

WELLBEING & CHALLENGES OF A PLAYING & COACHING CAREER

FEATURE / STEVEN REID INTERVIEW BY DR ANDREW SHAFIK

This is a transcript of the FMPA Podcast episode of the same name that was released in February 2023. It has been edited for clarity and to improve readability by Dr Elle Trezise, a member of the FMPA Education Team.

If you'd prefer to listen, episodes can be found on the [FMPA website](#), Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud and Spotify.

In this podcast episode host Dr Andrew Shafik, a medical doctor working in professional football and a Senior Editor in the FMPA Education Team, speaks to Steven Reid, a former professional football player who has played for Millwall, Blackburn Rovers, Burnley and West Bromwich Albion. He then moved into coaching, starting at Reading FC. He has also coached at Crystal Palace, Nottingham Forest and for the Scotland National Team. Steven is now pursuing a career in counselling and also wellbeing, confidence and leadership coaching.



Steven Reid



Dr Andrew Shafik

Andrew

Welcome to this Football Medicine and Performance Podcast. Today I am delighted to be joined by Steven Reid. Steven began his playing career at Millwall before a move to the Premier League with Blackburn Rovers. He then went on to play five more seasons in the Premier League with West Bromwich Albion and Burnley. Steven's coaching career began at Reading with Steve Clarke, helping them to a playoff final before moving on to Crystal Palace alongside Roy Hodgson. He then helped the Scotland National Team

to their first tournament in twenty-two years at the 2021 Euros. Steven left his role to concentrate on club duties at Nottingham Forest, helping them return to the Premier League after twenty-three years. After promotion, Steven decided to pursue a different career in wellbeing, confidence and leadership coaching alongside counselling studies. Today we're going to discuss Steven's journey, experiences and find out a little bit more about his journey as a player, coach and his life after coaching. Welcome, Steven.

Steven

Evening. Good to see you, Andrew.

Andrew

Thanks for joining us, Steven. That intro - really some career as a player and as a coach and obviously life after, but it would be interesting to start off by learning a bit about your journey as a player and some of the key challenges that you faced.

Steven

I started my playing career coming through the ranks at Millwall. During that time, it was kind of a centre of excellence and then you progressed into the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Before the scholarships you did your two-year YTS. I signed my first professional contract on my 17th birthday and, pretty quickly, there was a little group of us who broke into the first team quite early. Had a lot of success at Millwall, obviously: we got a promotion and things progressed well. Then it was that big move to the Premier League in 2003. Spent the remainder of my career in Premier League football but as I'm sure we'll get to, on the face of it this is success and the perception a lot of the time is seeing all the trappings of what that looks like, but it was a real challenge for many different reasons.

Andrew

Do you mind just touching on a few of those challenges? Some of the key ones that yourself and, I suppose, players generally experience alongside their playing career?





Steven

It started pretty early for me. I mean, even growing up I was a little bit of a worrier. I was slightly anxious probably as a kid growing up and then being involved in the football environment, especially leaving school and then going straight into the YTS scheme at Millwall, I felt different challenges in that: the dressing room banter and playing with a lot of senior pros. I just felt a pressure. I felt a sort of anxiety. That's a period where I was struggling to adjust to those pressures and dealing with playing in front of bigger crowds and the expectations and all that goes along with becoming a professional footballer. It became a little bit more of an issue when I signed my first professional contract and started playing first team football. It stopped being purely a game that I loved and purely a game that was fun and enjoyable with your mates. It became really serious quite soon in my career.

Andrew

Are some of the challenges different for different age groups coming through the YTS? Did you find the challenges quite different [when you were younger compared to] when you were a senior pro?

Steven

To be honest, when I was playing as a schoolboy at Millwall it was just excitement. It was excitement and anticipation of getting that YTS. I was always one of the, I guess, better players at that time. So, in a confident kind of way back then I expected to get a YTS but even at that time, I do remember the pressures were building around the YTS, around who was going to get one and who was going to get released. Because one of the first major steps in any professional's career is getting that scholarship, is getting that YTS contract. Because then it's effectively leaving the structured school life. I know there are other studies if you go into that scholarship programme and YTS. I did a leisure and tourism course when I was at Millwall doing my YTS but it was always around those times when a decision was being made that I really do remember those moments where guys are starting to feel the pressure, starting to get anxious. You'd see parents having these discussions on the sideline and obviously we've seen in a few of the programmes quite recently around academy football, seems to me that it's almost gone up to another level. I think that's partly

down to the nature of the world we live in. Think social media - now we've got access to everyone's lives. You can see the trappings. You can see what success brings to a lot of footballers' lives and celebrities' lives. I think it's now become a different landscape because back then I had no idea whatsoever what was going on in certainly other footballers' lives. It was just living in your own little football bubble.

