own trumpet but... if I was given the funds to sign the players that club is able to attract then I believe I could have done what Sir Bobby Robson did and taken them into the Champions League."

Allardyce was more sanguine on Thursday as he delved into the past, but there is still bitterness. After his surprise appointment as

Leeds United's manager with four games remaining this season, he bemoaned the fact he had not been given the chance at a major club, from the start, rather than the firefighting role he has come to specialise in.

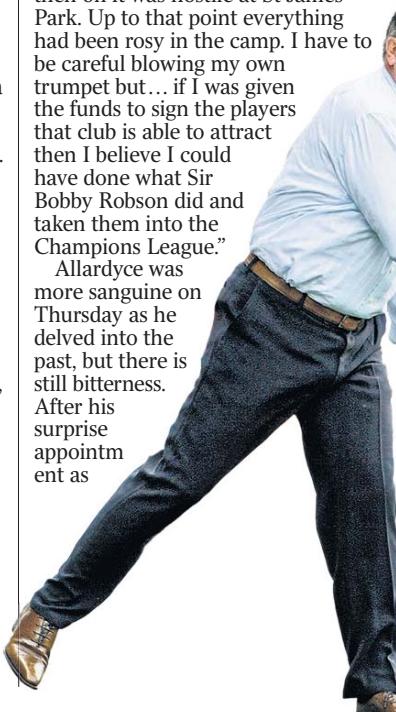
He was asked if his sacking at Newcastle provided extra motivation, with Leeds fighting for their Premier League future and Newcastle on the cusp of the Champions League qualification he had hoped to achieve. "It's a long time ago," he said. "Was I disappointed? Yes. It

was a massive knockback but, as always, I recover and move on... but it was a blow to my career."

It will add extra spice to today's lunchtime game against Newcastle. Allardyce had returned to management with Sunderland and help to relegate Newcastle in 2016, but the stylistic question, the appreciation of fans, is one that haunts and troubles him.

At Newcastle, the players privately complained about the desire for huge kicks from their goalkeepers. The focus in training was on playing out of possession until a player one day asked what the plan was when they

Allardyce landed Newcastle job in 2007 after impressing at Bolton Wanderers



Twitter parody puts Tindall in the spotlight for eager post-match handshaking

The Newcastle assistant manager Jason Tindall has a parody Twitter account mocking what it suggests is his desire to be the centre of attention. The account – titled "Jason Tindall

ARSENAL'S TURN TO CHASE



Tomorrow 4pm



never go out of style

RICHARD SELLERS/ALLSTAR/GETTY IMAGES

Social media users have noticed that Tindall, left, tends to shake rival managers' hands before Howe



"desperate to be centre of attention" — has 43,000 followers and highlights Tindall's apparent desire to shake hands with rival managers before head coach Eddie Howe after a game.

actually had the ball. His time in charge at West Ham United did not quite end in such hostile fashion, but when the club left Upton Park for their shiny new world at the London Stadium, they left the old manager behind after four years in charge. Fans again talked of a lack of an attractive playing style as the club finished 10th, 13th and 12th.

The danger of writing off an older manager has been clearly demonstrated this season but fail to pick up anything from the next two games and Leeds' Premier League status will likely be over and, at 68, that may be the curtain call for one of English football's larger characters.

The beginning of the end for Allardyce's predecessor at Leeds, Javi Gracia, came with a 5-1 defeat by Crystal Palace under their newly installed 75-year-old manager Roy Hodgson. There is a flip side for Allardyce of course, perhaps inspired by Hodgson; win his next two matches against his former clubs whose fans turned against him and he could pull off his greatest escape — and Leeds might be tempted to leave him in charge of a genuine big club.

Newcastle are overwhelming favourites. They have won on six of their past ten visits to Elland Road,

and then there is Allardyce's managerial run that has hardly been mentioned: he has lost his past five matches in charge of Leeds and West Bromwich Albion, his previous club. Not since West Brom beat Southampton on April 21, 2021 has he enjoyed a victory.

The next four games for Newcastle will be transformative if they qualify for Europe's top competition. Allied to major increases in facility fees (the number of live appearances) and their merit payment, it will potentially add £100 million to the club's turnover.

Alongside that is the soaring popularity of the Newcastle manager Eddie Howe among the fans, a contrast to Allardyce's time at the club.

"I don't sit there and think, how can I entertain the fans," Howe said. "You sit there and think how can we win this game but at the same time you want to produce a good product for the supporters. The style I like is entertaining, attacking, looking to score, not possession necessarily for possession's sake. Flair players who are capable of doing the unexpected. All these things are embedded in Newcastle's history. You have to understand the history of what the supporters want to see."

Moyes finally admits Rice is likely to leave

Russell Harris

David Moyes has finally admitted that Declan Rice is likely to leave West Ham United this summer.

Rice has been heavily linked with a move to Arsenal, although West Ham have placed a prohibitively high price tag of £100-£120 million on their captain. Chelsea, Manchester United and Liverpool are also monitoring the England midfielder, 24, who will have one year remaining on his contract this summer and has ambitions to play in the Champions League.

West Ham, who could qualify for the Europa League next season by winning the Europa Conference League, have the option of extending that contract by another year, but behind closed doors they are resigned to losing him. Moyes, the West Ham manager, said on Friday that the likelihood of Rice — who turned down a lucrative new contract 18 months ago — moving on is making it difficult to plan for next season.

"We honestly hope he stays," Moyes said. "We'd love for him to be a West Ham player but we are aware that might not be the case at the end of the season.

"So that's one of the scenarios around planning. There are plans that we have Dec here but we're also fully aware there is a good chance we won't have him."

Moyes has also been unable to formulate plans for next season while West Ham's Premier League status remains unclear, although Sunday's win over Manchester United all but ensured their Premier League safety.

"The planning has been on the back burner," the Scot said. "It's always been about making sure you're a Premier League club. Your planning will go completely if you weren't. A lot of it will only start to go into place once we've realised we have kept our Premier League place.

"We're watching a lot of players, a lot of games, doing a lot of scouting, but truth is the focus has been on staying in the Premier League. We brought in a big number of players last summer so I see this summer more as tinkering and bits and pieces being done here and there. I see a change here or there and an addition or two."

Rice is set to be rested when West Ham travel to Brentford on Sunday, with one eye on the second leg of their Europa Conference League semi-final against AZ Alkmaar, who they beat 2-1 at the London Stadium on Thursday. Jarrod Bowen and Michail Antonio, who was limping after the Alkmaar match, are also expected to be given the afternoon off.

"We are still assessing a lot of players, we are less than 24 hours from the [Alkmaar] game," Moyes said. "There are obviously knocks and bruises but I am hoping Michail is not too bad."

ALSO SHOWING



Tomorrow 1pm



Monday 6.30pm



Thursday 7pm

sky sports

£18

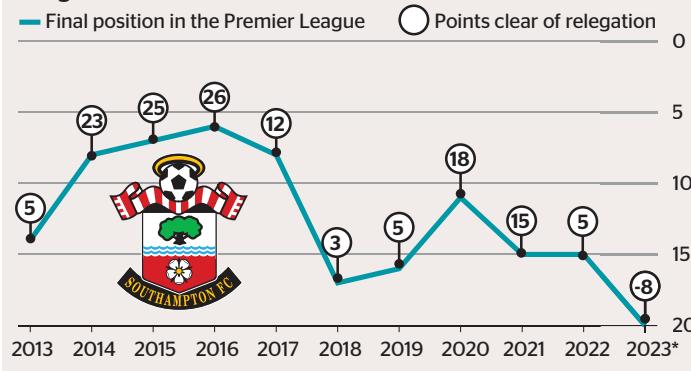
**EXTRA A MONTH
with Sky Q subscription
CANCEL ANYTIME**

Q 'Get Sky Sports'

Sport Football

Southampton's eleven years in the Premier League

League finishes



Southampton's spending

Season	Spent (£m)	Sales (£m)	Profit/loss (£m)
2012-2013	36	0	-36
2013-2014	35	4	-31
2014-2015	84	108	24
2015-2016	52	46	-6
2016-2017	60	74	14
2017-2018	53	86	32
2018-2019	54	23	-32
2019-2020	54	24	-30
2020-2021	33	23	-10
2021-2022	38	53	15
2022-2023	125	5	-120



Southampton's PL managers

Manager	Years in PL	Games	Win %
Nigel Adkins	2012-2013	22	23
Mauricio Pochettino	2013-2014	54	35
Ronald Koeman	2014-2016	76	47
Claude Puel	2016-2017	38	32
Mauricio Pellegrino	2017-2018	30	17
Mark Hughes	2018	32	9
Ralph Hasenhüttl	2018-2022	152	31
Nathan Jones	2022-2023	8	13
Ruben Selles	2023-	13	15

Most assists



Most goals

Ward-Prowse	48
Danny Ings	41
Shane Long	28
Rickie Lambert	28
Jay Rodriguez	26

Most appearances

Ward-Prowse	340
Oriol Romeu	217
Ryan Bertrand	214
Shane Long	198
Nathan Redmond	198

Arrogant Southampton's self-sabotage

Factions, dithering and a flawed policy – club will have themselves to blame if they go down, says **Tom Allnutt**

There was a time not long ago when Southampton were the envy of both ends of the Premier League, a model of best practice for teams at the bottom and a shining example of how to scout and sign for those at the top.

It was the days of Mauricio Pochettino and Sadio Mané, of Luke Shaw and Virgil van Dijk, when the club's "black box" was overflowing with scouting data that nobody else had and their blend of smart recruits and academy graduates was seeing off Inter Milan and winning at Anfield, the Emirates and Old Trafford.

If Southampton fail to win at home to Fulham today, they will be relegated, club no longer represent a paragon of excellence but a cautionary tale, a warning for how quickly things can unravel.

Southampton were rarely blown away this season, their demise far from inevitable. For a team who have been bottom of the table since March, they are not last in the Premier League for goals scored or goals conceded, for shots taken or passes

made. Their form at St Mary's has been miserable, but away they are only the fifth-worst in the division and have lost by a single goal more than by any other margin. They are a team cut adrift but not out of their depth.

A key problem was the lack of harmony and cohesion, with senior players growing disillusioned with the cliques that had formed. Some saw the divide as generational, the result of a team made up of youngsters and veterans, with little in between. Others believed factions were based more on culture and language, with an African and French-speaking group viewed as removed.

Either way, there was a disconnect between the old guard and the new, about how a Premier League team should operate. Poor punctuality was a source of tension, as was a lack of attentiveness in team meetings. Some of the younger players were accused of complacency.

They were told they thought they had made it by playing for a Premier League club and were now letting their standards slip. The decision to target youth and potential, instead of proven performers, had been a conscious one. Rasmus Ankersen and Henrik Kraft, the co-founders of

Sport Republic, who acquired a controlling stake in Southampton in January 2022, told staff there was a gap in the market for clubs prepared to take risks on players who others believed were not ready. It was a sporting strategy with financial motivation. Youngsters would flourish and mature. They would benefit the team before being sold at a profit.

Southampton took that policy to its extreme. Instead of cosseting youth with experience, they removed experience and bought even younger. Of the ten players that arrived last summer, Joe Aribo was the oldest at 25. To some, the splurge on potential was a risk. To others, it smacked of arrogance. "They thought anything they touched would turn to gold," says a source close to the dressing room. "They believed they could bring in whoever they wanted and they would be a superstar. You bring in a load of kids who don't know what the levels are — it's going to be a disaster."

Roméo Lavia was one of the few that delivered and he could be sold for at least £40 million this summer. Relegation will cost Southampton

more than double that. Regardless of age, players noted a lack of cohesion between recruitment and coaching departments about which arrivals needed time to adapt. There even appeared to be a lack of knowledge and trust in new signings.

And a lack of leadership made it harder for players to gel. Fraser Forster, Shane Long and Nathan Redmond left on free transfers last summer, a year after Danny Ings was sold to Aston Villa and Ryan Bertrand joined Leicester City. The year before that, Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg went to Tottenham. The exodus of experience left a vacuum that needed filling last summer. Instead, they doubled down, letting Oriol Romeu, another highly respected figure, join Girona.

By the time Romeu left, the grumbling about Ralph Hasenhüttl was getting louder again. Some players had made it clear they wanted him gone at the end of last season but three members of his coaching team were dismissed instead. Rubén Sellés, who came in as an assistant, led the first two weeks of pre-season training and the atmosphere improved. Yet the appreciation for Sellés magnified the disappointment when Hasenhüttl returned and within three months, he was sacked.

The biggest failing was in the timing. Hasenhüttl had done good work during his four years but if he had left in the summer, a replacement would have had space to implement his ideas. Roberto De Zerbi, who was available after leaving Shakhtar

Donetsk, was among those discussed. The World Cup offered the board an excuse to delay, with the mid-season break seen as a useful juncture when they could look again at Hasenhüttl's position. It was an excuse to dither when decisive action was needed.

By the time Hasenhüttl was sacked in November, De Zerbi had been snapped up by Brighton & Hove Albion and Southampton lurched to Luton Town's Nathan Jones, whose direct style of play and confrontational personality was an awkward fit for a young squad, honed in the ways of pressing. His lack of pedigree raised doubts too. Here, the board were putting a relegation-threatened side in the hands of an unproven coach.

For all his antics in public, Jones was not unpopular with the players. There was a belief he could have been successful if he had been given a summer to bed in. The failing was in the timing and so it proved again with Sellés, who could have offered a smoother transition after Hasenhüttl.

Sellés's interest in the academy, his eye for detail and his desire to make changes for the long term all pointed to a coach suited for building, not fire-fighting. There were signs of improvement but all too little, too late. Every step of the way, Southampton were a step behind. Another squad, with a different dynamic, might have muddled through, but for this youthful team, instability proved a disaster. Southampton were so fixated on the next, they forgot about the now. Today, it catches up with them.



Sellés is a coach far more suited for building, not fire-fighting

Saudis believe dream of being megapower not built on sand

Emirate has bottomless well of resources and a population of avid fans to avoid fate of China, writes **Tom Kershaw**

The great wall of hysteria greeted the Chinese Super League's sudden and seemingly irrepressible spending in December 2016. More than £300 million was splurged in one transfer window, the most remarkable move bringing the Brazil midfielder Oscar from the periphery at Chelsea to headline a fleet of otherwise fading stars, and that ripple threatened to become a flood. Alex Teixeira chose Jiangsu Suning over Liverpool. Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale and Wayne Rooney were all genuine targets. The ambition was unbridled, the numbers unfathomable. Even Sky Sports were seduced by the hype and agreed a three-season broadcast deal.

Not long after that contract had expired, Jiangsu Suning ceased operations. Others soon folded, unable to sustain the exorbitant salaries, and big companies that had invested in football were left saddled with debt. President Xi Jinping's grand plan to turn China into a football superpower, which included making the sport part of the school curriculum, transforming its national team and hosting a World Cup, had fallen victim to its own excess. The boom went bust, the top players fled, and allegations of corruption soon took their place.

The likenesses to Saudi Arabia's sporting takeover are clear. A steady recruitment of foreign players, from Brazil and northern Africa, has accelerated into a fervent pursuit of the world's most recognisable stars. Ronaldo seemed like the coup de grâce, at least until signing Lionel Messi this summer became realistic. Other ageing but decorated names, such as Sergio Busquets, Sergio Ramos and Luka Modric, have been the subject of firm interest. It is the frenzy of China's 2016 on steroids — or oil — with much the same goals in mind, but carried out with the confidence and backing that the bubble cannot be burst.

"The big difference here with China and MLS [America] is they were countries that were new to football," says a source close to the Saudi Pro League (SPL). "It's not like we're starting from scratch. We have a massive, young population for whom football is the No 1 sport. There's an existing structure, a league, a pedigree."

Although it may often be obscured by Saudi Arabia's overarching

motives, that much is indisputable. Al Ittihad, the oldest club in the Saudi Pro League, was founded in Jeddah in 1927, and when they face Riyadh rivals Al Hilal the attendance can exceed 50,000. The national team's victory against Argentina was an astonishing upset, but Saudi Arabia have appeared at four of the past six World Cups. There is already a genuine football culture and a restless population that can be both inspired and placated by the presence of icons like Ronaldo.

"This is not a dream built on sand, there is substance to it," says Simon Chadwick, a professor of sport and geopolitical economy at Skema Business School. "I think Saudi Arabia realises it hasn't been punching its weight in football terms. Ronaldo is almost like a legacy signing that will develop the medium and long-term future."

For all that those internal benefits are of value to an absolute monarchy, it hardly needs pointing out that the prospect of tripling Hugo Lloris's salary to £300,000 a week has immediate benefits that stretch beyond Saudi Arabia's borders. "It's about visibility and legitimacy," Chadwick says. "They're signalling to the market that they are prepared to trade in top talent and become a realistic destination for players, which can attract inward investment.

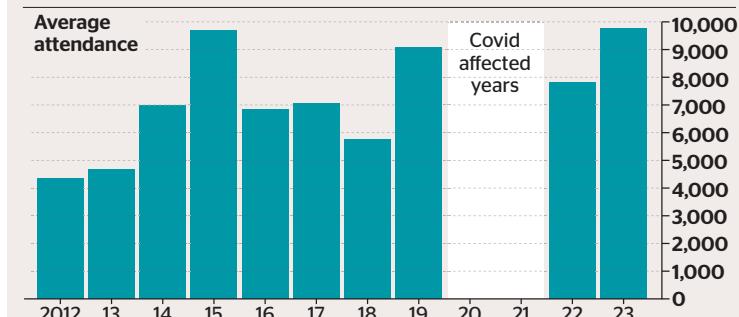
Football is powerful. It can shape and change people's attitudes and perceptions."

What underpins those goals, and makes Saudi Arabia sturdier than China, is an essentially bottomless well of resources — and a safety net. In 2018, when poorly run SPL clubs



Oscar, inset, and Ronaldo accepted deals in China and Saudi Arabia respectively

Attendances in Saudi Pro League



were struggling financially, Mohammed bin Salman intervened and personally wrote off \$340 million in debts. With the state's backing, it has been rumoured that as many as 50 players could join the SPL from Europe this summer in a LIV Golf-style blitz that further distorts the market, but sources in Saudi Arabia insist their focus is on "two or three big-name acquisitions".

Messi, who is already a Saudi tourism ambassador, is inevitably chief among them and has reportedly been offered a contract worth £350 million. It is an outrageous figure, but the value of reuniting him with Ronaldo is not just seen as vital to attracting external sponsors and broadcast deals, but pivotal to Saudi Arabia's expected bid to host the 2030 World Cup. Voting takes place next year, and Chadwick suggests Messi and Ronaldo will be instrumental in securing support.

"It won't change how European nations vote," he says, with the majority expected to back a joint Spain-Portugal-Morocco bid, "but if you send Ronaldo to Angola or Messi

to Kenya as your ambassador, for example, it can have a considerable impact on the voting intentions of Fifa members."

Officials in Saudi Arabia will have watched the global attention on Qatar in November with envy, regardless of the coverage not being entirely positive. There is a concerted effort to attract new visitors, and precious few events have the global reach or ability to draw live audiences quite like a World Cup. It is the ultimate prize in a grand plan that bears echoes of China's. Time will tell if it too gets swept up in the allure of that illusion or if, in this case, it is simply too big to fail.

"Europe remains the industrial heartland of football," Chadwick says. "But Saudi Arabia already sees itself as a rival to South America and the USA, and superior to other countries in Asia and Africa. They want much better teams in 2030 and beyond. They want the national team to improve in the rankings. I don't think what we're seeing is just largesse. It won't simply be a retirement home. They want long-term sustainability."

Messi-free La Liga glory beckons for Barcelona

Ian Hawkey

Having spent most of his working life doing as Pep Guardiola did, Xavi Hernández notices the moments of divergence. His career as a Guardiola-like midfielder for Barcelona turned out to be far more successful than his mentor's. As a manager, he is about to seize, as Guardiola did, a La Liga title in his first full season in charge of Barcelona. But there are notable deviations: there is no Lionel Messi, for a start. For that alone, Barcelona's first Messi-free league title since 2000 was always going to be a triumph of pragmatism over purity.

