

= Steve Bruce =

Stephen Roger " Steve " Bruce ( born 31 December 1960 ) is an English professional football manager and former player who is currently without a club , having left Hull City in July 2016 . Born in Corbridge , Northumberland , he was a promising schoolboy footballer but was rejected by several professional clubs . He was on the verge of quitting the game altogether when he was offered a trial with Gillingham . Bruce was offered an apprenticeship and went on to play more than 200 games for the club before joining Norwich City in 1984 , winning the Football League Cup in 1985 .

In 1987 , he moved to Manchester United , with whom he achieved great success , winning the Premier League , FA Cup , Football League Cup and European Cup Winners ' Cup . He also became the first English player of the 20th century to captain a team to the Double . Despite his success on the field , he was never selected to play for the England national team . Commentators and contemporaries have described him as one of the best English players of the 1980s and 1990s never to play for his country at full international level .

Bruce began his managerial career with Sheffield United , and spent short periods of time managing Huddersfield Town , Wigan Athletic and Crystal Palace before joining Birmingham City in 2001 . He twice led Birmingham to promotion to the Premier League during his tenure of nearly six years , but resigned in 2007 to begin a second spell as manager of Wigan . At the end of the 2008 ? 09 season he resigned to take over as manager of Sunderland , a post he held until he was dismissed in November 2011 . Seven months later , he was appointed manager of Hull City , and has since led the club to two promotions to the Premier League , as well as the 2014 FA Cup Final .

= = Early life = =

Bruce was born in Corbridge in Northumberland , the elder of two sons of Joe and Sheenagh Bruce . His father was local , and his mother had been born in Bangor in Northern Ireland . The family lived in Daisy Hill near Wallsend , and Bruce attended Benfield School .

Bruce , a boyhood fan of Newcastle United , claims to have sneaked into St James ' Park without paying to watch the team play , saying " I have always been a Newcastle lad and when I was a kid , I crawled under the turnstiles to get in to try and save a bob or whatever it was . They were my team , I went to support them as a boy and being a Geordie it 's in @-@ bred , you follow the club still the same today . " Like several other future professionals from the area , he played football for Wallsend Boys Club . He was also selected for the Newcastle Schools representative team , and at the age of 13 was among a group of players from the team selected to serve as ball boys at the 1974 Football League Cup Final at Wembley Stadium .

Having been turned down by several professional clubs , including Newcastle United , Sunderland , Derby County and Southport , Bruce was about to start work as an apprentice plumber at the Swan Hunter dockyard when he was offered a trial by Third Division club Gillingham , whose manager Gerry Summers had seen him playing for Wallsend in an international youth tournament . He travelled down to Kent with another player from the Wallsend club , Peter Beardsley , but although Gillingham signed Bruce as an apprentice , they turned Beardsley away . At the time Bruce was playing as a midfielder , but he was switched to the centre of defence by the head of Gillingham 's youth scheme , Bill Collins , whom Bruce cites as the single biggest influence on his career .

= = Playing career = =

= = = Gillingham = = =

Bruce spent the 1978 ? 79 season in Gillingham 's reserve team and , despite playing in defence , scored 18 goals to finish the season as top scorer . In January 1979 , he was selected to represent the England Youth team , and he went on to gain eight caps , participating in the 1980 UEFA

European Under @-@ 18 Championship . He came close to making his debut for the club 's senior team in May 1979 , but Summers decided at the last minute that , as Gillingham were chasing promotion from the Third Division , Bruce was not yet ready to handle the pressure of the occasion . He eventually made his senior debut in a Football League Cup tie against Luton Town on 11 August 1979 , and made an immediate impact in the team , winning the club 's Player of the Year award at the end of the 1979 ? 80 season . He went on to make more than 200 appearances for the club , and was twice voted into the Professional Footballers ' Association 's Third Division Team of the Year .

Confident that he was being targeted by clubs from higher divisions , Bruce resolved not to sign a new contract with Gillingham when his existing deal expired at the end of the 1983 ? 84 season . In an April 1983 match against Newport County , he attempted , in a moment of anger , to deliberately injure opposition player Tommy Tynan , but connected awkwardly and succeeded only in breaking his own leg , leaving him unable to play again for six months . He returned in time to play a key role in Gillingham achieving two draws against Everton in the FA Cup in 1984 , attracting the attention once again of scouts from First Division clubs . Arthur Cox , manager of Bruce 's beloved Newcastle United , expressed an interest in signing the player , but resigned from his job before any further action could be taken . Bruce eventually opted to sign for Norwich City in August 1984 for a fee variously reported as £ 125 @,@ 000 or £ 135 @,@ 000 . In 2009 he was voted into Gillingham 's Hall of Fame .

