



TOP KEEPER HAS GOAL FOR FUTURE

Stuart Hammonds reports

Stereotypically a professional footballer's future employment involves pulling pints in a pub they own, pulling no punches with their views in the media, or pulling on their tracksuit to manage or coach.

Fraser Digby, the former Manchester United, Swindon Town, Crystal Palace, QPR and Kidderminster goalkeeper, is a little different.

While former colleagues landed jobs at the hundreds of academies developed at all levels of English football over recent years, 40-year-old Digby has been doing his own bit to encourage the stars of tomorrow by helping Non-League clubs relocate to brand new community-orientated stadia as business development manager for Sports Solutions GB.

"The beauty of this job is that I am still involved in football, the game I love, and that is why I'm so keen on helping clubs," says Digby, who also had a spell at Thurrock in the Ryman League before calling time on his playing days in 2003.

Anyone who believed the former Premiership stopper's involvement in the grass-roots game was limited to that short spell would be mistaken, however.

He's also turned out for Juventus – no, not that one – in the Swindon Sunday League, and last week signed forms as cover for Toolstation Western League club Devizes Town, where his 17-year-old son Josh is an emerging midfielder.

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But it's in his day job that he gets his biggest kicks these days.

"I can see how the clubs want to get the kids on board because they are the future," says Digby. "If you've got the facilities and you are open to the community, it's amazing what can be done.

"Our flagship project is at Cirencester Town, and to see the difference there now compared to what they used to have is unbelievable. They've got over 350 kids, girls teams, women's teams, and they were the first Non-League club to have an academy.

"It's fantastic to see how they've come on. Our team is a coming together of several key personnel who worked on their development, so we can offer that sort of expertise to as many clubs as we can."

Sports Solutions GB is a company that acts as a one-stop-shop for sports clubs wanting to move or improve their ground to increase revenue streams and community activity. They deliver the planning, selling and acquisition of land, design, construction, the maintenance, off-field revenue streams and business plans for the club. They can even source lawnmowers to keep the pitches in tip-top condition and introduce potential sponsors.

The man behind the company is Ken Chapman, ex-chairman at Swindon and formerly an executive director at Southern League Ciren. A year ago he introduced his plan to his former goalkeeper, who had been working in corporate PR and marketing for Swindon and other local companies since hanging up his gloves.

Chapman and chairman Steve Abley had overseen Cirencester's 2002 move to the Corinium Stadium. Their old 3.5 acre ground was sold for development at £1.5m, with a further £480,000 coming in grant aid from the Football Foundation and £200,000 courtesy of the Football Stadia Improvement Fund.

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“The new 17.5 acre site on the edge of town cost £350,000, and with the extra money they were able to build a facility which is totally sustainable for years to come,” said Digby.

“It’s got everything they require; six pitches, two function rooms, space for a marquee, an indoor pitch with third generation AstroTurf and eco-friendly things, like the recycling of the pond water to water the pitch.”

Cirencester’s off-field facilities, including the indoor training dome which proves a popular venue for local five-a-side tournaments, produces a significant income each year, so the club doesn’t have to rely on a major benefactor.

Digby says: “I had lunch with Ken, who I’ve known for almost 20 years. He is passionate about his football and can still be found at every Cirencester game.

“He said that he’d had so many clubs come up to him asking how he managed to achieve the kind of facility they have. Ken had one of the biggest town planning businesses in the country, and he told me he was thinking of starting another firm to look after sports clubs’ relocation and business needs.

“I thought it was a great idea and wanted to get involved to help use my knowledge and contacts in the game to try to put something back. Ken started to put the team together that is now Sports Solutions GB.

“He doesn’t get heavily involved with the planning side of it now, but he knows everyone within football and business, connected with land and the finances. He is very well known and respected in a lot of circles, so he is the ideal person to be the face of the company.

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“Ken and I are the football side of the business, along with projects director Anna Kocerhan and head of projects South Karen Woolland, who have come over from the Football Foundation because they wished to be part of what we want to achieve.

“Anna was general manager and vice-chair at Cirencester, was offered a position at the Football Foundation because they were so impressed when dealing with her. What she doesn't know about obtaining funding and development is not worth knowing.

“Karen also has a tennis background with the LTA, and others on the team have athletics, cricket and rugby backgrounds. With the Olympics coming up in 2012 and the need for more facilities and kids' involvement, our work can only be beneficial to every sport.

“Chris Bevan, the managing director, was acquisitions surveyor for Fitness First. He joined them when they only had eight clubs and left them with over 200 worldwide.

“I was at a tennis club the other day, and the chairman said ‘I don't think you're going to be able to get any land for us'. Chris has already got somewhere lined up. His strength is in land acquisition and knowing what is available.

“We can offer such a good product, and we want to help all clubs get bigger, better facilities that can help them be more sustainable in the future and act as the hub of their community.”

The team has already helped Burnham build a new main stand and conference centre at The Gore, and has another dozen projects in progress including one former Southern League club who were on the verge of going bust, but have been saved by Sports Solutions GB.

It also gives him the chance to look up old colleagues, like Sheffield FC assistant-manager Lee Walshaw, who was a team-mate in the Sheffield Schools team.

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“I hadn’t seen Lee for 25 years,” says Digby, “so that’s the other benefit to this job. If we can help a club we will. By renewing acquaintances with people like Lee we may be introduced to clubs who do need help.

“For almost 20 years I had the buzz of playing with all of those thousands of people watching.

“My buzz now is to get clubs on board and to actually help them become successful Non-League clubs with hopefully a view to getting into the Football League.”

He stood between them more than 600 times in his playing career. Nowadays Fraser Digby is focussed on moving the goalposts to help Non-League clubs prosper.

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