That is not to say that Xavi's side — who could become Spanish champions today if their two distant pursuers, Real Madrid and Atlético Madrid, both drop points; otherwise they can seal the title at Espanyol tomorrow — are a dull watch. But their first La Liga title since 2019 would be more about how agile Xavi has been in making compromises. He has quickly integrated a clutch of medalled veterans from elsewhere, man-managed academy graduates and dealt with ex-team-mates, older heads who knew Xavi as a buddy not a boss.

That was the easy bit. Barcelona's title will be won in the foreground of a mountain of debt, from which rubble falls towards Xavi's office almost daily. So tight were the accounts that Barcelona needed to present to meet La Liga's Financial Fair Play rules in August that Jules Koundé, a €50 million (£43.5 million) recruit, could not be registered for the season's opener, pending someone being removed from the wage bill.

Long-serving, high-waged players, several of whom Xavi captained at Barcelona, felt relationships strain. Gerard Piqué retired abruptly, Jordi Alba's left-back spot came under threat from the 19-year-old Alex Balde and Sergio Busquets will leave next month, to Xavi's disappointment, after 15 years commanding the base of midfield.

Busquets, 34, takes some credit for the standout feature of Barcelona's season: they have conceded a mere 11 goals in 33 league matches. They are set to eclipse the meanest defence in a major European 20-team league of the past 20 years. That was Chelsea in 2004-05 under José Mourinho, whose crabby tactics Xavi the player used to criticise, a little piously.

Xavi the manager finds himself caricatured as a Mourinhista as often as a Guardiolista. Barcelona's favourite scoreline closing in on the league title? 1-0. When they went to Real Madrid and eked out a backs-to-the-wall 1-0 victory with 35 per cent possession in the first leg of their Copa del Rey semi-final, Xavi was reminded of his purist, keep-ball manifesto. "It wasn't the plan, which is to be dominant in the position half of the pitch," he pleaded. "But it was an important win." Once Madrid routed Barcelona 4-0 in the second leg at the Nou Camp, it wasn't a win at all.

Real have outscored Barcelona in the league. Take away Robert Lewandowski's tally of 19 goals, and Girona, Villarreal, Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao would be outscoring the champions-elect. The Pole, 34, has proved a crucial lever. Likewise Marc-André ter Stegen, the long-serving goalkeeper whose fifth La Liga triumph will have his gloveprints on it more than any other. It will be his first in a Barcelona team where he could dare call himself the key man. Before, that man was always Messi.



Messi is a Saudi tourism ambassador

Sport Football

Forget errors - Lloris and De Gea are true greats

James Gheerbrant



In the summer of 2011, Manchester United signed a young Spanish goalkeeper called David de Gea. The next summer, he was joined in England by Hugo Lloris, the new recruit of Tottenham Hotspur. Neither looked especially steely: De Gea's fuzzy frieze of beard framed his oval face like a Tommy's chinstrap, and the No 1 jersey bequeathed by Edwin van der Sar seemed to swamp his skinny frame. Lloris, a banker's son from the Côte d'Azur, looked like what would result if you asked an advanced AI programme to generate an image of the ideal son-in-law. They didn't seem set fair to haunt a generation of strikers.

In their first seasons, both dropped a few balls, and caught a lot of flak. Pundits wondered loudly whether they were cut out for English football, especially in De Gea's case. But the pundits were wrong, and De Gea's youth coach at Atlético Madrid, Ángel Mejías, who memorably described him as "cold as a wolf", was right. The Spaniard grew into probably Manchester United's finest player of the post-Sir Alex Ferguson era, winning the club's player of the season award four times (Bruno Fernandes is the only other player to win even twice in that period).

Among active Premier League players, he ranks fourth for top-flight appearances; Lloris, who has been one of the three world-class pillars of this Tottenham team, along with Harry Kane and Son Heung-min, is just behind him in sixth. They are first and second among overseas players. But now, in the autumn of their careers, they are at a crossroads. Lloris's contract expires next year and

Tottenham are looking to sign his long-term successor this summer. De Gea seems likelier to stay in England, but after a nightmarish month in which his errors cost United a Europa League quarter-final against Sevilla and a league game against West Ham United, he has been given no assurances that he will remain United's No1. After more than a decade of service, two of the finest goalkeepers of the Premier League era are reaching the end.

It's worth putting a number on just how good they have been. The "goals prevented" metric, which aims to quantify the value of a goalkeeper's shot-stopping by comparing their actual performance with an expected-goals value based on the placement of the shots on target they face, estimates that between them, De Gea and Lloris have prevented 87 goals over the course of their Premier League careers.

In that truth, the double impact of a great goalkeeper is implicit. What we see is the brilliance of their saves, the marvel of their athleticism, the victories clawed from the maw of defeat. But lying beneath that, like a photographic negative, there is also the effect on their opponents: the goals that never were, the destinies altered, the strikers whose careers might have been different had it not been for the fateful brush of a gloved hand, reaching into their story and diverting its course. A goalkeeper's legacy is not only spectacular, but tentacular.

This season, De Gea and Lloris are in negative numbers for goals prevented. Partly, this is simply a case of two great 'keepers getting older, time dulling their sharp reflexes, but



Lloris won the 2018 World Cup and got to the final with France in 2022

Among active players De Gea ranks fourth for top-flight appearances

their obsolescence has also been accelerated by a fundamental change in the nature of their position. We're not quite in the same territory as Mesut Ozil, a player the game left behind almost from the moment he arrived in England; De Gea and Lloris have enjoyed a far longer period of peak performance and relevance. But goalkeeping has changed enormously since they arrived 12 and 11 years ago, with Pep Guardiola's binning of Joe Hart for Ederson the pivotal catalyst moment.

No man is an island on the football field, but the goalkeeper was once the nearest thing. In the 2012-13 season, Lloris's first in England, De Gea's second, goalkeepers completed their passes at a rate of 52.2 per cent and were largely disconnected from the architecture of the team; this season, that figure is 67.1 per cent. Ederson and Alisson are pushing 85 per cent, and 'keepers have never been more important in build-up. The long punt feels as quaint as air freight in a world of infinite connectivity. De Gea and Lloris are by no means bad with the ball at their feet, but at this rarefied level, they are just maladroit enough to be exposed by the unforgiving, eye-

of-a-needle margins of the modern game.

Pan out, allow the individual mistakes to be lost in the long sweep of excellence, and it seems clear that De Gea and Lloris will go down as great players with unusually unfulfilled club careers. De Gea has never played in even a Champions League semi-final; Lloris hasn't won a club trophy since the 2012 Coupe de France. Their best years were given to their club's fallow years. It's tempting to see that as a waste, a travesty. Famously, it was only the caprice of a temperamental fax machine that stopped De Gea moving to Real Madrid in the summer of 2015, before the last four of their Champions League titles. Imagine, it's only natural to think, if he had.

But it is not only for the accumulation of medals, the enrichment of their own legacy, that footballers compete. And perhaps such plangent counterfactuals ignore the unique psyche of the position. At heart, the goalkeeper's vocation is one of custodianship, safe-keeping, forestalling disaster rather than chasing glory. De Gea's *raison d'être*, the purpose of his prime, might have

been to keep Florentino Pérez's gleaming white superyacht in a state of utmost spotlessness. Instead, his talent was spent in preventing a grand old ship from running aground. Who's to say that was a lesser use of his gifts? Maybe Lloris found more fulfilment in Tottenham's quest than he would have done collecting garlands elsewhere.

Through all the tribulations of their role, both have always remained steady, level-headed, fine ambassadors for the sport. It's still amazing to me to look back on the calm, unruffled eloquence with which De Gea dealt with the blizzard of criticism that enveloped him in his first season, when he was 21, newly arrived in a foreign country and getting pelted from everyone.

"All 'keepers make mistakes once in a while and none of us like it when we do," he said after one error had prompted a round of inquisition. "I have every intention of spending many years here at Manchester United. I want to become a great United 'keeper and I want to earn the respect I hope to get." He made good on that vow, and then some.

Spurs rule out appointing Nagelsmann

Tom Allnutt

Tottenham Hotspur are no longer considering Julian Nagelsmann to be the club's next permanent manager.

Nagelsmann emerged as the preferred choice for Spurs after the German was sacked by Bayern Munich shortly after the departure of Antonio Conte in March. But sources at Tottenham said yesterday that while the club had "great respect" for Nagelsmann, he was out of the running for the role.

Ruling Nagelsmann out will come as

a disappointment to Spurs supporters, particularly with the club deciding to overlook their former manager Mauricio Pochettino for the post. Pochettino is expected to take over at Chelsea instead and Nagelsmann would have been an exciting alternative to re-energise the fans.

Tottenham were always aware of the financial difficulties in appointing Nagelsmann and have been keeping their options open as they look for a young and up-and-coming coach, in the mould of Pochettino when he took charge at White Hart Lane in 2014.

Sporting Lisbon's Rúben Amorim has been contacted and would be interested in the role at the end of the season. Brighton & Hove Albion's Roberto De Zerbi and Arne Slot, of Feyenoord, are also of interest while Bayer Leverkusen's Xabi Alonso has emerged as a possible candidate since the resignation of Fabio Paratici as Tottenham's managing director of football.

Ryan Mason, who took over from Cristian Stellini as interim manager last month, has expressed his interest in taking the job on permanently.

Ineos bid in pole position

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

stake from a number of American investment firms representing the only alternative.

The serious bidders were invited for meetings at Old Trafford and the club's training ground at Carrington, after which two more rounds of bidding followed.

Now, however, the identity of a preferred bidder could be announced within the next few days, with Ratcliffe and his Ineos colleagues seemingly in pole position going into the final stages of what has been a six-month process.

Sport

From a 'blank canvas' to Double dreams – how United joined elite

Tilt at the Double is reward for shrewd planning and sacrifice of club's 'originals', writes **Molly Hudson**

Manchester United were not going to make a quiet entrance into the women's game. Their first match in the women's Championship, the second tier of women's football, was a 12-0 thrashing of Aston Villa.

It sent shockwaves through the sport — a professional team backed by their men's club, entering into a semi-professional league that often was watched by only a few hundred fans, did not sit well with many.

Yet those building blocks, on which United won the Championship with a goal difference of plus-91, have meant that five years on, they are battling for a league and cup double. On Sunday they will face Chelsea in the FA Cup final at a sold-out Wembley Stadium.

"It's a bit surreal to be honest, from being at Leigh with some girls that have never played full-time...to competing for the double, it's almost immeasurable," Katie Zelem, the Manchester United captain, said. "If in another five years we're that far advanced then Manchester United will certainly be one of the biggest teams in Europe."

Zelem is one of the four "originals", as she describes it, part of the first professional United team, unveiled with significant fanfare, in the summer of 2018. Despite having hefty financial backing, recruiting that first squad was trickier than it may initially sound.

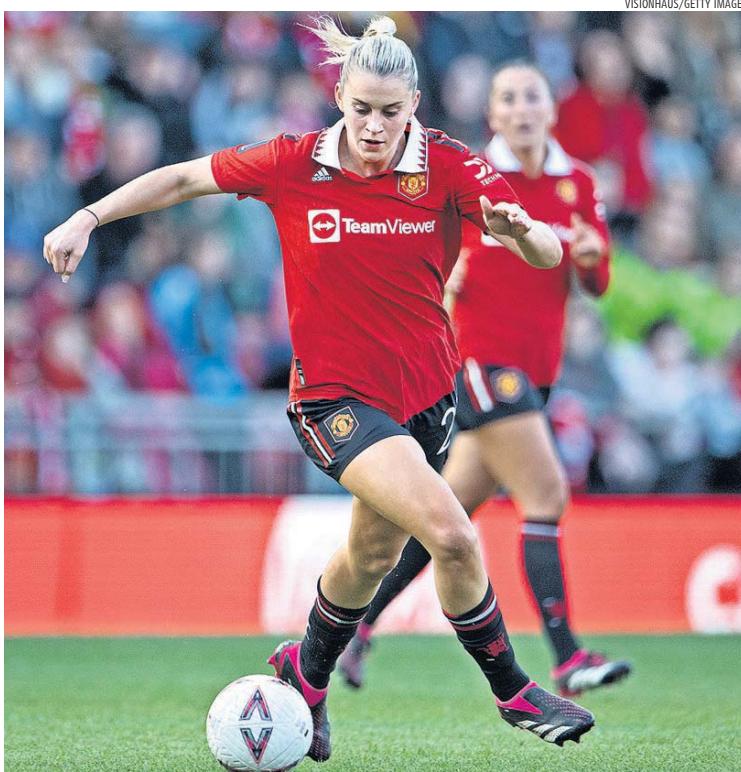
United could not simply cherry-pick the world's best players — first they had to convince new recruits they were serious about their women's team, given they were decades behind leading sides such as Arsenal. For years, United had a successful academy but no senior team for their best talents to go to.

Then they needed to find players with the potential to play for United in the Women's Super League, but who were also willing to endure a season in the Championship. The "originals" — Zelem, Leah Galton, Ella Toone and Millie Turner — perfectly fitted that mould. "For me, it was my childhood club but I'd just won the league and got into the Champions League at Juventus so it was a huge gamble for me to come back and play in the Championship," Zelem explained. "I actually did an interview with Leah [Galton] and she'd stopped playing football completely, so everyone was in really different circumstances."

United were unacquainted with the demands of running a professional women's team, and quickly identified that if they were to be successful, they would need experience.

They found it in the head coach Casey Stoney, the 130-cap England defender. "It was going to be a blank canvas, and I was going to get to build this club from the bottom up," Stoney said, when asked why she applied for the role. "They knew that I knew women's football better than they did, and they just supported me through that process."

The return of the likes of Zelem was an important step to show academy prospects there was a route to first-team football. Zelem had joined United



VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES

Russo was the subject of a world-record bid from Arsenal but United's progress has been such that they now regard them as rivals and felt able to turn it down



when she was eight, and used to be a flag bearer on Champions League nights but, back then, that was as close as she could get to Old Trafford given the lack of a senior team.

Promotion was swiftly secured to the WSL — the real test of the team that Stoney had been tasked with building. Their first season in the top flight in 2019–20 was a relative success, as they finished in fourth position, but 13 points separated them and the top three of Chelsea, Manchester City and Arsenal.

There was a feeling United were lacking experience and leadership, and the signing of the US internationals Tobin Heath and Christen Press brought proven winners. It also drove commercial interest — in the first three days of their shirts being on sale, they outsold any of their male counterparts.

Those signings were glamorous, but the conditions that they were training in were not. Having made a temporary switch from training in Leigh to Carrington, the men's training ground, the area they were using was sub-standard.

Players were unable to shower in between training and meals before makeshift portacabins were installed, and gym facilities were in a tented facility. It was understood to be a contributing factor to Stoney's surprise resignation at the end of the 2020–21 season.

Chelsea v Manchester Utd

Women's FA Cup final
Wembley
Tomorrow, 2.30pm
TV: BBC One/iPlayer



SPORT NOTEBOOK

Martyn Ziegler
Chief Sports Reporter



Welsh throw millions at Wrexham's Hollywood pair

Wrexham's Hollywood owners are to benefit by public funding to renovate the Racecourse Ground to the tune of £17 million — four times the sum they paid to buy the club and stadium.

The cash is coming from the Welsh government via the local authority and will mean the stadium's capacity is boosted from 10,500 to 16,000, perfectly timed for their return to the EFL.

Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, inset, bought Wrexham in 2020 for £2 million, and secured the stadium for a similar sum, before bankrolling the journey back to League status and helping the club to become a global phenomenon via the

documentary series *Welcome to Wrexham*.

Public funding for football clubs is nothing new, but it appears to be particularly generous in Wales — Cardiff City received significant investment from the city council, while Swansea's Liberty Stadium is council-owned.

The Wrexham money has been agreed on the basis that it will allow Wales to play internationals at the Racecourse Ground again — the last competitive men's match at the ground was 15 years ago.

Wales's match against Gibraltar in October has been lined up as the first international in the renovated ground.



Webb to blow whistle on VAR

Audio of discussions between referees and VARs will be made public for the first time on Monday when referees chief Howard Webb takes part in a pilot show to discuss "key decisions" from the season.

Webb will take part in Sky's *Monday Night Football* (MNF) alongside Jamie Carragher and Gary Neville — which starts at the earlier time of 6.30pm. He will also talk through the incidents for a Premier League Productions

programme aimed at international audiences, alongside Michael Owen. The referees body, PGMOL, is keeping schtum on which incidents will be dissected, but given the confusing state of the handball law, they could do worse than look at a couple of those. Two handball decisions which went against West Ham United recently, involving Manchester United's Victor Lindelof and the Liverpool midfielder Thiago, look baffling.

Webb had a similar programme in the US when he was head of refereeing in the MLS, and if it is deemed a success there will be more such shows as the PGMOL tries to increase transparency around its operations.

Damian Collins MP is hoping to win back his chairmanship of the digital, culture, media and sport select committee at next week's election.

Collins had chaired the committee during several important investigations, including one into the British Cycling/Team Sky doping scandal, but lost the chairmanship soon after Dominic Cummings became Boris Johnson's senior adviser in No 10.

Collins had been instrumental in Cummings being declared in contempt of Parliament after he refused to give evidence to the committee inquiry into fake news before the Brexit referendum.

The suspicion is that once Cummings gained a position of power, he worked to get Collins replaced by Julian Knight.

Two other Tory MPs have also declared they are standing: Caroline Dinenage and Damian Green.

Chelsea looking to hire a spook

Chelsea's latest recruitment opportunities include one job advert for a "spook" to identify threats to the club.

The range of jobs on offer at the club includes an "Investigative Intelligence Researcher". The job, says the club's website, is "to support the security department's investigative functions by researching and analysing an array of information from open source, social media and company software systems to identify specific threats to the club's operations".

Wright decision

There will be a father-and-son punditry team for the first time on *Match of the Day* this evening.

Ian Wright and Shaun Wright-Phillips will join Gary Lineker in the studio to review highlights from the Premier League fixtures — the programme has been moved to 10pm on BBC2 to accommodate the Eurovision final on BCB1, which is taking place in Liverpool.

Sport EFL play-offs

Coventry set sights on most incredible promotion of all

Club have reached play-offs under Mark Robins despite threat of homelessness, writes **Gregor Robertson**

The last time Coventry City hosted Middlesbrough, back in October, the very notion that the two clubs would be meeting in the Sky Bet Championship play-offs seven months on would have been strictly for the birds.

Five defeats in a seven-game winless start, which included the postponement of their first few home games because of a pitch deemed too dangerous to play on, meant Coventry began and ended the day bottom.

Coventry's 1-0 win, thanks to Viktor Gyokeres's early strike, continued a

miserable start for Middlesbrough that yielded only two wins from 11 games. Two days later, it cost the manager, Chris Wilder, his job.

The rearrangement of Coventry's opening three home fixtures — after 65 rugby sevens games on the surface in the space of three days in July, as part of Birmingham's hosting of the Commonwealth Games — in a packed calendar, still rankles with Mark Robins.

"It still annoys me to this day," the Coventry manager says. "It hampered us, stifled the season. We just couldn't get going. But that's over, it's done. I think we would have picked up a few more points, which would have got us in the play-offs a bit earlier. But ultimately it's been a brilliant turnaround."

Middlesbrough's transformation under Michael Carrick has been just as remarkable. Wilder's withering assessment of the club's promotion credentials after a difficult summer transfer window did little for squad morale and

so Carrick's unwavering positivity, his air of calm authority, has been a perfect tonic.

The former Manchester United midfielder's tactical tweaks, and revival of confidence-hit players, prompted a run of 16 wins from his first 22 league games to climb into the play-off positions by January, in what was the best start of any manager in the club's history.

"From the first day we believed things could change under the gaffer," Darragh Lenihan, the Middlesbrough defender, said. "[Nottingham] Forest were in a similar situation last season, probably worse off, and they went up. We weren't in too great a position when he came but he's transformed us. For his first full-time managerial job, he's been unbelievable."

Moving the previously frozen out Chuba Akpom from his position as a striker to No 10 has been inspired. The former Arsenal youth player, whose 28 Championship goals earned him the division's player of the year award, is the first Middlesbrough player to score 20 league goals in a season since 1990.

Another striker, Marcus Forss, has been converted to a right-sided forward to great effect. The forward Cameron Archer, who joined on loan from Aston Villa in January, has been the only key addition to Carrick's fluid and free-scoring side.