= = = Norwich City = = =

Bruce began the 1984 ? 85 season by scoring an own goal in the first minute of his debut for Norwich against Liverpool , but went on to score the team 's winning goal in the semi @-@ final of the Football League Cup against local rivals Ipswich Town , and was named man of the match in Norwich 's victory in the final . Bruce was voted Norwich City Player of the Year , but the team was relegated to the Second Division . Bruce played in every match as Norwich won promotion back to the top division at the first time of asking in the 1985 ? 86 season , after which he was chosen to replace the departing Dave Watson as club captain . The following season he helped the club to its highest ever league finish of fifth position .

In 1987 , he was chosen to captain the England B team in a match against the full national team of Malta , but it was to be his only appearance in an England shirt , and he has subsequently been described as one of the best defenders of his era never to be selected for the full England team . Bruce later stated , " I bumped into former England manager Bobby Robson in Benfica ( sic ) . He came up to me and said ' I should have capped you ' . It was nice to hear but it still didn 't get me one .... I 'll always be a little disappointed I didn 't get one . "

Bruce began to attract the attention of big @-@ name clubs in late 1987 , with Manchester United , Tottenham Hotspur , Chelsea and Rangers all reported to be interested in signing him . Manchester United quickly emerged as the front runners for his signature , and Bruce publicly expressed his desire to sign for the club . The deal came close to collapsing when Norwich asked for a transfer fee of £ 900 @,@ 000 after initially agreeing to accept £ 800 @,@ 000 , leading to Bruce refusing to play any further matches for the club , which he felt was jeopardising his dream move . On 17 December 1987 , shortly before his 27th birthday , the deal was concluded and Bruce officially left Carrow Road , for a fee reported as £ 800 @,@ 000 or £ 825 @,@ 000 . Norwich fans remembered his contribution , and in 2002 voted him into the Norwich City Hall of Fame .

= = = Manchester United = = =

Bruce made his Manchester United debut in a 2 ? 1 win over Portsmouth on 19 December 1987 , and played in 21 of United 's remaining 22 league fixtures , helping the club to a top two place in the First Division for the first time since 1980 . The team only finished in mid @-@ table in the following season , prompting manager Alex Ferguson to bring in several new players , including Gary Pallister , who joined the club in August 1989 from Middlesbrough . His partnership with Bruce in the centre

of defence was described in 2006 by the then @-@ United captain , Gary Neville , as the best in the club 's history . " Dolly and Daisy " , as the pair were affectionately known , are described as " arguably the best " on the official Manchester United website . Bruce and Pallister were part of the team that won the 1990 FA Cup final against Crystal Palace in a replay .

Following the lifting of the five @-@ year ban on English clubs from European competitions , which had been imposed after the Heysel Stadium disaster , United became England 's first entrants into the UEFA Cup Winners ' Cup in the 1990 ? 91 season . Bruce played regularly , and scored three goals , in the team 's progress to the final against FC Barcelona . He came close to scoring the first goal , only for Mark Hughes to deflect the ball over the line and claim the goal , and United went on to win the game 2 ? 1 . This was a particularly high @-@ scoring season for Bruce , who found the net 13 times in the First Division and 19 times in total in all competitions . He also played again at Wembley , in the Football League Cup final , in which United were defeated by Sheffield Wednesday of the Second Division .

Bruce missed several weeks of the 1991 ? 92 season when he underwent an operation on a longstanding hernia problem , in which Leeds United , after a season @-@ long tussle , beat Manchester United to the championship by four points . Bruce helped United win their first @-@ ever League Cup in April 1992 , captaining the team in the final in place of the injured Bryan Robson . Injuries continued to take their toll upon Robson during the 1992 ? 93 season , leading to Bruce captaining the team in the majority of United 's matches during the first season of the new Premier League . Bruce scored two late goals in a win over Sheffield Wednesday which proved decisive in United winning the inaugural Premier League title , the first time the club had won the championship of English football since 1967 , and he and Robson received the trophy jointly after the home victory over Blackburn Rovers on 3 May .

