

**How would you sum up the 2015/16 season?**

The club as a whole continued to move forward during 2015/16 both on and off the pitch. We're hoping that there will be another set of very good financial figures to report for this period. Our fanbase, attendance, continued to grow; commercial revenue continued to grow; and there was an obvious improvement on the pitch as well. To sum it up as a business it continued to move in the right direction.

Did you achieve targets that you'd set yourselves at the beginning of the season?

As we've always said, when you're Portsmouth in League 2, off the field pretty much all the targets were achieved. We were up on budget across a whole range of barometers that we set ourselves at the start of the year. The primary aim this year on the pitch was to improve on last season and in that respect we did improve, although our target, as Portsmouth in L2 is to try and achieve promotion. In fact that would be the case whatever league we are in. We fell short of that this year.

On the pitch there's a difference, isn't there, between an aspiration and a target? Paul Cook was famously quoted at the beginning of the season as saying the target was "promotion, no messing" and some fans have used that as a reason to question his position.

Yep. Let's just say as an example that our commercial revenue is £500k. And we set ourselves a target of £1m, and we achieve £900k. Although we haven't achieved our target, we would still call it a very good year.

You have to be careful, and I'm always careful about putting that kind of pressure on the manager, although to be fair Paul actually embraces that pressure and wants to put that kind of pressure on himself. It's a difficult one, let's face it. The aspiration for us this season was to achieve promotion. Make no bones about it, the manager has said it, the Chairman has said it, But we fell short. However it was still a very successful season.

There's a fine line between aspiration and a target. We aspired to go up this year, and we always will, but so will every club. Not every one of them will achieve it, though.

What targets do you think the club might achieve in the coming year?

Firstly it's important that we continue to build on the off field success that we've achieved during the first three years of fan ownership. That's vitally important because you can have 3-4 good years but if you're not careful that can get wiped out easily in one year if you don't keep your eye on that particular ball.

There's still going to be a lot more improvements. The other two pitches at the training ground, the academy pitches, should be coming on line for the summer, which is absolutely fantastic. Kids are continuing to come through from the academy, and again that's another massive positive. And on the pitch we will be looking to improve on sixth place – our new benchmark – for the coming season. Whether that gets us promotion or not, who knows? There's a lot of variables in that, but we all want to progress from that and will be making every effort to ensure we do.

There's a lot of stadium works that we have to address, but nothing major is going to happen until the review process is complete and a decision made on future location, and it is likely to take a year after that before any work is started.

You mentioned the kids coming out of the academy - how is the recruitment at the other end of the academy....is that good too?

That is something that we're looking at. Hopefully in the not too distant future we will be announcing some changes in our recruitment which will encompass what we are trying to do in the academy as well. So again there's strong building blocks continuing to be laid.

**Can you explain a little bit about the processes involved in recruiting players?**

With Paul he knows what budget he's got, and he knows what's committed in his existing budget, so the balance is effectively what he's got to play with. He gives us a list of the players he would like in different positions which we explore. We tend to have a budget for each position.

Myself and Tony Brown, our FD, initially speak to the agents, if the player is out of contract, or the clubs if they are in contract, to see what kind of deal can be struck. That can take a fair bit of to-ing and fro-ing before we come to a figure. We would then present Paul with that figure, and he has to decide if he wants to go through with the deal. If the figure is outside of the budget for the position if he wants to go ahead he has to look at whether he can make a saving elsewhere.

It's a complex game of cat and mouse made more difficult by the involvement of agents, if I'm being truthful. Though to be fair they are mostly doing what they are paid to do, and that is to get the best deal for their client.

An added complication is when news of any interest is leaked out. We have a policy of not commenting on anything until the ink is drying on the contract, but that isn't always the case with others involved in the negotiations. But it can impact on a deal you think you've already made, which can be frustrating!

At any given time we can have between 5-10 players on the radar and we're negotiating with them, their agents and or their clubs in order to get a deal over the line.

We all have an idea of what each player will be worth – these are big assets – especially if there are transfer fees as there are not many fees involved at this level. So there will come a time when we just call a halt to the process and accept that we will not be getting such and such a player because the demands from the player, the agent or his current club are too high.

I'm a bit old school in that if I have agreed a deal in principle on the phone, that's a deal as good as done. Unfortunately, not everyone is like that and sometimes that agreement is used to up the ante with another club. It all adds to the frustration!!

I guess that eventually the message will get out to others that Portsmouth likes to do business in a certain way?

Yes, it does. But unfortunately not everyone will take heed of that, and to be fair we want to be swimming in a certain pool, and we have to accept the frustrations that come with it. If we don't play that game then the chances are we won't get the players we want.

From the outside it might seem that the close season is, apart from the small matter of player recruitment, a bit of R&R for the management team and staff at the club. Is there time to take a breath?

Not really! It's quite often the busiest time of the year. Season tickets are on sale; there's quite a lot of work being done around the stadium and the training ground and of course on the pitches; the finance team are busy getting the end of year accounts together. All this with it being the time when most of the staff want to, and are able to take a holiday, it ends up being pretty hectic! And that's without the added complication of player recruitment!. Obviously it's an ideal time to get things done without the interruption of football matches – work that has been delayed until the closed season because of the timescale.

Of course we also have to start planning for the pre-season, arranging games and booking transport and accommodation for that; plus once the fixture lists are out starting to look at arrangement for the away games.



Then I've got the League meeting to prepare for and attend. One of the things on the agenda this time is the suggested change to the structure of the League. It's not a time for decision making but we need to brush up on the paperwork and be able to take a view. Personally I can't see it being of benefit to us for a number of reasons.

Surprisingly enough there remain amongst the fan base those who continue to be unhappy with the current ownership model and would like to see an immediate substantial injection of cash in order 'to take this club forward'. Is there a queue of potential buyers outside your door?

Genuinely, I've not had one serious enquiry about someone buying the football club. That's me personally. Whether the board have, or the chairman has, that's a question for them, but the board have been very clear and transparent in saying that this model does work. Some clubs are having to have an injection from a 'benefactor' of £1m every season just to balance the books. That's not the model this club wants to be. There are examples all over the league of money being thrown at clubs without the positive outcomes one might expect. No guaranteed that throwing money on the pitch will mean success,

I've said before that at this level and in League 1 we have a model and competitive budget which means that we do not have to rely on cash from a wealthy owner, and that when we get to the championship will be the time for a review. Then we will be up against clubs with huge parachute payments or owners who are seriously wealthy.

Then there's a big decision for the shareholders, and we know that the Trust are aware of this and are giving serious thought to how the model might have to change and what safeguards must be in place.

If there is not a number of suitors for the club do you have a view of why that may be?

As I said earlier I've not had a 'serious' enquiry. Now, there's not a day goes by I don't get someone email saying I've got potential investors willing to invest into Pompey, can you tell me what you're looking at figures-wise. I always spin that on its head. And before I go to the board with it I need to know two things. One is who they are, and the other is some statement of their potential worth.

I'm not going to tell them what we need without that kind of information because the way things work in football is that before you know where you are there'll be rumours out that Pompey's up for sale and the figures are being bandied around and that person then has a mandate to go and find investors. That's not how we want to go about it. That's not where we are. We are not actively looking to sell the club.

However, it's a bit like a player, if someone comes in with a 'seriously' good offer, everything has to be considered. And by that I mean considered by the board, the Presidents and the Trust shareholders.

Mark was talking to Kim Richardson