With Luton Town's rise from the National League and a youthful Sunderland's renaissance under Tony Mowbray completing the play-off picture, this year's battle for promotion is blessed with plot lines.

Yet what Coventry and Robins have already achieved, in the face of unprecedented adversity, is straying into the realms of fantasy. Five years ago, the 53-year-old, in his second spell as Coventry manager, was in the process of steering the club out of League Two via the play-offs, after finishing sixth, and now they are only three



Josh Eccles celebrates the first goal in a 2-0 win over Birmingham last month

games from an unlikely return to the top flight.

It's 22 years since Coventry's 34-year stay among the elite came to an end. In that time, the bond between club, supporters and city has been stretched to breaking point.

There have been bitter protests against the club's hedge-fund former owners, Sisu, labyrinthine stadium disputes and litigations, two years

exiled in Birmingham (and, before Robins's return, Northampton), while the spectre of homelessness continued to rear its head even after a protracted takeover by Doug King, a local businessman, was completed in January.

Yet throughout it all, Robins has been a pillar of strength. The 53-year-old former Barnsley, Huddersfield Town and Scunthorpe United manager led Coventry to promotion from League One, as champions, in 2020. After knocking on the play-off door for much of last season, they put that dis-

piriting start to this campaign behind them to produce a run of one defeat from their final 17 games to gatecrash the top six — the 1-1 draw at the Riverside on Monday confirming fifth place.

"The challenges are well documented, but we've managed to get through them together," Robins said. "We've had a mantra over the last few years: rise together. That couldn't be truer. Dave Boddy [the CEO], the board, the previous board, they've supported me as much as they could, and I've got incredibly talented people working with me. The supporters have been phenomenal too. It's been a team effort."

Coventry could yet become the first club to fall from the Premier League to the fourth tier and climb all the way back up again. As Liam Kelly, 33, the sole survivor of Coventry's League Two campaign, says: "It would be a massive achievement, but it's taken a lot of hard work to get the club here."

If Robins's frugally assembled young side do go all the way, then chances are the club's player of the year, Gustavo Hamer, who has nine goals and ten assists, and Gyokeres, who has 21 goals

Championship bottom six, October 1, 2022

Relegation zone

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
19	Blackpool	11	3	2	6	10	16	-6	11
20	Hull City	11	3	2	6	11	23	-12	11
21	West Brom	11	1	1	3	17	17	0	10
22	Middlesbrough	11	2	4	5	13	16	-3	10
23	Huddersfield	10	2	1	7	10	16	-6	7
24	Coventry	8	1	3	4	8	13	-5	6

Championship top six, May 8, 2023

Automatic promotion Playoffs

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
1	(C) Burnley	46	29	14	3	87	35	52	101
2	(P) Sheff Utd	46	28	7	11	73	39	34	91
3	Luton	46	21	17	8	57	39	18	80
4	Middlesbrough	46	22	9	15	84	56	28	75
5	Coventry	46	18	16	12	58	46	12	70
6	Sunderland	46	18	15	13	68	55	13	69

Expect tussles and tension as non-League 'juggernauts'

Kit Shepard

An astounding National League promotion race is primed for a fitting conclusion. Notts County and Chesterfield, two historic clubs with a feisty rivalry and a combined 222 seasons in the Football League, meet at Wembley for a place in Sky Bet League Two.

County are not thrilled to be here. Their 107 points over the 46-game regular season (23 more than Chesterfield) beat the fifth tier's previous record tally, only for Wrexham to make it to 111.

The EFL is considering adding an extra promotion spot from the National League, but any plans offer no consolation to this year's runners-up.

"The players should already be on the beach, having been promoted automat-

ically," Luke Williams, the County head coach, said.

Despite Williams's irritation, the 2022-23 promotion tussle has been a triumph for the division. Its profile has skyrocketed, and not just because of Wrexham's Hollywood odyssey.

Take last Sunday's semi-finals. County came back from 2-0 down to beat Boreham Wood, scoring an equaliser at the very end of normal time and a 120th-minute winner. A few hours later Chesterfield also won 3-2 after extra time, which was forced by Bromley's

Langstaff scored 42 goals to set a National League record

99th-minute leveller. The nerve-shredding drama set up an exciting final.

"It is two juggernauts of the National League going head-to-head," Danny Webb, the Chesterfield assistant manager, said. "The National League must be very excited and it is a great advert because, with all due respect, if Bromley had played Boreham Wood, I think there would be a lot fewer people there."

The finalists' regular-season encounters, which finished 2-2 in Nottingham and then 2-1 to County in Chesterfield, were also captivating and make for a tantalising third chapter under the



The sides trying to climb up the EFL via play-offs

League One

Sheffield Wednesday Were careering towards automatic promotion before going six games without a win, with their slump continuing last night.

Barnsley Embracing the data to good effect under Michael Duff. Score plenty, but have not won in three.

Bolton Wanderers Led shrewdly by Ian Evatt, the Papa Johns Trophy winners are trending upwards after financial turmoil.

Peterborough United Snuck into the play-offs. Inconsistent but the mid-season appointment of Darren Ferguson, who has steered the club to promotion four times, seems sensible.

League Two

Stockport County Targeting back-to-back promotions, and a third in five campaigns. They have lost one of their past 20 matches.

Carlisle United In the automatic-promotion hunt for much of the season but fell away after winning only two of their final 11.

Bradford City boast Premier League heritage and a famous manager in Mark Hughes. Andy Cook was the division's top scorer this season.

Salford City Owned by the Class of '92, they scored the joint most goals (72) in League Two this season. The derby with Stockport could be tasty.

MATTHEW LEWIS/GETTY IMAGES



that helped Coventry finish fifth in the Championship and clinch a play-off spot

League positions of play-off winners since 2005



and ten assists, will have had their say in it. Hamer, 25, marries industry and craft in midfield, while Gyokeres, 24, is a bustling threat on the break, and looks set to be a Premier League player next season come what may.

That Coventry have embarked upon this run without arguably their best player, the attacking midfielder Callum O'Hare, who ruptured his ACL before the turn of the year, says everything about the continued resilience of Robins's side. "When you got the start to the season that we got thrown at us, you can cope with anything," Robins said. "We got here against the odds."

Middlesbrough are the bookmakers' favourites to reach the Premier League. Carrick's side still had automatic promotion in their sights until April but faltered and finished fourth.

For Carrick, though, now there is "a clean slate" — for both teams. "Confidence is more important than form, and the boys are confident," says Carrick, who has leaned on Sir Alex Ferguson for advice this season. "It's about performing at your best at the right time. We all know what's at stake."

collide at Wembley

arch. "It's a local derby with two very well-supported clubs that are in the wrong place, so it will be a brilliant occasion," Williams said.

"I'm sure this is the only country on the planet where you can have a game of this size in the fifth tier. It's remarkable, the interest and passion for football in this country."

The clubs have more in common than their Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire enmity implies. County dropped out of the Football League in 2019 after 131 years at that level, while Chesterfield's 97-year stay ended in 2018. Both clubs have experienced a takeover and play-off agony while in the fifth tier.

Chesterfield, managed by Paul Cook, have dangerous attacking options but lack an elite marksman. Liam Mandeville is their top scorer with ten.

County, meanwhile, conceded the second-fewest goals in the regular season (42) and scored the most (117). They do have a deadly striker in Macaulay Langstaff, whose 42 goals was the most in a National League campaign.

County have plenty of admirers, not least the Wrexham co-owners, Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, who are likely to be at Wembley cheering on the team they pipped to the title. Needless to say, Chesterfield are undeterred.

"I have got no interest in making anyone smile outside this football club," Webb said. "As long as our fans support us, that's all I care about. I don't give a monkey's who supports Notts County."

Chesterfield v Notts County
National League play-off final, Wembley
Kick-off Today, 3.30pm TV BT Sport 1

'What happens if we go up? I'd do well to last ten weeks'

Jason Mellor finds Sunderland head coach Tony Mowbray in a reflective, candid mood ahead of play-offs

Time in the company of Tony Mowbray is time well spent. Part-philosophy lesson, part-confessional, it is a restorative mix.

And whereas modern-day press conferences are often limited to a handful of questions, done and dusted in 15 minutes, as the dictaphone display nears the hour mark, the 59-year-old Sunderland head coach is still putting his small corner of the world to rights. No tired soundbites or dead-bat platitudes, just refreshing insight delivered long after most of his peers would have headed for the sanctity of the training ground.

Of course, the main business is to discuss the first leg of his side's Sky Bet Championship play-off semi-final against Luton Town this evening, but a plethora of other topics are touched upon, dissected and discussed. At one stage he admits: "I'm probably getting a bit deep in my chat now."

In one particularly soul-searching section, you begin to think that you would throw yourself at Mowbray's mercy and admit to almost anything. As he says, humility is the seed of growth. "You have to be true to yourself. I keep saying to the players, 'When you turn your bedroom light off at night there's only you in your thoughts really. Are you a good person? Are you a bad person? Are you sneaky? Are you doing things that are not true to your own values?'

"Everybody likes honesty. People who are a bit more clever than they should be, they get found out in the end. I'm just trying to tell you who I am. The only person I'm accountable to when I turn the light off is myself. Have I lived a good life today? Have I done the right thing, or shouldn't I have said that to that player?"

Mowbray's achievement in guiding Sunderland to within three games of



A philosophical Mowbray discusses the value of humility and honesty in football

consecutive promotions in his eight months in charge has earned him the love of the fans, despite his Middlesbrough connections (during the press conference a picture of the striker Chuba Akpom flashes up on his phone, signalling a call from his Middlesbrough-supporting son).

"I was sitting in a coffee shop yesterday on Yarm High Street and two people came in and gave me cards. They'd seen me, they'd gone to a shop and written cards out and came in and left them with me. How great is that?

"The number of people who support this club is unbelievable and it's humbling to see how much time, love and care they have for this club.

"I've been a manager for nearly 20 years and I don't get too excited. I don't want to get too high because I know when we lose four or five on the bounce it could be a case of 'you don't know what you're doing' or

'you're rubbish, it's time to go.'

Football can hurt really badly. So while I fully appreciate the love, I find it really difficult to get too emotionally attached or to connect too closely because somewhere down the line it's going to cast me aside.

"In this industry I have a self-protection mode which looks after me and my family because they're the most important people in the world to me. So while I love this club and the fans, I try not to bang my chest and point to the badge, it's a self-defence

mechanism and if you're in this industry you should have it because it can hurt so much."

Mowbray readily admits that promotion could well be the biggest threat to his long-term future at the Stadium of Light. "The Premier League isn't even something we've discussed at this stage," he said. "Someone asked me the other day, 'Is it too soon? What will you do if you get promoted?' I did joke that I'd probably be out of work in ten weeks." He would not be short of job offers if that happens.

"I've said to the players, 'You've only heard of the riches of the Premier League, wouldn't it be great to go and see it for yourself, to touch it for yourself and tell your kids and grandkids about it one day?'"

Just about the only question Mowbray swerved, more out of modesty, was who he would like to play him if the film of Sunderland's amazing season ever gets made.

"People have always said to me, 'God you're a bit dour on the telly' but I don't recognise the guy that people tell me is pretty dour — I don't think I am. When I walk out of the door I don't think I'm pretty dour, I think I make [the club's PA] Karen laugh. I can sing songs, I think I'm quite lively, wouldn't you agree?"

Press officer: "I'll not comment on the singing."

Given Mowbray's musical reference, the Australian actor Hugh Jackman is suggested. "I don't think they'll make a film," Mowbray said. "But if we manage to win the next three games, I'm not sure there's a guy to play me."

Sunderland v Luton Town

Championship play-off semi-final, first leg
Today, 5.30pm
TV: Sky Sports Football

Wednesday facing more play-off pain

Peterborough United

Taylor 20, Ward 36, Poku 50, Clarke-Harris 82

Sheffield Wednesday

4
0

League One play-off semi-final, first leg
Geoff Knox

Peterborough all but destroyed Sheffield Wednesday's promotion dream with a stunning victory in front of a sellout crowd at London Road.

First-half goals from Jack Taylor and Joe Ward were added to in the second period by headers from Kwame Poku and Jonson Clarke-Harris to leave Darren Ferguson's side 90 minutes from the League One play-off final.

Peterborough had gatecrashed the



Taylor got Peterborough off the mark

promotion race, sneaking into sixth place on a dramatic final day at Derby County's expense. With the bitter taste of a play-off semi-final defeat by Sunderland last season still lingering — and having finished 19 points ahead of Peterborough in the table — Wednesday

began apprehensively and went behind on 20 minutes after a comedy of errors in their defence. Harrison Burrows' cross went straight to Will Vaulks but the Wednesday midfielder's miscued clearance found Taylor, whose shot went through the goalkeeper Cameron Dawson's hands and in off the post.

Wednesday's dreadful first half got even worse on 36 minutes when makeshift right back Ward crashed in a superb 30-yarder after more good work from Burrows, aided by a slight deflection off Marvin Johnson's back.

Any hope of a Wednesday rally was extinguished after 50 minutes when they fell victim to a swift counterattack, Ephron Mason-Clark picking out Poku at the far post, and Peterborough put the seal on their victory when Clarke-Harris nodded in Taylor's 82nd-minute cross with the defence in disarray.

BILL EDGAR'S GUIDE TO THE PREMIER LEAGUE WEEKEND



19

Penalties taken in past 44 top-flight games

13

Brighton second-half corners v Everton, the most in top-flight game since Sept 2019

2

Draws in past 30 top-division matches, both 2-2

Leeds United v Newcastle United
Today, 12.30pm. TV: Live, BT Sport 1.
Radio: talkSPORT

Leeds (probable: 4-3-3)

J Robles – R Kristensen, L Ayling, M Wöber, J Firpo – W McKennie, A Forshaw, M Roca – W Gnonto, P Bamford, J Harrison.
Injured L Cooper, T Adams, L Sinisterra, S Dallas.

Newcastle (probable: 4-3-3)

N Pope – K Trippier, F Schär, S Botman, D Burn – Joelinton, B Guimaraes, J Willock – J Murphy, C Wilson, A Isak.
Injured S Longstaff, M Ritchie, J Lascelles, E Kraft.

Referee S Hooper
(matches officiated 26) ■ 0 □ 90

● Newcastle usually turn to Kieran Trippier to restart play

Newcastle restarting play in league this season

Most corners	Kieran Trippier	191	Most free kick shots	Kieran Trippier	11
Matt Targett	17		Fabian Schär	Fabian Schär	2

Most throw-ins	Kieran Trippier	284
Dan Burn	230	

Aston Villa v Tottenham Hotspur
Today, 3pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10pm. Radio: talkSPORT

Aston Villa (4-3-3)

E Martínez – M Cash, E Konsa, T Mings, A Moreno – J McGinn, D Luiz, J Ramsey – B Traoré, O Watkins, E Buendía.

Tottenham (3-4-3)

F Forster – E Royal, C Romero, C Lenglet – P Porro, O Skipp, P-E Hojbjerg, B Davies – Richarlison, H Kane, Son Heung-min.

Injured H Lloris, R Bentancur, R Sessegnon.
Doubt C Lenglet.

Referee P Banks (19) ■ 0 □ 84

● Tottenham have won their past eight matches at Villa Park

Tottenham's past eight games away to Aston Villa (league unless stated)

Dec 2012	Aston Villa	0	4	Tottenham
Sept 2013*	Aston Villa	0	4	Tottenham
Oct 2013	Aston Villa	0	2	Tottenham
Nov 2014	Aston Villa	1	2	Tottenham
Mar 2016	Aston Villa	0	2	Tottenham
Feb 2020	Aston Villa	2	3	Tottenham
Mar 2021	Aston Villa	0	2	Tottenham
Apr 2022	Aston Villa	0	4	Tottenham

Chelsea v Nottingham Forest
Today, 3pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10pm

Chelsea (4-3-3)

Kepa – T Chalobah, T Silva, B Badiashile, C Azpilicueta – N Kanté, E Fernández, C Gallagher – N Madueke, K Havertz, M Mudryk.

Injured R James, B Chilwell, M Mount, M Cucurella, K Koulibaly, A Broja.

Nottingham Forest (4-3-3)

K Navas – S Aurier, Felipe, M Niakhate, H Toffolo – R Yates, O Mangala, Danilo – B Johnson, T Awoniyi, M Gibbs-White.

Injured E Dennis, N Williams, G Scarpa, G Biancone, D Henderson, S McKenna, O Richards, C Wood. **Doubt** S Aurier, R Lodi.

Referee P Tierney (28) ■ 2 □ 104

● These clubs' bloated squads have led to them starting with the most different players

Most players used in Premier League starting XI this season

Chelsea	31
Notm Forest	30
Southampton	29
Wolves	28
Leicester	27
Leeds	26

Crystal Palace v Bournemouth
Today, 3pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10pm

Crystal Palace (4-3-3)

S Johnstone – J Ward, J Andersen, M Guehi, T Mitchell – E Eze, C Doucoure, J Schlupp – M Olise, J Ayew, W Zaha. **Injured** L Milivojevic, J Tomkins, N Ferguson.
Doubt J Schlupp, J McArthur.

Bournemouth (4-2-3-1)

Neto – A Smith, M Senesi, L Kelly, H Vina – J Rothwell, J Lerma – D Ouattara, P Billing, R Christie – D Solanke.

Injured M Tavernier, H Traoré, R Fredericks, J Stanislas.

Referee M Salisbury (14) ■ 3 □ 68

● Palace tend to make the most of their good scoring chances

Best "big chance" conversion rate in Premier League this season*

Crystal Palace	54.4%
Fulham	50%
Arsenal	48.9%
West Ham	47.4%
Bournemouth	46.9%
Worst	28.3%
Everton	28.3%
Chelsea	29%

Manchester United v Wolverhampton Wanderers
Today, 3pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10pm. Radio: BBC 5 Live

Man Utd (4-2-3-1)

D De Gea – A Wan-Bissaka, R Varane, L Shaw, D Dalot – Casemiro, C Eriksen – Antony, B Fernandes, J Sancho – A Martial.

Injured L Martínez, S McTominay, D van de Beek, P Jones, T Heaton.
Doubt M Rashford.

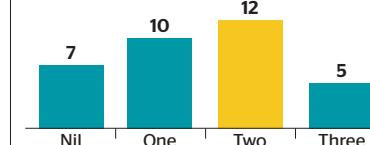
Wolves (4-4-2)

J Sá – N Semedo, C Dawson, M Kilman, Toti – M Nunes, M Lemina, R Neves, P Neto – D Costa, M Cunha.
Injured S Kaladzic, Chiquinho.

Referee J Brooks (16) ■ 1 □ 64

● United have yet to hit more than three goals in a league match this season

Man Utd league goal tallies this season



GROUND FROM THE PAST The Old Show Ground

Scunthorpe United played at the Old Show Ground from their formation in 1899 until 1988. In the latter year they became the first league club to change their home since the 1950s when they moved into Glanford Park.
Not surprisingly, given its name, the site of the Old Show

Ground in the centre of Scunthorpe hosted events long before football was played there, including the annual Scunthorpe show, dating as far back as 1867.

The club suffered severe financial troubles after a fire in the early years and another blaze in 1958 led to the



country's first cantilever stand being built as a replacement. The Old Show Ground's record crowd of 23,935 saw an FA Cup match against Portsmouth in 1954. The final game there was a 1-1 draw against Torquay United in May 1988. The stadium was demolished to make way for a supermarket.



Southampton v Fulham
Today, 3pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10pm

Southampton (4-3-3)

A McCarthy – K Walker-Peters, J Bednarek, Lyanco, A Maitland-Niles – J Ward-Prowse, R Lavia, C Alcaraz – T Walcott, C Adams, S Armstrong.
Injured A Bella-Kotchap, R Perraud, M Salisu, J Larios, T Livramento.
Doubt C Adams.

Fulham (4-2-3-1)
B Leno – K Tete, T Adarabioyo, I Diop, A Robinson – H Reed, J Palhinha – H Wilson, T Cairney, Willian – A Mitrovic.
Injured D James, A Pereira, T Ream, L Kurzawa.