At the height of his success with United , Bruce was contacted by Jack Charlton , manager of the Republic of Ireland national team , who had discovered that , due to his mother 's place of birth , Bruce was eligible to play for Ireland . Bruce states in his autobiography that further investigation revealed that , while his earlier appearance for England B in a friendly match was not an issue , his appearances for the England Youth team in a UEFA @-@ sanctioned tournament prohibited him from playing for the senior team of another country . He has subsequently claimed that he chose not to play for Ireland as it would have caused problems for his club at a time when the Premier League restricted the number of foreign players that a club could include in its team .

United dominated English football in the 1993 ? 94 season , winning a second consecutive Premier League title and then defeating Chelsea in the FA Cup final to become only the fourth team , and Bruce the first English captain , to win The Double in the 20th century , The 1994 ? 95 season was a disappointing one for Bruce and United , as the club failed in its bid to win a third consecutive Premier League title and lost to Everton in the FA Cup final .

During the following season Bruce was offered the job of manager by three different clubs , but Ferguson refused to allow him to pursue the opportunities as he felt the player still had a role to play in the United team . Bruce made a further 30 Premier League appearances , as United managed to overcome a 12 @-@ point deficit to Newcastle United to win the championship once again . A week later he was left out of United 's squad for the FA Cup final due to a slight injury . At the end of the match Eric Cantona , who had captained the team and scored the only goal in a 1 ? 0 win over Liverpool , attempted to persuade Bruce to be the one to receive the trophy , but Bruce declined . Ferguson denied that Bruce 's omission was a sign that his time at the club was nearing an end , but Bruce , then 35 years old , believed that he would be unlikely to be selected for the team during the year remaining on his contract . He opted instead to join First Division club Birmingham City on a free transfer , having signed a contract valued at nearly £ 2 million over two years , which made him one of the highest @-@ paid players in the country .

= = = Later playing career = = =

Bruce was among five former Premier League players signed by Birmingham manager Trevor Francis to add experience to a squad expected to challenge for promotion . He was made captain of

the team , but his Birmingham career was dogged by a series of disagreements with Francis . Director David Sullivan felt the need to publicly deny rumours that Bruce was lined up to replace Francis as manager after the club 's stock market flotation . While playing for Birmingham , Bruce was the subject of several bids from his old Manchester United colleague Bryan Robson to sign for Middlesbrough , but the transfer never happened .

The 1997 ? 98 season saw Bruce dropped for the first time in his career , for a match against former club Gillingham , and he described himself as " hurt and unhappy " at being left out . By November 1997 he was being left out more frequently , and his omission against Nottingham Forest provoked a public war of words , which fuelled rumours that the manager was to be dismissed and that Bruce would take over as caretaker until the end of the season . At the end of the season he accepted the post of player @-@ manager of Sheffield United . Though the deal was delayed while Birmingham attempted to negotiate a transfer fee for his playing contract , he took up his new position on 2 July 1998 . He played 11 matches for the club before retiring as a player , his final appearance being in a home match against Sunderland on 28 November 1998 .

= = Style of play = =

During the early part of his career , Bruce 's sometimes over @-@ enthusiastic playing style , which he later described as " rampaging " , caused him disciplinary problems . He later developed into a solid and dependable all @-@ round player , characterised as " an honest trier who made the absolute most of limited natural ability " . In his prime , he was particularly noted for his calm and deliberate passing of the ball , and his ability to control it under pressure , often with his chest . At the time , Mark Wright of Liverpool was said to be the only other centre @-@ back able to match Bruce 's level of skill in these areas .

Bruce was also known for his unusually high goalscoring rate for a centre @-@ back , resulting from a combination of his ability to powerfully head the ball and his effectiveness in taking penalty kicks . Although lacking poise and grace , and often criticised for his lack of pace , his bravery and willingness to take knocks from opposition players made him the " heart " of the defence during his time with Manchester United . He was well known for continuing to play even when injured , including returning to the United team at short notice in 1992 even though he was awaiting an operation on a hernia . His indomitable spirit and motivational abilities were deemed vital to the United team , and Alex Ferguson has commented on his " determination and heart " .