Referee T Bramall (6) ■ 0 □ 21

● Southampton's only major trophy – the 1976 FA Cup – was achieved as a second-tier club; they have not won anything during their 46 seasons in the top flight

Most seasons in top flight without a trophy in that time

Southampton	46
Notts County	30
Fulham	28
QPR	23
Crystal Palace	23

Brentford v West Ham United
Tomorrow, 2pm. TV: Highlights, BBC One, 10.30pm

Brentford (4-3-3)

D Raya – A Hickey, E Pinnock, B Mee, R Henry – M Damsgaard, V Janeit, M Jensen – B Mbeumo, I Toney, K Schade.

Injured P Jansson, C Norgaard, K Lewis-Potter.

West Ham (4-2-3-1)
L Fabianski – B Johnson, K Zouma, N Aguero, Emerson – F Downes, M Lanzini – M Cornet, L Paquetta, P Fornals – D Inggs.

Injured G Scamacca, V Coufal.

Doubt A Ogbonna.

Referee M Oliver (28) ■ 1 □ 84

● These teams have been busy with their heads this season

Most aerial duels contested in the Premier League this season

Brentford	1184
West Ham	1113
Southampton	1112
Everton	1103
Nottm Forest	1076

Everton v Manchester City
Tomorrow, 2pm. TV: Live, Sky Sports PL. Radio: BBC 5 Live

Everton (4-2-3-1)

J Pickford – N Patterson, Y Mina, J Tarkowski, V Mykolenko – I Gueye, J Garner – A Iwobi, A Doucoure, D McNeil – D Calvert-Lewin.

Injured S Coleman, B Godfrey, A Townsend.

Man City (4-2-3-1)

Ederson – R Lewis, M Akanji, A Laporte, S Gomez – Rodri, I Gundogan – R Mahrez, J Alvarez, P Foden – E Haaland.

Doubt N Aké.

Referee A Taylor (27) ■ 7 □ 109

● The managers of these teams are less inclined to make changes during games than their counterparts

Fewest substitutions per Premier League game this season

Everton	13.06
Man City	3.24
Leicester	3.63
Tottenham	3.63
Brighton	3.67
Bournemouth	3.71
Crystal Palace	3.71

Leicester City v Liverpool
Monday, 8pm. TV: Live, Sky Sports PL. Radio: talkSPORT

Leicester (4-2-3-1)

D Iversen – T Castagne, W Faes, C Soyuncu, V Kristiansen – D Praet, B Soumaré – J Maddison, Y Tielemans, H Barnes – J Vardy.

Injured K Iheanacho, J Vestergaard, J

Sport Gallagher Premiership

How Saints-Sarries culture clash

Alex Lowe

Rugby Correspondent



Jim Mallinder ripped off his shirt and clambered onto a table in the middle of the Twickenham changing room. Minutes earlier, the Northampton Saints director of rugby had seen his team defeat Saracens to win the Premiership title with a try in the last minute of extra time. Mallinder, tall, lean and with his veins popping, began to lead Northampton in a victory song. But not just any victory song.

"Tiki tiki Tonga," he chanted, beginning a call-and-response refrain that the Northampton players had first heard echoing down the corridors of Franklin's Gardens more than four years earlier, in April 2010. The song grows in volume with each repetition. Wheeling his shirt around his head and hollering "like a man possessed", Mallinder was leading Northampton in the Saracens club song. This was payback.

"That was a real f*** you to Saracens," one of the Saints players said.

Between 2010-2015, the Saracens-Saints rivalry was the spiciest in the league. It was driven by a deep-seated clash of cultures: the traditional town team versus the disruptors from London, a club that had been re-launched by Ed Griffiths, the chief executive, and Brendan Venter, the director of rugby. Alex Corbisiero, the Saints' hip-hop prop, tapped into that conflict for his own contribution to the wild changing-room scenes at Twickenham, when he performed an impromptu rap for the team.

A stereo was switched on to provide a beat and off he went. "I'm sorry, Sarries, there are new champs," Corbisiero started, before firing into a series of bars without any hint of apology. "You f*** with the Saints, you will f***ing regret it. Everybody feels this, I'm about to end it: Sarries, we are the real deal, you just pretend it."

The intensity of the rivalry has cooled because it was Saracens who prevailed in the struggle for supremacy. The two lock horns again today in the first Gallagher Premiership semi-final, reviving memories of battles past and, in these troubled times, how hostile rivalries are box office for the league. The seeds of enmity were planted in April

2010 and sprouted quickly. It began with a tussle over Soane Tonga'uha, the Tonga prop, who signed for Saracens but then decided to stay at Northampton. The announcement by Saints was made on April 1, 2010.

"The sad reality is that a proud Premiership club has brought our game into disrepute," Griffiths said at the time. "They have made themselves look like the ultimate April fools."

Griffiths, a former journalist, has never been short of a good quote or a bold idea. The Saracens mission was to "innovate by pushing accepted boundaries on and off the field". Clearly, that can be read in a different light following the salary cap scandal, but Saracens wanted to shake up the "staid and conservative" world of English rugby.

"Some of Ed's ideas were way off the mark but some were bang on," Alex Goode, the Saracens full back, said. "He was trying to be more innovative."

The Tonga'uha issue had gone to mediation when Saracens travelled to Northampton in late April 2010 and became the first visiting team that season to win at Franklin's Gardens. In an attempt at ambush branding, Griffiths had sought permission to hang a Saracens banner from the National Lift Tower that stands adjacent to Franklin's Gardens. After the win, Saracens gave their new club song, introduced by Venter, a lustrous airing. Mallinder was furious. "To hear them outside our changing room celebrating as if they had won the league was rubbing it in," he said. "It got to us."

Two weeks later, Saracens returned to Northampton for a Premiership semi-final and won again; this time after Mallinder had accused the club of trying to tap up Brian Mujati, their Springbok

prop. "The Sarries management try to stir things up," Mallinder said at the time. "They come up [planning to] sneak their dancers into the stadium and sell their merchandise. They are trying to play lit-

Mallinder enjoys
Saints' title win at
Twickenham in 2014



tle games. It's not the way we do things when we go away."

Two years later, Chris Ashton left Northampton for Saracens, cranking up the intensity, and Saints began to claim the upper hand. They defeated Saracens in the 2013 semi-final and then, courtesy of Alex Waller's try in the final seconds of extra time, in the 2014 final; sparking Mallinder's table dancing and Corbisiero's rap.

That Northampton team was piloted by Kahn Fotuali'i and Stephen Myler and featured the most destructive second-row combination the Premiership has seen, with Samu Manoa and Courtney Lawes rampaging around.

"I have two favourite memories of playing against Saracens," Manoa, the former United States lock, said. "One was sidestepping Alex Goode to score a try at the Gardens. The other was winning that final. There was bound to be somebody that would get smashed with me and Courtney."

Saracens also lost the Heineken Champions Cup final in 2014 and from that double despair grew a dynasty. They gained revenge on Northampton in the 2015 Premiership semi-final, another feisty affair in which Dylan Hartley was sent off for a headbutt on Jamie George. From there, the rivalry dimmed as Saracens went on to win four Premiership titles and three European crowns in the next five years. But the salary cap saga generated fresh hostilities, this time between Saracens, recast as the bad boys once again, and Exeter, who felt cheated, and Harlequins.

Rugby tends to shy away from promoting its rivalries but games with edge, intensity and needle, studded

with compelling head-to-head showdowns, are what the public want. Northampton's prospects of a win are slim, but Sale Sharks v Leicester Tigers has the potential to be all we want from a semi-final, a clash of shuddering intensity, with fascinating head-to-heads; not least Handré Pollard v George Ford.

"Those rivalries make a big difference," Goode said.

Deadline puts future of Irish on line

Alex Lowe

The future of London Irish is on the line after the RFU imposed a deadline of May 30 for the club's takeover to be completed.

The RFU has turned up the heat because the proposed buyers — an American consortium understood to involve NBA and NFL players — has repeatedly failed to supply proof of funds and other information critical to any takeover being approved.

Among the names presented to the London Irish squad were the former NBA stars Allen Iverson, Julius Erving, Dikembe Mutombo, and Ray Lewis, a two-time Superbowl winner with the Baltimore Ravens.

London Irish employees, who received their April salaries a week late and only minutes before the players submitted breach of contract letters, were told that "both sides would expect the deal to be done" before the deadline.

But there were no guarantees and the mood music around the Premiership was not optimistic. If a deal is not completed within the next 12 working days and payroll for May is not met, then the club would be at risk of being wound up.

The RFU wants to apply pressure in the hope of triggering a swift and positive solution, so the long-running saga does not drag on through the summer, causing uncertainty for club employees and the league.

Senior figures in the game have serious doubts over the takeover being completed and even whether London Irish will be a Premiership club next season.

There are widespread concerns that the consortium does not have the money to complete the deal for a club that is £30million in debt and does not own its own stadium.

There are doubts about whether Mick Crossan, who owns London Irish through his company, Powerday, would be prepared to keep investing.

Rival Premiership clubs are circulating lists of players they would be interested in signing. London Irish players are lining up provisional moves elsewhere, should the worst happen.

The RFU needs proof of funds and confirmation of which of the proposed investors would be the named owner of London Irish in order to complete its background checks and approve any deal.

The paperwork has been promised but not delivered; a worryingly familiar refrain in this takeover saga.

Last week, staff were promised on a daily basis that the funds were about to arrive from the US to pay their April salaries, but there was never any documentary evidence to support the claim. That money has still not landed. Crossan confirmed he would cover the salaries minutes before the squad were due to hand in breach-of-contract letters.

Crossan said last year he would give away London Irish for £1. The reality is a deal is more complex than that.



created spiciest rivalry in rugby



Star of Leicester's season is 6ft 6in, 19st – and filling out

21-year-old George Martin is hoping club success will help him add to his solitary cap, writes **Will Kelleher**

George Martin pushes himself up from the sofa at Leicester Tigers' Oval Park training ground to shake my hand and it becomes apparent just how enormous he is.

The 6ft 6in, 19st 21-year-old is probably still filling out, which is a daunting prospect. His hands are like spades, so big that his fingers slap my forearm as he quietly says hello.

His name may be recognisable but two other George Martins appear above him on search-engine results: the "fifth Beatle" and the author of *A Game of Thrones*. The way he is going, though, he may usurp them.

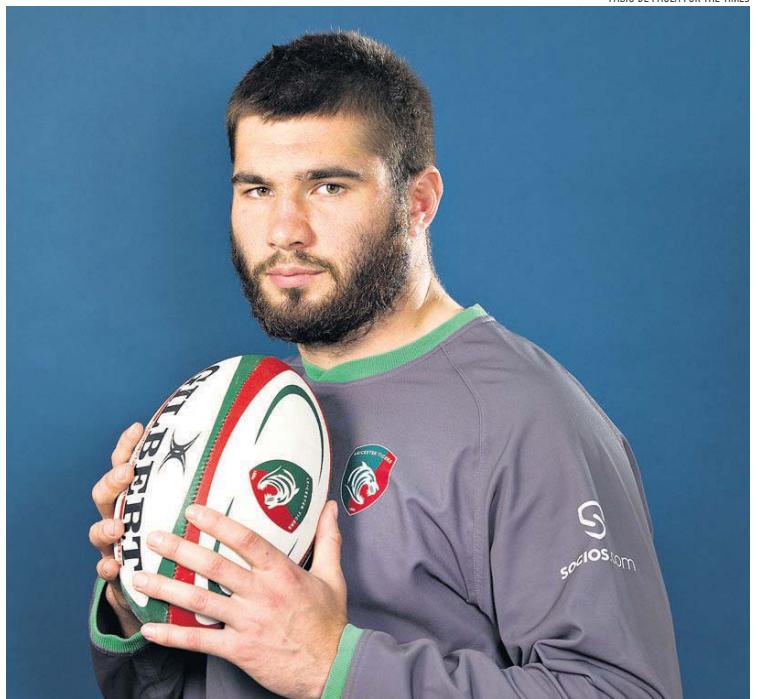
Martin, the first man born this century to play Test rugby for England, was a surprise selection by Eddie Jones for England's 2021 Six Nations squad against Wales. He was 18 and had played only six Gallagher Premiership games. Jones, then the England head coach, had spotted him when he was visiting Steve Borthwick, the Leicester head coach at the time, in 2020. Martin was undergoing rehabilitation on a bad knee injury.

"He said, 'Keep getting yourself better, and you'll earn your chance if you're playing well,'" Martin recalls. "That's what I did. I got my head down, worked hard, got fit and got called in."

He did not come off the bench in Cardiff, but did play for 20 minutes in England's defeat by Ireland in Dublin three weeks later. No fans were allowed in because of the pandemic, but Martin loved it. "It's something I'll never forget," he says. His status as a one-cap wonder will not last long. Ben Youngs, England's most-capped male player, stops by to massage Martin's shoulders. "Best young player in the country," Youngs says, grinning, which makes his teammate bow his head bashfully.

The respect Martin's team-mates have for him is clear. They voted him both their young player and player of the season two weeks ago. He also made the Premiership Dream XV this week, picked at lock, the position to which he switched mid-season from blind-side flanker. That change has not diminished his impact. Now, at No 4, he has a better gainline success and his carries are more dominant.

Martin is a proper Leicester forward. He was born in Nottingham, but raised in Loughborough — albeit with a brief stint over in Detroit when his father, David, worked as an accountant for Ford — and is built in that old-school, hard-nosed mould. His approach has been honed by Tom Harrison, the Leicester forwards coach who will join Borthwick's England for the World Cup. The pair go way back to their days as student and coach at Brooksby Melton College.



Martin was a surprise inclusion in Eddie Jones's squad for the 2021 Six Nations

Impact player

Hitting relentlessly...

Tackles per 80 minutes in the Gallagher Premiership this season

Ben Curry (Sale)	17.4
Harry Thacker (Bristol)	16
Jono Ross (Sale)	15.4
Angus Scott-Young (Northampton)	15.1
George Martin (Leicester)	14.8

...and hitting hard

Dominant tackles per 80 minutes in the Gallagher Premiership this season

Ben Curry (Sale)	2.8
Andy Christie (Saracens)	2
George Martin (Leicester)	1.9
Jono Ross (Sale)	1.9
Dave Ewers (Exeter)	1.5

Source: Opta

"He would sometimes sit at the back of lectures at the start to make sure everyone was there," Martin recalls. "I once rocked up ten minutes late and got a right bollocking from him. He can definitely get the most out of me."

You sense that he will relish the Premiership semi-final against Sale Sharks tomorrow, billed as the blood-and-guts play-off game with two beefy packs set for some eye-watering collisions.

When the word "physicality" is mentioned, and whether he needs to flick a switch to activate it, Martin smiles broadly. "I'm really excited," he says. "For me, in a game like this, with this amount of importance on it, it'll come quite naturally. Going away to Sale is never easy. Every time I've played there we haven't come away

with a win, so we know it's going to be tough, physical and hard."

Alongside Jack van Poortvliet, Freddie Steward, Ollie Chessum and Dan Kelly, Martin has formed part of a thriving academy group that has had winners in it since the start. Their dominance started in the under-18s, coached by Harrison again, and then they pushed on together to win the Premiership title last summer.

"If you take it back to our academy — with me Jack, Fred, DK — everyone who played, we won every game," Martin says. "We didn't lose for two years."

"I think that's why it's such a good special group, we've all come up together, and now play each weekend with each other. It's class. You can't force that, it's made over time. Growing up together, this has been pretty special. We definitely know we can build something special if we all stay together. We do realise it, and we know we're lucky."

Not all of those academy boys have been fortunate, though. In the summer of 2020 Taylor Gough was involved in a serious car accident that left him paralysed from the chest down, aged 20. Martin and others have since rallied round their mate, who has been supported by the Matt Hampson Foundation, the organisation started by the former Leicester prop, who was paralysed in a training-ground accident.

"You've got to stick with your mates," Martin says. "Nothing has changed with our relationship. I've just tried to be the best friend I could be for him. If it was the other way round he would have done exactly the same for me. I'm very lucky to have him as a friend."

And Leicester are lucky to have Martin, an impressive man on and off the field.

Sale Sharks v Leicester Tigers
Gallagher Premiership semi-final, tomorrow, 3pm. TV BT Sport 1

Sport

'I know my heart problem will come and get me when it wants to'

JAMES TAYLOR THE BIG INTERVIEW

Heart condition ended batsman's career, but he tells John Westerby how golf, a sport he used to mock, has given him reason to get out of bed



When you have come through the other side of the sort of health scare that James Taylor endured, any new experiences tend to be savoured with particular relish. Since his career as an international cricketer was abruptly ended seven years ago, with the discovery of a rare heart condition at the age of 26, Taylor has moved on to a varied portfolio of roles: he has been a commentator, a selector, and has coached with England's junior teams, while away from the game he works with a number of charities.

This season, he is taking on a new challenge as batting coach at Leicestershire, the county with whom he began his career. At 33, he is still younger than some of the players, but brings a seasoned wisdom to the role from a playing career in which, as a resourceful and resilient middle-order batsman, he won seven Test caps and played 27 one-day internationals.

"It's so good to be back, hands-on, trying to make a difference, at a club I know so well," he says. "It's a club that gave me so many opportunities when I was younger — I'm really, really enjoying it. And it's

early days, but we've had a good start to the season."

After opening the campaign with a sensational 389-run chase to beat Yorkshire at Headingley, Leicestershire, perennial strugglers in red-ball cricket, remain unbeaten in the Division Two of the County Championship, having drawn three matches since. But what brings Taylor real pleasure as a coach is the promise of his side's younger players. In the draw against Derbyshire last week, Leicestershire had two 18-year-olds in their line-up, Josh Hull, a tall left-arm quick bowler, and Rehan Ahmed, the leg-spin bowling all-rounder who became England's youngest Test cricketer in Pakistan last winter, taking five wickets on his debut in Karachi.

"It's great that we've got such young guys coming through with serious potential," Taylor says. "Josh is 6ft 7in, bowls 80-odd miles per hour, and swings the ball, which is really useful. And I've never met anybody quite like Rehan, in a lovely way. He's so confident, such a bubbly, energetic guy, seriously talented and still so raw. Hopefully, he's going to be a genuine all-rounder, and being able to bowl leg spin is going to be vital for his development moving forward. But he'll be a

Taylor, with the former selector, Ed Smith



proper batsman. As he matures, he gets more experience under his belt and he keeps working hard, the sky's the limit."

Taylor's job now is to help such players along the path to making the most of their abilities, something he was well on the way to doing himself in both red and white-ball cricket before his career was so cruelly cut short.

In 2016, Taylor was approaching what should have been his prime when, as he prepared for a pre-season game with Nottinghamshire against Cambridge Universities, his heart began pumping in a manner he had never felt before. He was given oxygen before going to hospital, where he was told that it was miraculous he had been able to walk himself there, and was diagnosed with arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy, a rare inherited heart condition, similar to the one that had caused Fabrice Muamba, the former Bolton Wanderers footballer, to have a cardiac arrest on the pitch

four years earlier. He would not be able to play cricket any more.

At the time, Taylor had just established himself at No 5 in England's Test team on winter tours against South Africa and Pakistan, and was playing his part in the ODI team that, under Eoin Morgan, was revolutionising 50-over cricket. And then, in an instant, his career was over, and very nearly his life. When he looks back now at how he dealt with such a seismic event, he feels the lessons learnt along the undulating career path of a professional sportsman served him well.

"As a cricketer, especially as a batsman, you have to have strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with pressure, with adversity, with things going against you," he says.

"I was the smallest player on the pitch [at 5ft 6in] and I always had been. I had to find a way to battle, to scrap, to work harder than the guy next to me, to know my game better.

"Mentally, I shouldn't have been fine, from what I went through with

my heart. I nearly died. I'd set up my whole life to be a professional sportsman, I'd got to the top, I was travelling the world, I'd worked so hard to get to where I was. I was nowhere near the peak of my powers, but I was at the top of the game. Then the carpet got pulled from underneath me.

"But I was fine, because I had the coping mechanisms to deal with all the setbacks I'd had in my career, to still be successful. I could still live a good life because of all that sport had taught me."

He feels now, in his new role at Leicestershire, that passing on tips about developing such coping mechanisms to young players is an essential part of his job. "As a coach, you've got to get to know the individuals you're working with before you dive into the mental side too much," he says. "But I don't like the word talented — in professional sport everybody's talented. It's what those players do with the skills that they have, how hard they want to

Sport

WILLIAM WEST/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Taylor, far left, prepares for the 2015 World Cup with Joe Root, and recovers in hospital the following year, right, after his career was ended by a rare heart condition. He has found a new lease of life as a golfer, even playing in pro-ams, inset



train, how much they want to concentrate, that's where the difference is really made."

As a player, Taylor was an assiduous trainer and analyst of his own game. When his heart condition was diagnosed, he knew that any form of strenuous exercise could threaten his life and so he had to find an alternative focus for his energies.

"A lot of cricketers love golf, but I never played, I just didn't like it," he says. "But when I was in hospital, the doctor was telling me, 'You can't do this now, can't do that, you can't exercise, you can't get pissed, but you could play golf'. I thought, 'Bloody golf? That's what my dad does'. But in that initial time off, when I was really ill, I could swing a club, and that gave me something to invest my time in. It was a challenge, a new technique to learn. My wife [Josie] encouraged me to do it. I got into it straight away and I got hooked."

"Over these last few years, golf has changed my life. I had no release and it's given me a release. It's good for

my mental health to get out in the fresh air, but it's good for my physical health, because I'm walking seven miles a day when I'm playing. I can't get too competitive with my condition, because that raises your heart rate, so golf is the perfect sport for me and I love it."

From being a complete novice, within three years he was playing off scratch. He has played in pro-am tournaments with the likes of Eddie Pepperell and Matt Wallace and converted his garage into a golf simulator.

"I love to practise, just like I did at cricket, and I needed something to fill that void," Taylor says. "When your life is turned upside down and you can't do what you love any more, you don't have that purpose. Golf gave me that thing to get out of bed for."

Before his return to Leicestershire last winter, Taylor had spent four years watching a lot of cricket in his role as a selector and then scout. Over the past year, he has watched with wide-eyed amazement at the

way England's Test team has been transformed under the ultra-attacking approach pioneered by Ben Stokes, the red-ball captain, and Brendon McCullum, the head coach. He knows Stokes well, and the two made their international debuts alongside each other in an ODI against Ireland in Dublin in 2011.

"I've grown up with Stokesy, he was the year below me, we played lots of [England] Lions cricket together," Taylor said. "It's remarkable to see how he's matured. Obviously he's made his mistakes, but the way he's developed as a person and a leader, it's phenomenal, it's been so good to see. Test cricket is the hardest format by a country mile and it's remarkable what Ben has done, the way he's galvanised the team and led from the front. It's going to be the ultimate test against Australia, against the best bowling attack. It's going to be intriguing to watch."

From his time scanning the county ranks for players capable of stepping up to international level, he feels that one underappreciated consequence of 'Bazball' is that, with an ever greater emphasis on white-ball skills in county cricket, more players now fit the template for the way the Test team is playing.

"When I was a selector, we had a massive pool of players in white-ball cricket, because ultimately white-ball cricket is a lot easier, and people are playing a lot more of it," Taylor said. "Because we're now essentially playing white-ball cricket in the Test arena, the pool is now getting bigger in red-ball cricket. They don't have to be as technically correct, they don't have to be as disciplined, because Ben and Brendon have given them the freedom to express themselves. The young guys at Leicestershire know now that if they want to play Tests, they've got to be playing that brand of cricket, otherwise they won't fit into that environment."

Taylor's contract at Leicestershire is for 120 days a year, the majority of which will be filled during the season, but also enabling him to continue commentary work, to look for short-term coaching roles in franchise cricket during the winter and, of course, to keep up to his golf. He is also kept busy by his 14-month old daughter, Lilia, and by being constantly mindful of the state of his health. "I know my body so much better now, but every day I feel plenty of stuff, which people don't necessarily see, and the medication is on top of that," he said. "It will never be fixed, it's something I've got to live with and it will come and get me when it wants to, but generally I'm pretty good and my defibs will look after me if something goes wrong. But I'm loving the different things I do and that's the proudest thing that I can say, that I'm in a good place and I'm content with the life that I live."

THE TAILENDER



Patrick Kidd

Games have lost their bottle

The Olympics has long been about making dough but at least Paris is doing it the right way. It was announced this week that the next Olympic Village will have a traditional boulangerie, producing baguettes, croissants and other pastries, as well as what is billed as the biggest restaurant in the world. "Athletes know they will eat well here," Philipp Würz, the catering manager, said. "France will invite the world to its table."

Faster, higher, stronger, tastier?

They also revealed some of the gourmet dishes that will be on offer, including guinea fowl slowly roasted with a crayfish jus, crushed chickpeas with herbs and a smoked fish sauce, and chocolate mousse with raspberries.

And yet what is this? "No wine or any other form of alcohol will be offered." *Incroable!* No carte des vins? Call this a French restaurant? For a country that until 1956 allowed children to drink wine at school — and until 1981 they could if they were over 14 — this ban is positively ungallic. Baron de Coubertin will turn in his gravy. It wasn't like this

in 1924, when Paris was the first venue to have an athletes' village. Then, competitors were given half a bottle of wine with both lunch and dinner every day. Eight years later, when the Games went to prohibition-era Los Angeles, the French team petitioned the authorities to turn a blind eye to their daily quart of claret.

"We are accustomed to wine with our meals," they said. "To suddenly stop drinking might lessen our chances in the Games."

They even got their way with Hitler, who tried to ban alcohol from the village in Berlin in 1936, but an exemption was given to the French and Italians to have wine with meals, while the Dutch and Belgians could have beer.

It's not as if plonk is performance-enhancing. Why not let athletes celebrate their efforts with a glass or two? Between 1996 and 2016, when a sponsorship deal ended, the village allowed athletes all the free McDonalds they could eat, limited to 20 items per visit, so it can't be about healthy living. If only Château Margaux sponsored the Games.

PIC OF THE WEEK

Mark Cavendish takes a tumble after a collision during the dash for the line on the fifth stage of the Giro d'Italia to Salerno. The Manx cyclist, who won the points classification in the Giro in 2013, was back in 13th place for the red jersey on Friday.



Start of a new era in athletics

It was 125 years ago yesterday at the Rockaway Hunting Club in Cedarhurst, Long Island, that a young Yale sprinter did something that would change his sport. As his competitors from Columbia, Princeton and Harvard stood on the line, muscles tensed, leaning forwards, Charles Sherrill dropped to the floor. One newspaper wondered if he had stumbled, and the starter held up the race to ask what was going on, but this was all part of a plan. From that coiled position, Sherrill sprung up and won.

Claims have since been made that the crouched start had been demonstrated by Bobby McDonald in Australia a little earlier (he said he got the idea from watching a kangaroo) and Sherrill's coach had heard of it, but its spread was due to American influence. Soon everyone was doing it. The Sherrill start changed sprinting just as much as the Fosbury flop, right, did the high jump.

Victory that sent a message

Sherrill later became an ambassador and, had he not died in 1936, would surely have approved of a moment in Berlin 85 years ago tomorrow, since he was a fan of Hitler — "a leader who leads", in his view. The England football team who played Germany on May 14, 1938 were less keen and there was anger in the changing room when they were told by the FA that it would be politically helpful if they gave their hosts the Nazi salute before kick-off. They could hardly refuse.

The image, used on the front page of German newspapers as propaganda, has become infamous. What is often forgotten is the result. Germany were on a 14-match winning streak; England's form was patchy. The British ambassador warned the team that the Nazis wanted a win to claim they were the super race. Thus, England's 6-3 victory was a greater show of defiance than refusing to salute.



Sport LV= County Championship

Anderson groin injury raises fear for Ashes

Lancashire v Somerset

Emirates Old Trafford (second day of four): Lancashire, with eight first-innings wickets in hand, are 299 runs behind Somerset

Paul Edwards

James Anderson added to England's bowling concerns for the Ashes after the 40-year-old seamer failed to appear on the second day of Lancashire's County Championship match against Somerset yesterday with what is believed to be a groin injury.

Anderson had left the Old Trafford field shortly before the first day's play was curtailed by rain. His county issued a brief, verbal statement on the morning of the second day saying that he was absent with a "minor issue" that was being assessed by their physio, Sam Byrne. However, that is unlikely to quell the concern, given that, after 179 Tests spanning 20 years, he could take longer to recover from any ailment than his younger colleagues.

Any injury to Anderson would deepen England's problems before a series for which Ben Stokes, the captain, would like to have a battery of eight frontline fast bowlers available.

At present, Jofra Archer has returned from the Indian Premier League to have his fitness assessed, Olly Stone has a hamstring injury and Mark Wood's fitness record suggests that he is unlikely to take part in all five of the matches against Australia.

Should Anderson be injured for any

or all of the series, it would be the second successive home Ashes in which his availability has been restricted. In 2019 he injured his calf against Durham at Sedbergh and subsequently bowled only four overs in the opening game against Australia at Edgbaston before being ruled out for the rest of the summer.

Anderson has played four County Championship matches this season, taking 16 wickets at an average of 20.31. The first Ashes Test begins on June 16.

While cricket lovers in England and Australia speculated on social media about the severity of Anderson's injury yesterday, Somerset's batsmen were surely grateful for his absence as they made a formidable recovery from 135 for five to 361 all out.

Particularly appreciative was 19-year-old James Rew, who made 105, his second century of the season against Lancashire and an innings that took his aggregate against the county in three matches to 362 runs at an average of 72.

Rew's sixth-wicket stand of 106 with Kasey Aldridge was at the heart of their side's effort yesterday but Somerset's tailenders reinforced their side's advantage with some uncomplicated hitting.

Craig Overton made 35 but the serious fireworks were delivered by Matt Henry, whose 39-ball unbeaten 50 included three leg-side sixes in one Tom Hartley over. Not content with that, Henry later took a stunning caught-and-bowled to remove Luke Wells for a single.



Smith struggles and is lucky to make

Leicestershire v Sussex

Leicester (second day of four): Sussex have scored 319 for four wickets against Leicestershire

Neville Scott

Ungracious England fans, getting their Ashes barbs in early, might quip that Penny Mordaunt's sword-carrying prowess in Westminster Abbey last week has proved more impressive to date than Steve Smith's bat-wielding duties for Sussex. Let it be said the

former Australia captain has played but two innings, both in wretched May conditions, but yesterday's scratchy three runs from 14 balls looked almost nervy.

Coming in on the back of a master-class in how to deal with a green pitch from Cheteshwar Pujara, with a 77 that prefaced Tom Alsop's evening hundred, Smith came perilously close to a second-ball duck, shouldering arms to Tom Scriven and surviving a vehement Leicestershire shout for leg-before.

There was no escape three overs later, however, as Wiaan Mulder, the

South Africa medium-pace all-rounder, nipped another one back onto the crease-bound Smith's pad and brought a raised finger, bizarrely clad in a black woollen glove, from umpire Hassan Adnan, braving the bitter north wind.

The pose was held above his head as Smith departed, following a 30 at Worcester seven days earlier that had also ended leg-before. After Thursday's wash-out and a wait of approaching five hours to bat, he had briefly come and gone, eight minutes from tea. Gloat not. This may merely have shaken rust from

RESULTS AND SCOREBOARDS

Football

Sky Bet League One play-offs

Semi-final, first leg

Peterborough (2) 4 **Sheffield Wed (0) 0**

Taylor 20, Ward 36 12,569

Poku 50

Clarke-Harris 82

Cinch Scottish Premiership play-offs

Quarter-final, second leg

Queen's Park (O) 0 **Partick (3) 4**

1,581 Graham 14, Tiffoney 28

Holt 41, Mullen 82

(Partick Thistle won 8-3 on agg)

Cinch League One play-offs

Semi-final, second leg

Clyde (O) 1 **East Fife (1) 1**

Rennie 107 Shepherd 10

1,012

Sent off: S Shepherd (East Fife) 83

(aet; Clyde won 2-1 on agg)

Cricket

LV= County Championship

Division One: Kent v Hampshire

Canterbury (second day of four): Hampshire, with all first-innings wickets in hand, are eight runs ahead of Kent

Kent First Innings 95 (J K Fuller 5 for 21)

Hampshire First Innings (overnight 89-0)

J J Weatherley not out 47

F S Middleton not out 44

Extras (lb 2, nb 10) 12

Total (no wkt, 28.1 overs) 103

N R T Gubbins, *J M Vince, tB C Brown, L A Dawson, I G Holland, J K Fuller, K H D Barker, K J Abbott and M Abbas to bat.

Bowling Agar 101-2-40-0; Hogan 9-2-19-0;

Umpires M J Saggers and P R Pollard.

Lancashire v Somerset

Emirates Old Trafford (second day of four): Lancashire, with eight first-innings wickets in hand, are 289 runs behind Somerset

Somerset First Innings (overnight 109-4)

T A Lammonby c sub b Mitchell 38

J E K Rew c sub b Mitchell 105

K L Aldridge c Wells b Mitchell 46

C Overton lbw b Williams 35

J H Davey c Williams b Hartley 9

M J Henry not out 50

M J Leach c Vilas b Williams 50

Extras (b 24, lb 6, nb 14) 44

Total (120 overs) 361

Fall of wickets 1-5, 2-11, 3-12, 4-55, 5-135, 6-241,

7-268, 8-285, 9-329.

Bowling Anderson 14-7-16-2; Williams 30-10-

71-3; Mahmood 22-4-66-2; Balderson 25-8-74-

0; Hartley 16-2-72-1; Mitchell 13-5-32-3.

Lancashire First Innings

L W P Wells c and b Henry 1

G P Balderson not out 38

J H Johansson b Leach 31

W S A Williams not out 0

Extras (nb 2) 2

Total (2 wkts, 28 overs) 72

Fall of wickets 1-5, 2-72.

Bowling Overton 6-17-0; Henry 6-2-19-1;

Davey 4-13-0; Leach 7-1-12-1; Aldridge 5-3-11-0.

Umpires N J Long and T Lungley.

Nottinghamshire v Nottinghamshire

Nottingham (second day of four): Nottinghamshire, with six first-innings wickets in hand, are one run behind

Nottinghamshire

Nottinghamshire First Innings (overnight 86-2)

R S Vasconcelos c James b Hutton 62

S A Zaib c Duckett b James 35

I K Keogh c Clarke b Hutton 0

J G Sales c Hutton b Mullaney 1

tH O M Goldstone c Duckett b Hutton 0

T A I Taylor c Duckett b Hutton 0

G K Berg b Hutton 23

J S Buckingham lbw b Paterson 0

C J White not out 6

Extras (b 4, lb 2, nb 2) 8

Total (55.1 overs) 158

Fall of wickets 1-21, 2-36, 3-113, 4-114, 5-125,

6-126, 7-128, 8-129, 9-130.

Bowling Fletcher 10-0-40-1; Hutton 18.1-5-37-

5; Paterson 20-3-45-2; James 12-3-22-1;

Patterson-White 2-1-5-0; Mullaney 3-0-3-1.

Nottinghamshire First Innings

H Hamed c Vasconcelos b Taylor 19

B M Duckett lbw b Taylor 39

B T Slater c Vasconcelos b Buckingham 5

M Montgomery c Goldstone b Sales 34

tJ M Clarke not out 41

L W James not out 7

Extras (b 2, lb 8, nb 2) 12

Total (4 wkts, 45 overs) 157

Fall of wickets 1-2, 2-46, 3-56, 4-86.

Bowling Rushworth 8.5-2-21-2; Hannan-Dalby 8-19-0; Barnard 5-11-1; Ali 5-11-1.

Warwickshire First Innings (overnight 17-2)

*W M H Rhodes c Pepper b Bracewell 63

S R Hain b Snater 45

D R Mousey c Lawrence b Snater 1

E G Barnard b Bracewell 28

T M G Burgess c Pepper b Bracewell 0

D R Briggs lbw b S J Cook 2

A H Ali not out 53

C Rushworth c Harmer b Bracewell 9

O J Hannon-Dalby c Pepper b Snater 18

Extras (lb 1, w 1, nb 6) 18

Total (69.5 overs) 242

Fall of wickets 1-0, 2-17, 3-108, 4-110, 5-147,

6-151, 7-154, 8-154, 9-172.

Bowling Porter 14-2-46-2; S J Cook 18-5-52-1;

Bracewell 13-1-51-4; Snater 15.5-1-71-3; Harmer 8-4-8-0; Critchley 1-0-3-0.

Umpires D J Millns and R A White.

Division Two

Derbyshire v Gloucestershire

Derby (second day of four): Gloucestershire won toss; Derbyshire have scored 130 for five wickets against Gloucestershire

Derbyshire First Innings

H R C Came not out 59

H Ali lbw b Price 2

tB D Guest b Singh-Dale 12

W L Madsen c Charlesworth b Singh-Dale 2

*J L Dooly c Braceby b Taylor 37

M D Wagstaff c Braceby b Taylor 8

Total (45 overs) 227

Fall of wickets 1-2, 2-38, 3-61, 4-65, 5-71, 6-132,

7-160, 8-167, 9-173.

Essex First Innings 126 (C Rushworth 4 for 28,

O J Hannon-Dalby 4 for 21)

Second Innings

N L J Browne b Rushworth 2

A N Cook lbw b Ali 18

*T Westley lbw b Barnard 28

D W Lawrence lbw b Rushworth 16

M J J Critchley not out 10

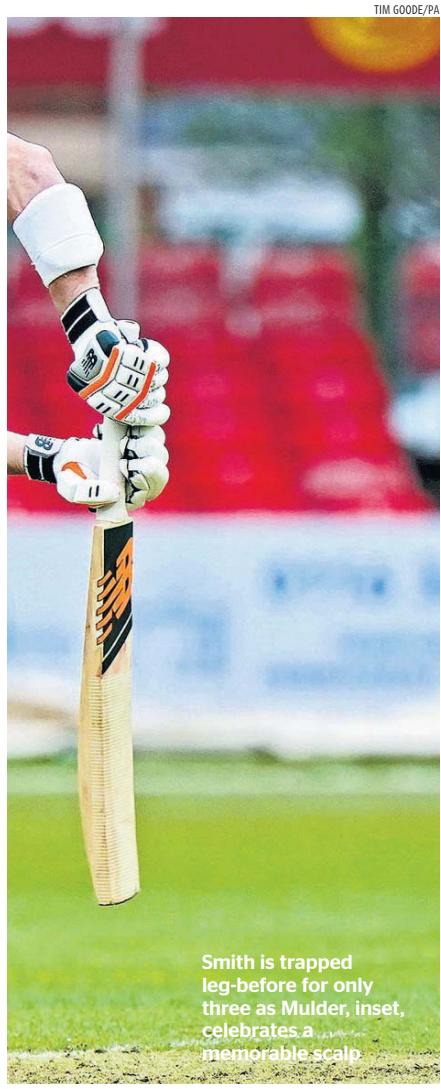
TM S Pepper not out 0

Extras (b 4, lb 8, nb 8) 12

Total (4 wkts, 26.5 overs) 86

Fall of wickets 1-2, 2-46, 3-56, 4-86.

Bowling Rushworth 8.5-2-21-2; Hannan-Dalby 8-19-0; Barnard 5-



Smith is trapped leg-before for only three as Mulder, inset, celebrates a memorable scalp.

just three

the machine. After the openers fell in the first hour, the third wicket expertly drew the pitch's sting, carefully adding 59 from 28 overs before suddenly stroking 77 more from 15. Pujara was on 22 after 80 balls but had added 55 from only another 38 until taken behind off inside edge and pad. When bad light intervened, Alsop, a calm, back-foot, left-handed complement to Pujara's right-hand, front-foot mastery, was on 118 and the teenage James Coles had reached 59, runs the 96-Test veteran could only envy.

Burns knuckles down to day job for Surrey

Mike Atherton

Chief Cricket Correspondent

Surrey v Middlesex

The Oval (second day of four): Surrey, with seven first innings wickets remaining, are 19 runs behind Middlesex

No county in the English game right now is producing better young cricketers than Surrey. On the first day of this London derby, 25-year-old Gus Atkinson hauled his side back into the contest with an eye-catching spell of fast-medium bowling and on the second day it was the turn of Jamie Smith, their 22-year-old wicketkeeper-batsman, to elevate the contest above the mundane.

Smith walked to the crease in the 16th over of Surrey's reply and promptly drove his first ball from Ryan Higgins to the cover boundary with a conviction and confidence that spoke of a young player with ambition. After that, he peppered the boundary at regular intervals, hitting eight more fours and one thumping six over wide long on in an unbeaten innings of 55, as Surrey closed in on Middlesex's 209.