= = Playing statistics = =

= = Managerial career = =

= = = Early managerial career = = =

In his first season as a manager , Bruce guided Sheffield United to eighth place in the First Division , nine points away from a place in the play @-@ offs . He also caused controversy when he attempted to take his team off the pitch during an FA Cup match against Arsenal . Bruce felt that the " Gunners " had broken an unwritten rule of sportsmanship by failing to return the ball to United , who had intentionally kicked it out of play to allow an injured player to be attended to . Although the game eventually continued to a finish , it was later declared void and replayed . In May 1999 , Bruce resigned from his post after just one season in charge , citing turmoil in the club 's boardroom and a shortage of funds for transfers . He contemplated leaving football for a job in television but was persuaded by Huddersfield Town owner Barry Rubery to become the club 's manager .

Huddersfield were early promotion contenders in the 1999 ? 2000 season , winning six consecutive matches to rise to third place in the First Division table by late November , but lost form and failed to reach the play @-@ offs . The team continued to struggle at the start of the 2000 ? 01 season ,

gaining just six points from 11 matches , and Bruce was sacked in October 2000 . He then became involved in a dispute with Rubery , who accused him of " wasting " £ 3m on players and having " an ego to feed " . Although he was linked with the manager 's job at Queens Park Rangers , Bruce remained out of the game until he was appointed manager of Wigan Athletic in April 2001 . The team reached the Second Division play @-@ offs but lost in the semi @-@ finals , and Bruce almost immediately left the club , where he had been in charge for less than two months , to take over as manager of Crystal Palace .

Although his new club began the 2001 ? 02 season strongly , topping the First Division table and looking well placed for regaining the Premier League place that the club had last held in the 1997 ? 98 season , Bruce tendered his resignation less than three months into the season in order to return to Birmingham City as manager . Although he was initially prevented from doing so by an injunction taken out by Crystal Palace , he was eventually allowed to join the Midlands @-@ based club after a compensation package was agreed . By now he had acquired a reputation as a manager who rarely held down a job for a significant length of time .

= = = Birmingham City = = =

Upon his arrival , the Blues were in a mid @-@ table position in the First Division , but a lengthy unbeaten run saw the team qualify for the play @-@ offs . The team went on to beat Bruce 's former club Norwich City in the final after a penalty shoot @-@ out to gain promotion to the Premier League , ending a 16 @-@ year absence from the top level of English football . Birmingham spent the early part of the 2002 ? 03 season struggling near the foot of the Premier League table , but Bruce 's signing of Christophe Dugarry revitalised the team , who ended the season in 13th place and finished higher than local rivals Aston Villa for the first time since the 1970s .

The following season began well for Birmingham , who climbed as high as fourth in the table , but the team 's fortunes declined and they could only finish in tenth place at the end of the season . Despite this disappointment , Bruce signed a new contract in June 2004 designed to keep him at St Andrew 's for a further five years , but just two months later Freddy Shepherd , chairman of Newcastle United , was reported to have made Bruce his main target in the search for a new manager to replace Bobby Robson . The club was reportedly prepared to pay Birmingham more than £ 3 million in compensation , and Bruce himself was said to be keen to take over at St James ' Park , but he ultimately remained at Birmingham . He stated that " as far as I 'm concerned , I 've got a job to do [ at Birmingham City ] and I 'm determined to get on with it " , but it was also reported that Newcastle would have been required to pay a much larger compensation fee or face legal action had he been persuaded to switch clubs . Three years later Birmingham director | David Sullivan publicly stated that the club had " priced Steve out of a move to Newcastle " and gave the level of compensation which would have been involved as £ 7 million . Initial expectations were high for the 2004 ? 05 season , but the club once again finished in a mid @-@ table position , ending the season in 12th place .

Following the sacking of Graeme Souness as Newcastle manager in February 2006 , Bruce was again linked with the job , which ultimately went to Glenn Roeder . By this stage of the 2005 ? 06 season , Birmingham were struggling in the league , and on 21 March 2006 were beaten 7 ? 0 at home by Liverpool in the FA Cup quarter @-@ finals . Some supporters of the club began to call for his resignation , but Bruce insisted that he would fight on as manager . The team managed to climb out of the relegation zone for the first time in nearly six months after a win over Bolton Wanderers in early April 2006 . However , they were soon overtaken by Portsmouth , whose victory over Wigan Athletic on 29 April left Birmingham mathematically unable to match their points total and therefore relegated .