On an unrelentingly gloomy and frigid day, Surrey were also thankful to their captain, Rory Burns, whose game looked in good working order in making 88 before edging Higgins to the wicketkeeper. Coming back to county cricket after being dropped from the



Foakes was unbeaten on 22 at the close as Surrey closed in on Middlesex's total

England team is not always the most straightforward task, but Burns has responsibility on his shoulders here, and that helps to remove any temptation to introspection.

Reflecting on the last Ashes series in Australia, and the Covid-affected build-up, Stuart Broad recently announced that he had airbrushed it from his memory banks and that the series was, in his view, a void one. Burns be-

came one of the abiding symbols of that series when he was bowled behind his legs first ball in Brisbane, and would, no doubt, wish to do the same.

He has since knuckled down to his day job, captaining and opening for Surrey, and he remains a fine player, as this innings reminded us. There are a lot of moving parts to his game but when they are in sync, as they were on Friday, there is a lovely flow to his batting, and he

made conditions look far easier than they were in a 105-ball stay. He passed 10,000 first-class runs in the process.

Burns's opening partner, Dom Sibley, is in a similar situation, having been discarded from England, and he was the first wicket to fall, when he advanced and aimed a drive to leg, only to edge Ethan Bamber to slip.

Unsurprisingly, Middlesex declined to give their leg-spinner, Luke Hollman, a bowl in such conditions, so there was a diet of right-arm medium pace to contend with, along with enough swing and seam movement to keep them interested throughout the day.

Ryan Patel got a lifter from which he could not remove his gloves in time and then it was Smith's turn to get to work. He is tall and imposing, uses his reach well, and is a powerful striker of the ball. He drove through extra cover and mid-on with great conviction, and when he advanced to strike Higgins with authority over wide mid-on, he gave us the shot of the day. He looked less certain when the bowlers held a slightly wider line.

His innings was not without flaw. He was dropped at gully on 26, a sharp low chance, and was put down badly at first slip off the persevering Bamber. In between, he should have been run out after a mid-pitch mix-up with Ben Foakes, but the throw from Hollman at square leg was a poor one and Smith, diving full-length, just managed to make his ground.

With Will Jacks waiting in the wings and Smith clearly intent on making good, viewing on Saturday morning should be worthwhile.

'Countries must let players have cake and eat it too'

Elizabeth Ammon

Brendon McCullum has warned that cricket boards around the world are going to have to be "fluid" and accept that some of their players will accept long-term deals with IPL franchises.

As revealed by the Times, at least six English players have been in discussions with their IPL franchises over future 12-month, multimillion-pound, full-time deals that would replace their central contracts and bring about a radical change in the way they are employed. Cricket would become similar to football whereby players would be "owned" by their club and released for international duty rather than the other way round.

With Indian franchises now having stakes in several other T20 tournaments around the world, there is now the possibility that some of the world's biggest T20 stars will become full-time franchise players taking part in four or five tournaments a year. McCullum, England's Test head coach, has accepted that the cricket world is changing and that England and other nations will need to be flexible in future if they are to make the most of their top talent.

"The last few years, there's been a shifting of the sand around international cricket," McCullum told SENZ Radio in New Zealand.

"We'd be completely naive to think that players would turn down huge amounts of money on long-term contracts for a lot less work in these T20 leagues because they should be playing international cricket. Those days are

fast approaching to be over. It's a shifting landscape and you've just got to be fluid. You've got to allow, ideally, players to have their cake and eat it too."

McCullum rejected the notion that anyone who turned down an ECB offer should be overlooked for selection.

Instead, he believes that the philosophy he and Ben Stokes, the Test captain, have injected into the England dressing room, creating a fun and enjoyable environment, will be what keeps players interested in playing Test matches.

FIXTURES

Today

Football

Kick-off 3.0 unless stated

Premier League Aston Villa v Tottenham;

Chelsea v Nottingham Forest; Crystal Palace v Bournemouth; Leeds v Newcastle (12.30);

Manchester Utd v Wolverhampton; Southampton v Fulham.

Sky Bet play-offs Semi-final, first leg

Championship Sunderland v Luton (5.30).

League One Bolton v Barnsley, League Two

Salford v Stockport County (7.45).

Vanarama National League Play-off final

Chesterfield v Notts County (3.30, at Wembley Stadium).

Cinch Scottish Premiership Aberdeen v

Hibernian; Dundee Utd v Ross County;

Kilmarnock v Livingston; Rangers v Celtic (12.30); St Johnstone v Motherwell; St Mirren v Hearts.

Cinch play-offs Championship: Semi-finals,

second leg Falkirk (2) v Airdrieonians (6);

Hamilton (O) v Alloa (1). League One: Semi-

final, second leg Dumbarton (O) v Annan (6).

League Two: Final, first leg Spartans v Albion.

Rugby league

Betfred Super League Castleford 22 Catalans

Dragons 46, Huddersfield 4 Leigh 30;

Warrington 21 Hull KR 14; Wigan 18 Leeds 40.

Tennis

Internazionali BNL d'Italia

Rome: Second round: Men J Sinner (It) bt T

Kokkinakis (Aus) 6-1, 6-4; A Popov (Aus) bt F

Auger-Aliassime (Can) 6-4, 4-6, 7-5; F

Cerundolo (Arg) bt Wu Yibing (China) 4-6, 6-2

6-3; C Norrie (GB) bt A Müller (Fr) 6-2, 6-3; M

Fucsovics (Hun) bt A de Minaur (Aus) 6-3, 6-4; A

Shevchenko (Russ) bt S Korda (US) 6-2, 7-6

(7-5); L Djere (Ser) bt B van de Zandschulp

(Neth) 6-2, 6-4; B Barrere (Fr) bt K Chachanov

(Russ) 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7-4); F Fognini (It) bt M

Kecmanovic (Ser) 6-3, 7-6 (8-6); G Garin (Chile)

bt P Taal (US) 4-6, 6-3, 6-4; A Bublik (Kaz) bt B

Shelton (US) 6-4, 1-6, 6-2; H Rune (Den) bt A Filis

(Fr) 6-3, 6-3; N Djokovic (Ser) bt T Etcheverry

(Arg) 7-6 (7-5), 6-2, C Ruud (Nor) bt A

Rinderknech (Fr) 6-4, 6-0. Women I Swiatek

(Pol) bt A Pavlyuchenkova (Russia) 6-0, 6-0; L

Samsonova (Russ) bt A Kontaveit (Est) 6-3, 6

3; J Grabher (Austria) bt J Teichmann (Switz)

7-6 (7-4), 5-7, 6-3; M Sakkarai (Gr) bt B Strycova

(Cz) 6-1, 6-3; D Vekic (Cro) bt A Sasnovich

(Bela) 3-6, 6-3, 6-3; P Badosa (Sp) bt O Jabeur

(Tun) 6-1, 6-4; K Muchova (Cz) bt M Trevisan

(It) 3-6, 6-3, 7-5; M Kostyuk (Ukr) bt C Liu (US)

6-0, 6-4; B Krejcikova (Cz) bt D Kovinic (Mont)

6-2, 4-1 ret; A Kalinskaya (Russ) bt E Mertens

(Bel) 6-4, 4-6, 6-3; J Ostapenko (Lat) bt S

Cirstea (Rom) 6-3, 3-6, 6-2; C Giorgi (It) bt E

Alexandrova (Russ) 6-4, 6-2; D Kasatkina

(Russ) bt L Pligato (It) 6-1, 6-2; L Surekno (Ukr)

bt B Peris (US) 6-4, 6-4; M Vondrousova (Cz) bt

B Andreescu (Can) 6-0, 6-1; E Rybakina (Kaz)

bt J Paolini (It) 7-6 (7-4), 6-1.

Rugby league

Betfred Super League St Helens v Salford

Red Devils (1.0).

Betfred Championship Batley Bulldogs v

Toulouse (6.0); London Broncos v Barrow

Raiders (2.0). **League One** Cornwall v

Hunslet (1.0); London Skolars v Rochdale

Hornets (3.0).

Rugby union

Gallagher Premiership: Play-off semi-final

Saracens v Northampton Saints (3.0).

RFU Championship Cup: Final Ealing

Traillfinders v Jersey Reds (2.0).

Rugby union

Gallagher Premiership: Play-off semi-final

Sale Sharks v Leicester Tigers (3.0).

Women's Allianz Premier 15s

Loughborough Lightning v Gloucester (3.0);

Saracens v Exeter Chiefs (2.0).

Indian Premier League

Wankhede Mumbai Indians 218-5 (20 overs):

S A Yadav 103 not out; Rashid Khan 4 for 30;

Gujarat Titans 191-8 (20 overs): Rashid Khan

79 not out). **Mumbai** (2pts) won by 27 runs.

Cycling

Giro d'Italia

Leading positions: Seventh stage

(Capua to Gran Sasso d'Italia, 218km): 1 D Bais (It, Eolo-Kometa Cycling Team) 6hr 8min 40sec; 2 K

Vacek (Cz, Corratec-Selle Italia) at 9sec

behind; 3, S Petilli (It, Intermarche-Circus-Wanty) 4, R Evenepoel (Bel, Soudal-Quick-Step) 3min 10sec; 5, P Roglic (Slove, Jumbo-Vismara); 6, T Pinot (Fr, Groupama-FDJ); 7, G

Thomas (GB, INEOS Grenadiers); 8, J Almeida

(Por, UAE Team Emirates); 9, E Dunbar (Ire,

Team Jayco-AlUla); 10, C Scaroni (It, Astana-Qazaqstan Team) all same time. **Overall** 1, A

Leknessund (Nor, Team DSM) 29:02:38; 2,

Evenepoel at 28sec; 3, A Paret-Peintre (Fr,

AG2R-Citroën Team) 30; 4, Almeida 1min; 5,

Roglic 1:12; 6, Thomas 1:26; 7, Vlasov (Russ,

BORA-hansgrohe) same time; 8, T

Geoghegan Hart (GB, INEOS Grenadiers); 9,

A Thitithum (Tha), Lee Min-jeo (Aus), Choi Hyo-jin (S Kor), N Hataoka (Japan), Ko Jin-young (S Kor), C Knight, S Lewis, Chien Peiyun (Taiwan), M Szeryk (Can).

PGA Cognizant Founders Cup

Clifton, New Jersey: Leading first-round

scores (United States unless stated): 66 Kim

Sei-young (S Kor), 67 Ryu Hae-ran (S Kor), 68

A Thitithum (Tha), Lee Min-jeo (Aus), Choi Hyo-jin (S Kor), N Hataoka (Japan), Ko Jin-young (S Kor), C Knight, S Lewis, Chien Peiyun (Taiwan), M Szeryk (Can).

Weekend quiz

Guess the star: Answer Sloane Stephens.

Sport Racing

Waipiro can give Walker more joy in Lingfield Derby Trial

Rob Wright Racing Editor

The Fitzdares Lingfield Derby Trial (3.35) is being staged on the all-weather this year, after the turf track was deemed unraceable because of water-logging, but it has still attracted a competitive field with **Waipiro** taken to spring a surprise.

He did not make it to the track until December last year, finishing sixth over an inadequate trip at Kempton, but made a big impression on his return to action when stepped up to ten furlongs at Newmarket last month, powering clear of a fair field to score in style.

Waipiro hit the line hard there and this son of the 2014 Derby winner Australia will surely appreciate this stiffer test of stamina. He rates fair value at the 11-1 generally on offer to give his trainer Ed Walker a second win in four years in this race.

Military Order rates the main threat. He is a brother to the 2021 Derby winner Adayar, who finished second in this race before going on to glory at Epsom.

Military Order opened his account over a mile at Newmarket in October and then took a big step forward over another two furlongs at Newbury last month. He, too, will benefit from his first try at a mile and a half.

Walker can initiate a double with **Perfect Prophet** in the Fitzdares Oaks Trial (3.00). This filly has plenty of stamina in her pedigree and showed a surprising amount of speed to win over a mile as a juvenile at Kempton last August before finishing a good third over the same trip in the May Hill Stakes at Doncaster the following month. This half-mile longer trip can see her in a much better light.

There is a good spread of Flat and jumps on a mixed card at Haydock Park, with **Brentford Hope** fancied to land the featured Pertemps Network Swinton Handicap Hurdle (3.15).

A classy handicapper on the Flat, this gelding was initially a little disappointing when switched to hurdles, finishing second on his first three starts. He has looked a different proposition since joining the stables of the up-and-coming Harry Derham, though, winning both starts for his new trainer in fine style.

Whether it is just a change of routine or the fact that Derham has fitted Brentford Hope with a tongue-tie, he has shown marked improvement and he appears leniently treated back in a handicap here.

At Ascot, **Timeless Melody** holds solid claims in the Peroni Nastro Azzurro Fillies' Handicap (2.05). She made a winning return over seven furlongs at Leicester and that form is working out extremely well. This longer trip will suit and she can follow up.

land the featured Pertemps Network Swinton Handicap Hurdle (3.15).

A classy handicapper on the Flat, this gelding was initially a little disappointing when switched to hurdles, finishing second on his first three starts. He has looked a different proposition since joining the stables of the up-and-coming Harry Derham, though, winning both starts for his new trainer in fine style.

Whether it is just a change of routine or the fact that Derham has fitted Brentford Hope with a tongue-tie, he has shown marked improvement and he appears leniently treated back in a handicap here.

At Ascot, **Timeless Melody** holds solid claims in the Peroni Nastro Azzurro Fillies' Handicap (2.05). She made a winning return over seven furlongs at Leicester and that form is working out extremely well. This longer trip will suit and she can follow up.

ROB WRIGHT'S WEEKEND GUIDE

Big-race trends

Peroni Victoria Cup
(2.40 Ascot)

Four-year-olds have held sway in this race in recent years, winning six of the past seven renewals. There are just four entries from that age group today. Eight of the past ten winners had already had a run that year

Banker or bust?

Creative Force
(2.45 Haydock Park)

A group one winner on Champions Day at Ascot 18 months ago, he failed to win in five starts last year but all were at the highest level and he was only out of the first four once. He can outclass this field. **BANKER**

Red-hot trainer

John and Thady Gosden

The father-and-son team have their Newmarket stables in fine form, with five winners from 13 runners in the past week. They saddle five runners, at Ascot and Lingfield, today

Repeat performance?

Mister Bluebird
(4.55 Ascot)

He is 8lb higher in the weights than when taking this handicap 12 months ago but that is partly offset by the 3lb allowance of crack apprentice rider Billy Loughnane. Has a chance but faces some less exposed rivals

What's in a name?

Mountain Song
(2.05 Ascot)

A daughter of the stallion Sea The Stars, she owes her name to her dam, Yodelling. She gained a first success on the all-weather at Southwell and, while she faces a sharp step up in class, she is open to improvement

Bet of the day

Brentford Hope
(3.15 Haydock Park)

He has shown much-improved form in two starts since joining trainer Harry Derham. A useful performer on the Flat, he can make the most of a lenient mark over hurdles

Ascot

Rob Wright

1.20 High Fibre 3.45 Westerton
2.05 Timeless Melody (nb) 4.20 Peace Of Mine
2.40 Admiral D 4.55 Cooperation
3.10 Ocean Runner

Going: soft, heavy in places

Sky Sports Racing

Draw: no advantage

1.30 Peroni Nastro Azzurro Handicap ITV4
(£10,800; 1m 4f) (10 runners)

1 (3) 52-201 SIR RUMI 18 (D) R Hannon 5-9-9 K Stott 94
2 (4) 0/03-6 RHYTHMIC INTENT 18 (D) S Williams 7-9-8 D Tudhope 74
3 (1) 030-50 ONESMOOTHOPERATOR 35 B Ellison 5-9-7 B Robinson ♦99
4 (7) 42140- NATHANAEL GREENE 189 W Haggas 4-9-5 A Farragher (3) 90
5 (2) 01114- SARATOGA GOLD 216 (B,D) C Hills 5-9-5 K Shoemark 90
6 (8) 6-0404 GREEN TEAM 20 I Williams 4-9-5 David Egan 86
7 (6) 361/2 HIGH FIBRE 396 H Fry 4-9-4 S Osborne 95
8 (10) 30604- SAVVY KNIGHT 33 (D) P Woods 4-9-3 H Davies (3) 86
9 (9) 14300- SHEER ROCKS 218 J E-Houghton 4-9-2 C Bishop 93
10 (5) 03240- RAVENS CURR 213 (D) H Morrison 6-9-9 J Hart 81
3-1 Nathanael Greene, 9-2 Sir Rumi, 5-1 High Fibre, 11-2 Savvy Knight, 8-1 Saratoga Gold, 12-1 Sheer Rocks, Rhythmic Intent, Ravens Ark.

Rob Wright's choice: Admiral D will appreciate this stiffer test after being unable to land a blow at Newmarket **Dangers:** Kingdom Come, Vafortino

2.05 Peroni Nastro Azzurro EBF Fillies' Handicap ITV4
(£23,193; 1m str) (11)

1 (4) 1/12 JULIA AUGUSTA 301 (B,F,D) R Varian 4-9-12 David Egan 90
2 (3) 2010-6 DON'T TELL CLAIRE 33 (P,C,D) D & C Kubler 6-9-8 J Mitchell 88
3 (10) 051-01 BELHAVEN 11 (D) Harry Eustace 4-9-7 P-L Jamin (3) 87
4 (8) 20230- PERFECT THUNDER 202 Patrick Owens 4-9-7 L Stewart 89
5 (11) 0-0162 SLIMY MADAM 11 (P,D) Miss S West 5-9-4 W Carver (3) 84
6 (3) 4-0463 FARHH TO SHY 11 G Margarson 5-9-4 T P Quigley 89
7 (7) 213- ONE MORNING 234 M Bell 4-9-2 S Osborne 85
8 (2) 421- TIMELESS MELODY 29 W Haggas 4-9-0 A Farragher (3) 94
9 (9) 1346- MOTTISFONTE 21 H Morrison 3-9-0 J Hart ♦95
10 (5) 2221 MOUNTAIN SONG 39 (D) C Appleby 3-8-7 H Davies (3) 88
11 (6) 43-0 BECCARA ROSE 22 C Fellowes 3-8-2 K O'Neill 80
10-3 Timeless Melody, 4-1 Mountain Song, 11-2 Julia Augusta, 7-1 Belhaven, 8-1 One Morning, 10-1 Beccara Rose, 12-1 Don't Tell Claire, 14-1 Sly Madam, Farhh To Shy.

Wright choice: Timeless Melody won in good style at Leicester; that form is proving solid and she can follow up **Dangers:** Julia Augusta, Mountain Song

2.40 Peroni Nastro Azzurro Victoria Cup (Heritage Handicap) ITV4
(£51,540; 7f) (23)

1 (6) 3200-1 SPYCATCHER 21 (D) K R Burke 5-9-12 P-L Jamin (3) 106
2 (14) 001-32 VAFORTINO 25 (D,C) K P De Foy 5-9-9 B Sayette (3) 103
3 (20) 0000-5 ACCIDENTAL AGENT 8 (B,C,D) E J-Houghton 9-9-9 Georgia Dobie (3) 104

4 (12) 100-50 TOMMY SON 21 (D) D Menisier 4-9-8 C Demuro 105
5 (11) 1100-6 FRESH 33 (T,C,D) J Fanshawe 6-9-8 D Tudhope 104
6 (8) 00/111 KINGDOM COME 38 (D) Cox 4-9-8 K Shoemark 105
7 (13) 1001-0 TOTALLY CHARMING 49 (T,B,F,D) G Bouhey 5-9-7 ♦110 Billy Loughnane (3) 104

8 (9) 0304- RIVER NYMPH 224 (CD) C Cox 6-9-7 A Kirby 104
9 (23) 3112-3 BIGGLES 14 (D) R Beckett 6-9-6 P Dobbs 100
10 (10) 1425-0 ORBAAN 14 (T,C,D) D O'Meara 8-9-5 Mark Winn (5) 106
11 (17) 231-21 RAINBOW FIRE 14 (D) Motti 5-9-5 N Callan 99
12 (16) 005-62 SIR DANSEAL 33 (D) Butler 9-9-4 G Mosse 98
13 (8) 3500-0 RHOCSOLYN 14 (T,D) D O'Meara 5-9-3 C Fallon 99
14 (21) 63400- PEROTTO 210 (C,D) R Varian 5-9-3 David Egan 106
15 (22) 204-03 SAFE VOYAGE 7 (D) J Quinn 10-9-3 J Hart 97
16 (7) 0001-3 BARADAR 42 (T,D) G Bouhey 5-9-3 K Stott 97
17 (19) 22641 TYLOS 29 (P,D) A Watson 4-9-1 T Fisher (5) 95

Nottingham

Rob Wright

1.55 Whirlwind 4.15 Enzos Angel
2.30 Cue's Beau 4.45 Edmund Ironside
3.05 All In The Hips 5.20 Blue Hawaii
3.40 Lipsink
Going: heavy, soft in places

Racing TV
Draw: 5f-6f, high numbers best

1.55 Handicap (£5,234; 1m 2f) (6)

1 (1) 0-314 LUNAR JET 14 (CD) M Mullineaux 9-9-12 Mia Nicholls (5)
2 (5) 3505- WHIRLWIND 157 (W,T) O Greenall & J Guerrero 4-9-11 W Pyle (3)
3 (4) 03615 MASQOOL 36 (D) H Evans 5-9-11 J Leavy (5)
4 (2) 115-6 AT LIBERTY 36 (D) M Bell 4-9-10 J Bradham (5)
5 (3) 044-6 EQUION 14 A Carroll 5-9-9 Molly Gunn (5)

6 (6) 154-0 RED DEREK 14 (D) L Williamson 7-8-13 M Tabti 13-8 Lunar Jet, 7-2 Liberty, 4-1 Whirlwind, 5-1 Masqool, 10-1 Equion, 14-1 Derek.

2.30 Maiden Stakes (£4,320; 6f) (4)

1 (4) 335-4 MONTELUSA 31 (B) T Easterby 3-9-6 D Allan
2 (1) 222-2 CUE'S BEAU 10 (B,F) D Dunlop 3-9-1 D Muscutt
3 (2) 502-2 ONEFORSUKE 43 P Midgley 3-9-1 G Lee
4 (3) 6 PRIMA VALENTINA 37 R Eddy 3-8-13 L Morris
6-4 Oneforuke, 7-4 Cue's Beau, 4-1 Montelusa, 7-1 Prima Valentina.

3.05 Handicap (£3-Y-O: £4,711; 5f) (7)

1 (3) 054-6 FAMILY TIES 40 P Midgley 9-10 G Lee
2 (1) 105-3 LUMACHO 39 (D) Bouhey 9-9 D Muscutt
3 (2) 16010 ALL IN THE HIPS 10 (D) P Evans 9-8 H Doyle
4 (4) 0200- AGOSTINO 205 R Cowell 9-8 H Turner
5 (5) 326-3 GLOEARL EFFORT 34 J Butler 9-8 Dylan Hogan
6 (7) 1106 COLOROS OF FREEDOM 10 (D) A Watson 9-3 L Morris

7 (6) 43-52 FORTUNATE STAR 17 D Carroll 9-2 H Shaw
2-1 Fortunate Star, 100-30 Lumach, 6-1 All In The Hips, Global Effort, 8-1 Colors Of Freedom, 10-1 Agostino, Family Ties.

3.40 Handicap (£6,673; 5f) (10)

1 (10) 020-2 LIPSINK 19 (V,D) R Cowell 6-9-9 S Cherchi
2 (8) 06-30 LIL GUFF 26 D & C Kubler 4-9-9 Dylan Hogan
3 (1) 00-22 RECON MISSION 9 (D) A Carroll 7-9-9 L Morris
4 (7) 100-6 MULZIM 28 (D) M Murphy & M Keedy 9-9-8 D Muscutt
5 (6) 00-24 SO SMART 19 (D) P Evans 4-9-8 Isabel Williams (3)
6 (4) 6-00 JOJO RABBIT 24 (CD) R Carr 5-9-7 J Sullivan
7 (5) 33-2 FANTASY MASTER 10 (P,C,D) Darryl Holland 5-9-5 H Doyle
8 (2) 22-25 MAXZENO 14 (T,D) M Appleby 4-9-1 Joanna Mason
9 (3) 64-12 HAN SOLO BERGER 18 (V,D) R Cowell 8-8-11 H Turner
10 (9) 600-2 SHOWALONG 19 (D) T Easterby 5-8-10 D Allan
7-2 Fantasy Master, 5-1 Han Solo Berger, 6-1 Lipsink, Recon Mission, 7-1 Showalong, 8-1 So Smart, Lil Guff, 12-1 Maxzeno.

4.15 Handicap (£6,673; 1m) (6)

1 (2) 36-04 LAST HOORAH 16 (B) A Watson 4-9-9 H Doyle
2 (3) 00-65 DANDY MAESTRO 11 (B,B,F,C,D) R Spencer 5-9-8 H Turner
3 (5) 20-02 STRONGBOWE 10 (P,D) T Easterby 7-9-7 D Allan
4 (1) /0-00 EMINENT HIPSTER 26 (D) P Chambings 5-9-5 D Muscutt
5 (4) 56-11 ON THE RIVER 12 (D) H Bethell 4-9-4 C Hardie
6 (6) 400-6 ENZOS ANGEL 21 S C Williams 4-8-12 Joanna Mason
6-4 On The River, 3-1 Strongbowe, 9-2 Last Hoorah, 6-1 Dandy Maestro, 10-1 Enminent Hipster.

4.45 Handicap (£3-Y-O: £5,234; 1m) (6)

1 (1) 2-326 SPIORADALTA 13 M Walford 9-10 J Garrity
2 (6) 4-62 STARBURG 204 (B) R Hanlon 9-10 Alec Volkhansky (5)
3 (4) 423- KHINJANI 176 E Walker 9-8 L Morris
4 (5) 0-53 AMAZING 28 R Varian 9-4 H Doyle
5 (2) 60-23 MADCO SUN 26 (B,F) John Feilden 9-4 Dylan Hogan
6 (3) 32-23 EDMUND IRONSIDE 19 K R Burke 8-13 H Shaw

9-4 Starnberg, 3-1 Khinjani, 7-2 Amazing, 6-1 Spioradalta, 8-1 Macho Sun, 10-1 Edmund Ironside.

5.20 Handicap (£4,449; 1m 6f) (10)

1 (4) 0-61 TIGERTEN 9 (D) I Williams 6-9-12 D Allan
2 (1) 064- MADE FOR YOU 133 (P,T,O) Murphy 8-9-11 L Morris
3 (2) 2212- CASA LOUPI J58 (B,F) G Moore 6-9-9 S W Kelly
4 (10) 0460- CHANKAYA J15 (V) Mitchell Hunt 6-9-4 S B Kirrane (3)
5 (5) 433/4 SHE'S ALL IN GOLD 37 (P,T) Oliver Greenall & Josh Guerriero 6-9-3 Ryan Sexton (3)
6 (6) 21-06 FEN TIGER 10 J Feilden 5-9-1 Dylan Hogan
7 (7) 4-302 SHIP TO SHORE 19 P Chambings 5-9-0 C Hardie
8 (3) 5-042 RICK BLAINE 19 (T,V) S Lyett 6-8-13 D Muscutt
9 (9) -0304 SOCIOLOGIST 17 (B) S Dixon 8-8-11 Dale Swift
10 (8) 00-02 BLUE HAWAII 5 (T) Collier 8-8-6 H Doyle
3-1 Tigerten, 7-2 Casa Loupi, 5-1 Made For You, 6-1 Rick Blaine, 8-1 Blue Hawaii, 10-1 Ship To Shore, 14-1 Dale Swift, 14-1 Dogonbeg Farmer, Catch My Breath.

Haydock Park**Rob Wright**

1.35 Tiger Jet	3.50 Angel Bleu
2.10 Feel The Need	4.25 Star Zinc
2.45 Creative Force	5.00 La Perle Est Belle
3.15 Brentford Hope	5.35 Fantizzy

Going: good to soft, good in places on hurdle course

Draw: 7-f-1m, low numbers best **Racing TV****1.35 Handicap Hurdle (£26,015: 3m) (17)**

1 /333- MILL GREEN 28 N Henderson 11-12-0	D Jacob
2 1252- BOLD ENDEAVOUR 24 (P) N Henderson 7-11-3 H Cobden	
3 P014- PRESS YOUR LUCK 24 G Gordon 8-11-11	Bryony Frost
4 F110- DARGIANNINI 29 (T) Harry Derham 8-11-11 Paul O'Brien	
5 4162- POUNDING POET 28 (P) T Lacey 7-11-8	R T Dunn
6 4050- PARTY BUSINESS 28 (P) I Williams 7-11-8 C J Todd	
7 4124- GROZNI 16 C Byrnes (Ire) 7-11-3	P Byrnes (5)
8 3450- FULL AGAIN GREEN 29 (T) F O'Brien 7-11-2 J Hogan (5)	
9 4004- GENTLEMAN AT ARMS 16 (P,T) S Edmunds 6-11-2 Claran Gethings	
10 4101- THANKSFORTHEHELP 15 (P,T,D) D Pipe 6-11-0 J Tudor	
11 5211- WILLASTON 24 (P,T) G Gordon 7-10-13 J Hamilton	
12 3590- SHANTOU EXPRESS 41 K Bailey 8-10-12 K Lenihan (7)	
13 2022- MERRY POPPINS 23 (B,T) D McCain 6-10-9 B Hughes	
14 P110- WA WA WA 14 (P,T,D) A McLoughlin (Ire) 8-10-9 A Coleman	
15 2210- RAMBO T 29 (P,B) Murphy 6-10-9 S Bowen	
16 3061- TIGER JET 35 (CD) B Ellison 7-10-5 H Brooke	
17 4012- LANGDALE LANE 22 3-C Crawford (Ire) 6-10-4 B Bromley (5)	
11-2 Thanksforthehelp, 8-1 Mill Green, Grozni, Bold Endeavour, 10-1 Pounding Poet, Merry Poppins, Willaston, Tiger Jet.	

11-2 Thanksforthehelp, 8-1 Mill Green, Grozni, Bold Endeavour, 10-1 Pounding Poet, Merry Poppins, Willaston, Tiger Jet.

2.10 Handicap (3-Y-O: £13,500: 1m) (9)

1 (2) 3110 IMPERIAL ACE 24 (D) H Palmer 9-9 James Doyle	
2 (8) 245 ARKENDALE 22 E Waller 9-8 P Mulrennan	
3 (7) 1106- DORNOC CASTLE 266 (W,C) Charlie Johnston 9-7 F Norton	
4 (5) 100-2 FEEL THE NEED 16 D O'Meara 9-6 Jason Watson	
5 (3) 051- FLORIDA 150 W Haggas 9-4 T Marquand	
6 (4) 215-0 CONSERVATIONIST 14 (T,C,D) C Cox 9-3 J Fahy	
7 (1) 324-1 JAMES MCHENRY 23 (D) E Bethell 9-3 C Rodriguez	
8 (9) 560-4 INANNA 29 (C) S P C Woods 9-3 H Crouch	
9 (6) 601-4 PHOENIX FIRE 16 M Dods 8-10 C Beasley	

9-4 Florida, 4-1 James McHenry, 9-2 Feel The Need, 8-1 others.

2.45 Conditions Stakes (£12,885: 6f) (4)

1 (4) 35-02 COMMANCE FALLS 23 (P,C,D) M Dods 6-9-12 B Beasley	
2 (2) 433-3 CREATIVE FORCE 23 (BF,D) C Appleby 5-9-8 James Doyle	
3 (5) 1042- RUN TO FREEDOM 210 (P,D) H Candy 5-9-8 D O'Neill	
4 (1) 065-4 TIBER FLOW 23 (D) W Haggas 4-9-8 T Marquand	

11-10 Creative Force, 3-1 Commance Falls, 4-1 Run To Freedom, 5-1 Tiber Flow.

3.15 Handicap Hurdle ITV4 (£65,950: 2m) (17)

1 2103- AUCUNRISQUE 34 (BF,D) C Gordon 7-12-0 N Schofield	
2 1620- HOMME PUBLIC 24 (P,T,D) Oliver Greenall & Josh Guerrero 6-11-4 H Brooke	
3 2110- PARRAMOUNT 27 (T,B,F,D) C Longsdon 7-11-1 A Coleman	
4 1361- TEDDY BLUE 34 (D) G L Moore 5-10-13 C Quinn (5)	
5 0620- NIBUR 29 (P,T,D) A J Martin (Ire) 8-10-10 Mr J Gleeson (5)	
6 4005- ONMOREFORERTHROAD 70 (P,D) N King 8-10-8 J Quinlan (7)	
7 1310- FRUIT N NUT 29 (D) D McCann 7-10-7 B Hughes	
8 1524- PARISENSES 21 (D) N Richards 7-10-7 D McNamee	
9 5132- BYKER 60 (P,D) C Byrnes (Ire) 8-10-7 P Byrnes (5)	
10 3142- HURRICANE ALI 168 (C,D) J Mackie 7-10-6 A Doyle (5)	
11 4142- GET BACK GET BACK 34 (T,D) H Fry 8-10-6 B Bromley (5)	
12 4501- TAKEIN EASY 15 (D) Mrs P Sly 8-10-5 A Edwards	
13 2031- BLACK POPPY 24 (D) Kerry Lee 7-10-5 A Wedge	
14 1151- JAMACHA 223 (D) C Longsdon 9-10-5 B Roberts (7)	
15 5923- WASHINGTON 29 (P,D) Murphy 7-10-5 S Bowen	
16 2211- BRENTFORD HOPE 33 (T,D) Harry Derham 6-10-4 Paul O'Brien	
17 3/46- LUNAR SOVEREIGN 15 (D) D Skelton 7-10-3 Claran Gethings	

4-1 Byker, 9-2 Brentford Hope, 15-2 Teddy Blue, 8-1 Parramount, 10-1 Lunar Sovereign, 14-1 others.

Wright choice: Brentford Hope has won both starts since fitted with a tongue-tie
Dangers: Byker, Fruit N Nut**3.50 Listed Stakes (£28,355: 7f) (6)**

1 (3) 601-3 THE WIZARD OF EYE 36 (P) J Moore 4-9-13 James Doyle	
2 (6) 01-51 AL MUBIR 14 (T,C,D) W Haggas 4-9-10 T Marquand	
3 (2) 05-26 ANGEL BLEU 42 (R) B Beckett 4-9-10 H Crouch	
4 (4) 010-3 ESCOBAR 21 (T,C,D) D O'Meara 9-9-10 Jason Watson	
5 (5) 614 MUMS' TIPPLE 36 (D) R Hannan 6-9-10 S M Levey	
6 (1) 032-2 HOLGUIN 25 (M) Balding 3-8-2 P J McDonald	

15-8 Angel Bleu, 9-4 Al Mubir, 5-1 Mums' Tipple, 7-1 The Wizard Of Eye, 8-1 Escobar, 12-1 Holguin.

4.25 Handicap (£8,374: 7f) (9)

1 (4) 100-4 BAILEYSGUTFEELING 23 (D) K P De Foy 4-9-10 G Eddeby (7)	
2 (5) 160-0 CULCOR 13 (P,D) D O'Meara 4-9-7 Jason Watson	
3 (7) 653-1 LIANGEL HOPE 11 (P,D) C Mason 4-9-6 Gina Mangan (3)	
4 (9) 120-6 ROACH POWER 14 T Easterby 4-9-5 P J McDonald	
5 (2) 365-0 LIAMRTY DREAMS 13 (CD) K R Burke 4-9-5 S Gray	
6 (3) 3456- STAR ZINC 203 (H) Oliver Greenall & Josh Guerrero 4-9-3 T Marquand	
7 (8) 40-60 EMPEROR CARODAC 16 (D) B Smart 4-9-3 P Mulrennan	

Placepot: £361.60. Quadpot: £14.20.

Placepot: £46.90. Quadpot: £5.50.

Placepot: £227.00. Quadpot: £34.80.

8 (1) 2146- METABOLIT 199 (D) D Loughnane 4-9-3 Laura Pearson (3)

9 (6) 13-62 INTERCESSOR 21 (B,BF) Gallagher (Ire) 6-9-3 R Clutterbuck

9-2 Liangel Hope, 5-1 Intercessor, 11-2 Metabolit, 6-1 Star Zinc, Baileysgutfeeling,

7-1 Roach Power, 8-1 Liamarty Dreams, 10-1 Culcor, 12-1 Emperor Carodac.

5.00 Open NH Flat Race (£6,808: 2m) (8)

1 1- I LOVE MY BAIE 342 (D) S Crawford (Ire) 5-11-9 B Bromley (5)	
2 24- PARADE AWAY 19 (T) M Harris 5-11-2 B Harris (7)	
3 50- PARK ANNOUNCEMENT 77 (T,S) S Crawford (Ire) 5-11-2 D Jacob	
4 32- SCANDISK PARK 160 N Henderson 5-11-2 Paul O'Brien	
5 1R- DIAMOND DEALER 17 (H,BF) S Brookhouse 4-10-10 J Quinlan	
6 341- FLYING FORTUNE 61 (P) B Bowen 4-10-10 S Bowen	
7 036- PERTEMPS DIAMOND 91 I Williams 4-10-10 C Todd	
8 LA PERLE EST BELLE C Byrnes (Ire) 5-10-9 P Byrnes (5)	

7-4 Scandisk Park, 4-1 La Perle Est Belle, 6-1 Love My Baie, Flying Fortune, 13-2 Diamond Dealer, 12-1 others.

5.35 Handicap (3-Y-O: £7,328: 1m 4f) (9)

1 (4) 32-6 FANTIZZY 6 T Dascombe 9-11 P Hanigan	
2 (2) 64-2 LORDSHIP 25 W Haggas 9-11 T Marquand	
3 (7) 44-3 EDGE OF DARKNESS 180 Charlie Johnston 9-10-9 Fanning	
4 (9) 63-1 IRONOPOLIS 25 (D) R Menzies 9-7 P Mulrennan	
5 (8) 269- DANCING GYPSY 14 J G O'Shea 9-6 Jason Watson	
6 (1) 035- FAIRBANKS 26 (V,W,BF) A Vining 9-5 P McDonald	
7 (5) 560-2 ARTISAN DANCER 60 Charlie Johnston 9-10-9 C Beasley	
8 (3) 0134- MASTERPAINTER 24 (P,D) M Dods 9-5 C Beasley	

9-6 Fairbanks, 2-1 Edge Of Darkness, 13-2 Artisan Dancer, Fantizzy, 7-1 Dancing Gypsy, 15-2 Masterpainter, 13-2 Artisan Dancer, Edge Of Darkness, 10-1 Masterpainter.

4.00 Handicap Hurdle (£5,413: 2m 4f) (9)

1 0034- PEACEFUL SUNDAY 57 S Crawford (Ire) 7-12-0 J J Slevin

2 102-0 APPLAUSE 7 (P,I,C) M Hammond 11-11-7 J Thompson (10)

3 4/00- HOUSTON BERE 28 (T) A Hales 6-11-7 Harriet Tucker (7)

4 /341- FABULEUX DU CLOS 56 (W,T,D) S G West 8-11-7 C O'Farrell

5 2214- LES'S LEGACY 26 (C) S Corbett 6-11-5 D Hurst (7)

6 1346- SOCKS OFF 133 (P,B,F,D) R Menzies 6-11-1 A Anderson (5)

7 1022- MOONLIGHT GLORY 19 M Walford 8-11-0 T Midgley (5)

8 3063- SERIOUS EGO 55 N Richards 10-10-4 Sean Quinlan

9 305F- STAR VANTAGE 28 G Bewley 6-10-4 J Bewley (3)

7-2 Fabuleux Du Clos, 4-1 Moonlight Glory, 6-1 Les's Legacy, Serious Ego, 10-1 Star Vantage, Socks Off, Applause, 10-1 Peaceful Sunday, 50-1 Houston Bere.