Although Bruce had the largest transfer budget in the division made available to him , Birmingham made a slow start to the 2006 ? 07 season in the Championship and , after a 1 ? 0 defeat at home to Norwich City , the team 's fifth consecutive match without a win , there were calls from fans and local journalists for the manager to be sacked . Bruce publicly accepted responsibility for the team 's poor run and admitted that he feared for his job , but the team responded with a 1 ? 0 victory over

Derby County , and then recorded a further five consecutive league victories to be joint leaders of the league table by late November . On 29 April 2007 , Birmingham secured promotion to the Premier League , with one match to play , by virtue of Derby County 's 2 ? 0 defeat at Crystal Palace . Chairman David Gold told the press " There have been some dark days but Steve has been outstanding . He was determined to bounce back . He has rebuilt the team and now we are all back where we want to be . "

= = = Wigan Athletic = = =

In May 2007 , Birmingham 's board agreed a new contract for Bruce , but the unwillingness of the club 's prospective purchaser Carson Yeung to ratify it left his future uncertain . In October 2007 , Bolton Wanderers were refused permission to speak to him about their managerial vacancy . Later that month , Bruce and Yeung held a meeting which reportedly had positive results . Bruce later claimed that Birmingham 's managing director Karren Brady had " shafted " him on a new contract with the club , and when Wigan Athletic requested permission to speak to Bruce about their managerial vacancy , he was receptive to their approach . As required under the terms of his contract , Wigan agreed to pay Birmingham a then @-@ world record compensation for the loss of his services of around £ 3m , and they were then allowed to speak to him . On 19 November , Wigan announced the signing of Bruce for a second time .

On 21 November , during a press conference which was intended to formally present Bruce as the new manager of Wigan , the club 's chief executive Brenda Spencer informed the media that the deal had been put on hold by " unknown issues " between Bruce and Birmingham City , reported to centre on the advance payment of the image rights element of Bruce 's contract at St Andrew 's . On 23 November 2007 Wigan announced that Bruce had now signed his contract and would officially rejoin the Latics . His first game in charge was a 1 ? 1 home draw with Manchester City on 1 December 2007 . Wigan spent the remainder of the season struggling against relegation , but the club secured Premier League survival with victory over Aston Villa in the penultimate game of the season . In September 2008 , Bruce was once again linked with the manager 's job at Newcastle United following the departure of Kevin Keegan .

Bruce led Wigan to an 11th @-@ place finish in the 2008 ? 09 season , despite the loss of midfielder Wilson Palacios to Tottenham Hotspur in the January transfer window .

= = = Sunderland = = =

On 27 May 2009 , Bruce was reported to have been given permission to talk to Sunderland about succeeding Ricky Sbragia , who resigned as manager after the last match of the season . Bruce was confirmed as the new manager of Sunderland on 3 June after signing a three @-@ year contract . He was joined at Sunderland by three of his former Wigan Athletic coaching staff , assistant Eric Black , goalkeeping coach Nigel Spink , and reserve team coach Keith Bertschin . In his first season at Sunderland , despite a run of 14 games without a win , Bruce led the Black Cats to a 13th @-@ place finish in the Premier League .

Bruce made wholesale changes to Sunderland 's squad , signing 13 players and selling 15 in his first 18 months at the club . On 25 February 2011 , Bruce signed an extension to his contract , keeping him at Sunderland until 2014 , with chairman Niall Quinn stating that " In only 18 months he has reshaped our squad beyond recognition , bringing in some fantastically talented players . He embodies the ethos of teamwork and the importance of camaraderie in creating a wonderful spirit of togetherness amongst the players and staff " .

Bruce was dismissed as manager on 30 November 2011 , with Sunderland in 16th position following a poor run of form which culminated with a 2 ? 1 home defeat to bottom club Wigan four days earlier . He later linked his dismissal from the managerial post with the fact that he is a fan of Newcastle United , Sunderland 's bitter rivals .

= = = Hull City = = =

On 8 June 2012 , Bruce was appointed as manager at Championship side Hull City on a three @-@ year contract . In his first season with the club , he led them to promotion to the Premier League , clinching second place in the Championship on the final day of the season . The following season , the " Tigers " came 16th with a club record tally of 37 points , and reached the final of the FA Cup for the first time . They took a two @-@ goal lead in the first ten minutes of the final , but opponents Arsenal scored a goal in each half to take the game into extra @-@ time and then scored a third to win the trophy . Reaching the final qualified Hull for the 2014 ? 15 UEFA Europa League , their first European campaign .