4.30 Handicap Chase (£5,888: 2m) (7)

1 6532- SAO 37 (H,T,C) R Menzies 9-12-2 N Moscrop

2 5P0- WELL EDUCATED 7 G Bewley 7-11-13 J Bewley (3)

3 5330- FRINGILL DIKE 35 (J) O'Keefe 6-11-8 C O'Farrell

4 /420- EDMOND DANTES 138 Ruth Jefferson 7-10-12 R McLernon

5 0145- FIRST REVOLUTION 37 M Thodtner 9-10-11 Sean Quinlan

6 351P- GOING MOBILE 19 (P,T,C,D) S England 8-10-5 J England

Sport

Bais sprints to first win as favourites avoid drama

Giro d'Italia
Elgan Alderman

This was a stage of the Giro d'Italia in which nothing happened for a long time. Three riders without a professional win and who instil no fear in the general classification were permitted by the peloton to stay more than three minutes clear, having been four times as far ahead earlier in the day. The big hitters of Remco Evenepoel, Primoz Roglic and Geraint Thomas seemed to be enacting an armistice, and Andreas Leknessund retained the Maglia Rosa for another day.

Davide Bais, Simone Petilli and Karel Vacek were in the breakaway for more than 200km of this long, mountainous stage from Capua to Gran Sasso d'Italia. It seemed inevitable that the peloton would develop lightweight socks and reel them in, as they had done to Simon Clarke and Alessandro De Marchi with 300 metres to go the previous day.

Only it wasn't. The two Italians and



The Appenines town of Capestrano sits above the Giro peloton as the riders make the long trek to Gran Sasso d'Italia

one Czech were left alone to fight for the stage victory, riding above an altitude of 2,000m into a headwind, seemingly through icy quicksand. It was Bais who found reserves, sprinting clear to become the second Italian victor of the

past week, his first win aged 25.

There was rain at the start, sun in the middle, and snow alongside the roads at the finish. Thomas had chain trouble for the second day in a row before being restored to the bunch. Roglic avoided

another mechanical, and Evenepoel stayed upright and did not suffer terribly after he twice crashed on Wednesday — the first of those caused by a stray dog — in a chaotic week that has shown no mercy to reputation. Thomas

and Tao Geoghegan Hart, the Ineos Grenadiers team-mates, went into the stage sixth and ninth in the general classification, a minute and a half behind Leknessund. Both remain in the reckoning.

"The Giro d'Italia, of all the Grand Tours, is the one with a little more mystique, the one which is a little bit less quantifiable and the one that in recent years you often see some big shake-ups in the last week," Geoghegan Hart said before the race, and he more than anyone knows that it matters who is wearing the Pink Jersey only at the end of the 21st day of competition.

Three years ago, the long-time leader João Almeida offloaded it to Wilco Kelderman with four stages to go, then Jai Hindley wore it after the penultimate stage, level on time with Geoghegan Hart. On the final day, the Briton beat Hindley in a time-trial to become the first man ever to wear the Pink Jersey for the first time at the last chance. In 2018, Chris Froome snatched top spot with an 80km solo breakaway in the third-from-last stage, turning a 3min 22sec deficit into a 40sec lead.

No one has lost the Giro yet and there is spice to come in two further time-trials, the latter on the 20th stage, and any of the random setbacks that await the leading players. After this mountainous welcome comes a ride from Terni to Fossombrone on Saturday, and then a 35km time-trial, sure to see moving and shaking from Evenepoel in particular, before a day of rest and contemplation.

Nadal facing race to be fit for French Open defence

Tennis
Stuart Fraser
Tennis Correspondent

Rafael Nadal faces a key decision on Saturday as doubts continue to grow over whether the 22-times grand-slam champion will be fit to compete in the French Open later this month.

At a time when the European clay-court stretch is in full swing at the Italian Open, Nadal has been limited to training at his academy in Mallorca because of a lingering hip injury that has kept him sidelined from the tour since January.

Concerns among his many supporters deepened this week when a short video emerged online of Nadal halting

a practice session on Wednesday. Doubled over in clear discomfort, he walked gingerly to his courtside chair for a rest.

Nadal, 36, is understood to have resumed his hit after five minutes, but it is clear he is still well short of full fitness with only two weeks until the French Open starts. The exact area of concern is the psoas muscle in his left hip, which connects the spine to the legs.

There are few opportunities left for Nadal to play a warm-up tournament before the action begins at Roland Garros on May 28. If he wishes to drop down to the second tier and play in the Bordeaux Challenger from Monday, he must inform organisers on Saturday that he would like to take up a wild card for an event that also includes Andy Murray and Dominic Thiem in the field.

Otherwise, Nadal has two ATP tour events that he could play in the week beginning May 22, in Geneva or Lyon. But this would mean that he leaves himself little time for preparation at Roland Garros, where the latest he could play his first-round match is May 30.

Nadal, 14 times a French Open champion, has not missed the tournament since 2004, when an ankle injury denied him a debut appearance. He is now ranked No 14 in the world after his ATP

Nadal is battling with a hip injury



tour record streak of 912 weeks inside the top ten came to an end in March.

"The world of tennis and the Roland Garros tournament would be affected by his absence because of his history in that tournament and generally what he has achieved in his career and the impact he has made on the sport," Novak Djokovic, his main rival, said.

"I'm sure that everyone wants to see him there. I would like to see him play because for the competition, it is the best if you can have the best players in the world so the challenge is as big as it can be."

"I've been seeing some videos that he's been training, he's been trying to get himself ready for it. I'm obviously not in his shoes, so I don't know what he's feeling. I'm sure he's trying his best to be there. Let's see what happens."

Djokovic made a successful return in Rome last night after skipping the Madrid Open because of a right elbow injury. Other than a compression sleeve on his arm, there were no signs of any major issues during his 7-6 (7-5), 6-2 victory over Argentina's Tomás Etcheverry.

Meanwhile, Cameron Norrie made a comfortable start to his campaign in Rome. After receiving a first-round bye, the No 13 seed from Great Britain defeated the French qualifier Alexandre Muller 6-2, 6-3.



TALKSPORT.COM



LEEDS v NEWCASTLE
TODAY 12:30 K.O



ASTON VILLA v SPURS
TODAY 15:00 K.O



KSI v FOURNIER
TONIGHT 21:00



CHELSEA v MAN UTD
SUNDAY 14:30 K.O

BOX TO BOXING ACTION

EXCLUSIVE EFL PLAY-OFF COMMENTARIES

BOLTON v BARNESLEY
TODAY 15:00 K.O

SUNDERLAND v LUTON
TODAY 17:30 K.O

SALFORD v STOCKPORT
TONIGHT 19:45 K.O

COVENTRY v MIDDLESBROUGH
TOMORROW 12:00 K.O

BRADFORD v CARLISLE
TOMORROW 19:00 K.O

FROM THE ARCHIVES

A look back at a memorable moment in sporting history

1940 COPPI BECOMES YOUNGEST WINNER OF THE GIRO D'ITALIA

Sasha Nugara

In 1940 a 20-year-old Fausto Coppi became the youngest winner of the Giro d'Italia — 83 years on, it is a record still held by the man dubbed *Il Campionissimo* (the “champion of champions”). Coppi was invited to ride for the Legnano team, alongside his fellow Italian Gino Bartali. Hired as a helping hand, he instead stormed to victory, defeating their star man and launching a rivalry that would come to divide a nation.

Bartali, always praying as he pedalled, captivated the more conservative and religious southern Italy, whereas Coppi's worldlier approach, introduction of modern methods and drug-taking made him the hero of the carefree north.

That was the last Giro d'Italia before the Second World War led to it being suspended for five years. When it resumed in 1946, Coppi was racing for Bianchi, placing the rivals on opposing teams.

Bartali asked Coppi to help him finish, promising that if he did, he would not contest the race, but after Coppi had agreed, Bartali double-crossed him and sped past as he adjusted his toe straps, taking the win by 47 seconds. That would be the last time that Bartali would win the Giro and beat Coppi, though, as Coppi won the following year and then on three more occasions, making him one of the most prolific winners of the Italian race.

Despite having married Bruna Ciampolini in 1945, Coppi's relationship with a mysterious and strikingly beautiful “woman in white” made headlines as they embraced at the end of a race in St Moritz. The woman was revealed to be Giulia Occhini and the couple soon moved in together, but with adultery still illegal in Catholic Italy, the landlord of their apartment cast them out.

Fleeing from reporters from villa to villa around Italy, the police eventually raided their home in the



OFFSIDE/FARABOLAFOTO

Coppi tackles the mountains in the 1953 edition of the Giro d'Italia

middle of the night to see if they were sharing a bed. Coppi was shunned and spectators spat at him after Pope Pius XII refused to bless the Giro d'Italia if he rode it without returning to his wife. Ciampolini refused to divorce him because it was still illegal in Italy, but that didn't stop the lovers from fleeing the country to get married in Mexico and start a family in Buenos Aires.

Coppi's road to success had begun in Castellania, northern Italy, skipping school to ride through the countryside on a rusty, brakeless bike that he found discarded in a cellar. Leaving school at 13 to work for a

butcher, he eventually saved up and borrowed 600 lira to buy his own custom bike from Genoa, winning his first race aged 15 for the modest prize of 20 lira and a salami sandwich.

He took a racing licence at the start of 1938, encouraged by cycling enthusiasts to pursue his dream. They sent him off to the Tour of Tuscany with the advice to “follow Gino Bartali”. Coppi fell short, stopping the race because of a broken wheel, but it would take only another year for him to beat his future rival.

Despite halting international competitions, the Second World War did not stop *Il Campionissimo*

pursuing his dream. He joined the Italian army and was able to continue track cycling and one-day races.

Coppi also took to the Vigorelli Velodrome in Milan, full of holes and pock marks from regular bombing, to make a successful bid for the hour record, which remained unbeaten until 1956.

He won the Giro five times and the Tour de France twice, but his career was short-lived, with his successes dropping off after his adultery scandal and the death of his brother in 1951. It was reported that his skill level had decreased so significantly

that he could only continue competing by dousing himself with amphetamines before a race — a method that he believed was key to a cyclist's success.

In 1959, the president of Burkina Faso invited Coppi, along with a group of French cyclists, to compete against local riders and hunt. Kept up all night in a room infested with mosquitoes, he and Raphaël Geminiani caught malaria and fell severely ill.

Geminiani had a lethal strain diagnosed but recovered — unlike Coppi, who died on January 2, 1960, at only 40 years old.

THE NEXT BIG THING

Jeremiah Azu

- Age: 21
- European 4x100m relay champion, plus bronze in the individual event
- Won 100m at the 2022 UK Championships with

- wind-assisted time of 9.90sec
- Only fourth Welshman after Fred Cooper (1898), Berwyn Jones (1963) and Ron Jones (1969) to become UK champion in the event

Egan Alderman

Christian Malcolm achieved many things during his athletics career, but he was never the British 100m champion. Ron Jones, from Cwmaman, was the nation's best in 1969, but it was not until Jeremiah Azu in 2022 that another Welshman



finished first. He had “2022 British champion” on the lock screen of his phone, and it came true. Azu, 21,

not only beat Reece Prescod and Zharnel Hughes, the European champion, but he did so in a time of 9.90sec. It did not count as a personal best given that it was wind-assisted to the tune of 2.5m/s, but even with a zephyr giving you a push it was an eye-catcher. Only

Linford Christie has officially run faster from these isles and it was quicker than Christie (9.91sec with 3.7m/s in 1994) and James Dasaolu (9.93sec with 3m/s in 2016) managed in the national championships.

Azu, left, achieved his best run of 10.13sec in Munich at the European Championships last summer, taking bronze behind Marcell Jacobs, Italy's

Olympic champion, and Hughes. That time ranks him tied 27th among all-time British sprinters, but there is plenty of opportunity for him to become the 11th Briton to dip beneath 10sec. A more pressing landmark would have been 10.05sec, the time required to earn him a place at the World Championships last year.

Despite being the British champion, he was selected only as part of the relay, and fifth at the Commonwealth Games added to his frustration (though he was the highest British finisher). He has started this campaign by winning silver at the British Indoor Championships behind Prescod.

Azu did not start athletics seriously until he was 16, when he was spotted at Llanishen High School. Away from the track, he enjoys learning about Ghanaian food from his mother and sings at the New Identity Christian Centre in Rumney, Cardiff, where his father is the senior pastor. Their son's goals are lofty: “I want to change sprinting in Britain for ever.”

Wiggins may never escape purgatory he is trapped in

Owen Slot
Chief Sports Writer



The bit that really got me was when Sir Bradley Wiggins said he had recently isolated in a hotel for six weeks and didn't answer his phone. He said this was "a particularly bad period", as if these bouts of "self-sabotage", as he described it, were not infrequent. Yet what made it particularly disturbing was because it came only a few lines down from the section when he talked about his love for his two-year-old daughter and what she had brought to him. "Oh," he said, "she saved my life."

So he leaves her and isolates for six weeks?

This is all in the interview he gave to Polly Vernon in *The Times* magazine last weekend. A more terrible, harrowing piece of self-examination you will struggle to find. Vernon writes that she felt "devastated and appalled" as he told her his story, a lot of it with intricate detail about how he was groomed and abused as a young teenager and, at one point, she put her head in her hands — which is how you feel when you read it.

Yes, how we now find this iconic British sporting hero, here, on these pages, is heart-breaking. It is in part an extreme version of a story played out across professional sports — the afterlife, the bit when you've retired and you ask: who am I now? Brian O'Driscoll made a documentary, last year, called *After The Roar* asking athletes how they found it when the crowds aren't roaring for you any more. AP McCoy gave him a raw answer when he said that sportspeople die twice. How hard do you mourn your first death when your life as a pro athlete is over?

This may be a generalisation, but cyclists find it as hard as anyone, possibly harder. That is in part a reflection on the sport: the solitary nature of it, those thousands of hours you will have spent alone on two wheels, the personality type who commits to that kind of regime and the reasons that drove them to it.

Wiggins says in the interview: "I hated cycling. I hated training. But I had to do it." Why, Vernon asks, as an escape? "Yes."

So if you used cycling as an escape, what do you do when you have no escape any more? You confront what you have been escaping from. You struggle. Wiggins is struggling desperately. He says he wants to go into boxing. He hopes to have his first *

fight this year. He is 43. Cycling has an appalling record for its retired "greats". (Inverted commas are required everywhere here). Of the stars of the EPO (erythropoietin) era, Marco Pantani and Frank Vandenbroucke were both found dead in hotel rooms. Jan Ullrich has a long record of extreme, unstable behaviour and has said himself that he has almost gone the same way as Pantani.

Mario Cipollini is in prison for domestic abuse offences. Who would have thought that Lance Armstrong would emerge as the stable one? Some sports are beginning to understand the challenges of life "after the roar" and are starting to recognise that they have a responsibility to their athletes after the sun has gone down on their competing career. Cycling is definitely not one of those, yet its attrition rate is terrible.

It was only 11 years ago that Wiggins was winning the Tour de France, ringing the bell at the London 2012 opening ceremony and then sitting on a throne in front of Hampton Court as he waited for his fourth Olympic gold medal. And now he is isolating in hotels and starting a career in boxing?

Let's rewind, here, to the 2018 Tour de France, which was preceded by an investigation into Chris Froome's use of an asthma inhaler and whether

Wiggins is a victim of cycling's inability to look after its retirees, but his refusal to confront allegations worsens his plight

exceeding the upper limit for salbutamol constituted a doping offence. On the eve of the race, Froome was cleared of the offence. A week later, the issue was discussed on a cycling podcast, *The Bradley Wiggins Show*.

Wiggins' co-host asked him a very clear question regarding Froome: "He's under instruction from doctors. He's taking what he's told to take. What is it like to put your trust in a doctor and then it goes the wrong way and you are accused of things like this?"

Wiggins did not answer the question at all. Instead, he criticised the "hysteria" around the subject, "people sensationalising things", he said, adding "it's a mess" and an "anti-Team Sky thing".

The question, though, went straight to the point. It offered Wiggins the opportunity to discuss the use of therapeutic use exemptions (TUEs), which permit athletes to take certain drugs that are normally banned if there is a medical requirement. And he knew this subject as well as

anyone. Two years earlier, it was revealed that Wiggins had thrice been given intramuscular injections of triamcinolone. All three occasions were on the eve of the three biggest stage races of his life, one of those being the 2012 Tour de France. Triamcinolone was widely known for its ability to help an athlete lose weight without losing power. Wiggins, apparently, was using it as an asthma suppressant. This is all history.

A parliamentary inquiry into the matter later concluded that the drugs were used "to enhance the performance of riders, and not just to treat medical need" and that this "does cross the ethical line". In doing so, it took a sledgehammer to the credibility of Team Sky and Wiggins's 2012 Yellow Jersey.

In that 2018 Tour de France, Froome finished third, the winner being Geraint Thomas, also of Team Sky. Towards the end of that Tour, L'Équipe wrote of Team Sky that "when you wear the jersey of the British team, suspicion is as contagious as herpes". Back on his

podcast, Wiggins dismissed this judgment as "sour grapes" and a case of the French "getting cheesed off".

Five years on, his position has hardly changed. When he was asked by Vernon if these historical doping allegations were associated with a feeling of "injustice" and "lack of control", he replied: "Well, no, not really. No, no, no, because that sorted itself out pretty quickly, actually."

Well, it didn't actually. It didn't at all. The quote from Damian Collins MP, after another parliamentary inquiry into Team Sky, is that "a cloud now hangs over one of our greatest Olympians".

This is the lot of being Bradley Wiggins. You exist under that hanging cloud. You still have the Yellow Jersey but you lack the respect for the reason why. You inhabit a kind of purgatory between hero and villain. It must be a terrible place to live. The interview with Vernon suggests that it is.

In 2004, another highly talented British cyclist of the Wiggins generation, David Millar, was busted for doping. In the book that he would later write, *Racing Through The Dark*, he details the pressures and influences that turn a principled young man into a doper. Then, after a two-year suspension, he writes of the relief and the joy he felt to be competing clean — and evangelically so — again.

The last word of Millar's book is "redemption". His experience and his rebirth came to define his career. Wiggins's career is largely defined by a Yellow Jersey that we cannot completely believe in.

You wonder if Wiggins could ever talk openly about 2012 and triamcinolone. You wonder, too, if that would earn him the peace of mind it did Millar. But you don't know, then, if that would lose him his Yellow Jersey.

It would seem, instead, that he is likely to stay in that purgatory, a place where cycling has left many from the peloton of old — struggling to make sense of the past, floundering for a place in the future. It is hard to watch.

Atmosphere at Milan derby rivalled London 2012 - so why demolish San Siro?

The Milan derby on Wednesday: so loud, so extraordinarily atmospheric from beginning to end. A privilege and a pleasure to be there — it triggered a conversation about the best ever sporting occasions — as in the loudest, most atmospheric.

Short of a decibel meter, I have been having a go at this. I saw Neymar score the winning penalty to win Brazil gold at the Rio Olympics; that was thunderous, though for South American riotousness, I suspect Boca Juniors versus River Plate would top it.

I also thought back to Napoli. I only saw their

round-of-16 home leg against Eintracht Frankfurt, but they seem to have a very special, head-splitting thing going on. The images of their home-town scudetto celebrations are ridiculous.

For football, my previous loudest crowd was Saudi Arabia versus Mexico at the World Cup in Qatar. For rugby, I've never seen anything to match France winning the grand slam in March. That had a sense of occasion to match Milan.

Clearly, it has to be a home-town thing. Probably the most uniquely special occasion I've witnessed in a UK arena was Jess Ennis running home to gold in the

800m of her Olympic heptathlon. That was London Olympic hysteria and Super Saturday madness at its height.

But it doesn't have to be either a vast or a national thing: you pack the MEN Arena (as it was then called) in Manchester with well-fuelled Ricky Hatton fans, on an evening when he is the underdog but manages to take the IBF light welterweight title off Kostya Tszyu and you have an unusually raucous, very special atmosphere.

I also cling to a fond, emotional memory of Cathy Freeman winning the 400m in the Sydney Olympic Stadium in 2000. All that

pressure on the home-town girl, the Australians' only real hope on the track. That was before camera phones, but as she lapped the track that night, the sound filling the heavens, it looked as though a Mexican wave of flashbulbs was following her progress.

I'm not going to give a winner, because you just don't experience sport subjectively that way. But having returned from Milan, you do think back to the San Siro, that magnificent, high football cathedral where it seems that the whole 75,000-strong crowd is sitting above pitchside, and wonder: do they really want to pull it down?