In March 2015 , Bruce signed a three @-@ year contract extension . A run of poor form left Hull near the bottom of the table going into the final game of the 2014 ? 15 season and needing to defeat Bruce 's former club Manchester United to stand any chance of avoiding relegation . They could only manage a 0 ? 0 draw and were relegated to the Championship . The poor performances of a numbers of players signed by Bruce , including club record signing Abel Hernández , were identified as key factors in the club 's failure to remain in the Premier League .

In January 2016 , Bruce won the Football League Championship Manager of the Month after leading Hull to four victories ; Hernández , who scored six times , got the players ' equivalent . Hull finished the season in fourth , qualifying for the play @-@ offs , where they defeated Derby County in the semi @-@ finals . In the final on 28 May , a 25 @-@ yard goal from Mohamed Diamé against Sheffield Wednesday won Hull promotion to the Premier League for the second time during Bruce 's spell in charge . Bruce said after the game that he had considered resignation following the team 's relegation , and would hold talks with the prospective new owners to be assured of his future . In July 2016 , with his future at Hull seemingly still uncertain , he was interviewed by officials of The Football Association concerning the vacant position of manager of England . Three days later , Bruce met with Hull City officials and announced his resignation later that day amid claims he became frustrated by a lack of transfer activity at the club .

= = Managerial statistics = =

As of match played 28 May 2016 .

= = Honours = =

= = = Playing = = =

= = = = Club = = = =

Norwich City  
Football League Cup  
Winner : 1985  
Football League Second Division  
Champion : 1985 ? 86  
Manchester United  
Premier League  
Champion : 1992 ? 93 , 1993 ? 94 , 1995 ? 96  
FA Cup  
Winner : 1990 , 1994 , 1996  
Runner @-@ up : 1995  
Football League Cup  
Winner : 1992  
Runner @-@ up : 1991 , 1994

Charity Shield :

Winner : 1990 ( shared ) , 1993 , 1994

European Cup Winners ' Cup

Winner : 1991

European Super Cup

Winner : 1991

===== Individual =====

Premier League 10 Seasons Awards Domestic Team of the Decade

===== Manager =====

===== Club =====

Birmingham City

Football League Championship

Runner @-@ up : 2006 ? 07 ( promoted to the Premier League )

Play @-@ off winner : 2002 ( promoted to the Premier League )

Hull City

FA Cup

Runner @-@ up : 2013 ? 14

Football League Championship

Runner @-@ up : 2012 ? 13 ( promoted to the Premier League )

Play @-@ offs 2016 ( promoted to the Premier League )

===== Individual =====

Hull City

Football League Championship Manager of the Month : December 2012 , January 2016

===== Life outside football =====

===== Personal life =====

Bruce has been married since February 1983 to Janet ( née Smith ) , who is also from the Hexham area , and went to the same school as Bruce . The couple have two children , Alex ( born 1984 ) and Amy ( born 1987 ) . Alex is also a footballer , and was signed by his father for Hull City in July 2012 . He had previously played under his father 's management at Birmingham City , but left the club in 2006 , in part due to accusations of nepotism levelled at his father . Amy was linked romantically with Aston Villa player Lee Hendrie in tabloid newspaper stories in 2004 , which provoked an angry response from her father , who described the reports as " lies " , and claimed that journalists had gone so far as to contact his doctor and examine his household waste in an attempt to uncover gossip . In September 2004 , Bruce was involved in an altercation outside his home with two men who were attempting to steal his daughter 's car . The affray left him with facial injuries but did not prevent him from travelling to a Premier League match the same day . After the incident one newspaper attempted to connect it with the allegations concerning Hendrie , leading Bruce to contemplate legal action .

===== Other activities =====



In addition to an autobiography , *Heading for Victory* , Bruce has published three novels , *Sweeper !* , *Defender !* and *Striker !* , featuring the exploits of fictional footballer manager Steve Barnes . *Sweeper !* , released in 1999 , was described by a critic for *The Independent* as " surprisingly punchy and pacey , although the plot is essentially ludicrous " .