Andrew

Tell us a bit about your journey into coaching and some of the challenges you faced during that time.

Steven

Just to finish off on the playing side, it's probably right for me to mention after my move from Millwall to Blackburn that brought another layer of - I've spoken about it recently - impostor syndrome: "am I good enough to be a Premier League player? Am I going to fit into this dressing room? Can I do it at that level? Am I going to get found out?" So, it took me a good season to a season and a half to believe that I actually belonged at that level. So that's when the stresses and

the pressures and the real mental health issues kicked into another gear for me.

It's also around the same sort of time that the injuries started to rear their ugly head, ranging from ruptured cruciate ligament which led to a chondral defect, had a micro-fracture and an ankle reconstruction bit later on at West Brom. So, alongside the mental health struggles, the physical injuries were also causing me a big problem and I guess that was, in a way why I even thought about going down the coaching route. I wasn't sure at the time, but I thought, "well, I'm injured. I need to do something." Because there's no guarantee that I was going to get back to that level. So, I made good connections when I was playing. I got on well with Steve Clarke and Roy Hodgson when I was at West Brom who were managers. When I was coming to the end of my playing career at Burnley, that's when I had a discussion with Steve Clarke and I made that decision in probably the December of my last season. That that was going to be it and I was going to pursue that journey into the coaching world.

Andrew

It's a really interesting point, I think, especially for medical and performance practitioners to hear that - something we're probably aware of - but when the mental health side of it was kicking in a little bit more some of the injuries and the physical health manifestations were of a very similar timing and both potentially going hand in hand or exacerbating one another. I don't know if you want to comment on that.

Steven

No, absolutely. What was going through my head when you were speaking there was what you become as a medic or a doctor - it's a more than just that. You're walking side by side with your players. I was out for three months with my pars defect in my lower back. So, I was out for a period of time. Got back from that. First week back I did my ACL. So, I was out for seven months. Got back from that for twenty games and then I was out for eleven months with a chondral defect and the micro fracture. So, you become as a physio or as a doctor, all things really. Might be a father figure, part-counsellor, a friend. All of these different support networks that you become is so important for that relationship, and I was so lucky during that time that I had unbelievable medical support.

I used to challenge them. I've got to be honest but I know Dave Fevre has spoken



All of these different support networks that you become is so important for that relationship, and I was so lucky during that time that I had unbelievable medical support



about it in, I think, a podcast he has done. He loved it. He loved players that wanted to be challenged. I remember I grabbed one of the S&C coaches and said, "right, this period of time I'm non weight bearing on my right leg for two months. Me and you are going to be in the gym at nine o'clock every morning for two months working on my left leg." Because there was that kind of theory that you get a little bit of overflow into your right leg. So, I was quite active in looking for that support and I found that they loved it. The S&C and the medical department really loved being challenged a little bit and being pushed. But, again, it's psychological skills that you need and what you do to support the players on their own journey. That's what I've personally found. When I had the strong medical departments behind me, it went so far to getting me back to fitness quicker.

Andrew

I suppose you've been at a range of clubs throughout your career and mentioned quite a few injuries there. We've already kind of touched on this but what are some of the best practices from medical practitioners that you've seen in those moments where you've needed them the most - as you mentioned e.g. being the father figure? Are there things specifically that you can pick out that you feel would be really important for players who have experienced similar?

Steven

From a human point of view, just that empathy. You know, a club doctor that I could speak freely to not just about the injury but just about where I was mentally. So that was always my first port of call when I ended up seeing Steve Peters for a period of time and when I was at Blackburn and that was me going to see Dr Phil Batty and saying, "I really think I need to go and

see someone." He had presented this to the squad which is brilliant. So, on the back of that I went to see the doc but had that relationship where I felt comfortable to do that. It was the same when I went to West Brom and had my issues.

Mark Gillett was great at 1-to-1s showing empathy and knowing where I was at physically and almost fighting your corner to get you days in the gym. Things like that. But one of the key ones I think during my rehab periods was when the physios mixed it up; it wasn't just your standard exercises, CV etc. etc. daily. It would be mixed up. Luckily, when I was at Blackburn we had a swimming pool, we had the beautiful countryside and we had facilities there so it might be a triathlon for the day. We might go out on the mountain bikes, get back and we're in the pool, got the rower side by side with the pool. It might be - at West Brom, where the doc gets in, Richie Woodhall, the former British champion, or maybe even European boxing champion, you know, just something to stimulate you a little bit just to keep things fresh and mixing it up. So, you're not just on the daily grind but I also noticed that the good ones would know when you were not in a great place and it might be, "right, just take a few days off" or "take a week off."

When I was having my issues with some of my serious injuries, especially the chondral defect, I had my eight to ten weeks non weight bearing and then a couple of my mates were in Thailand at the time. So, Dave Fevre went, "listen, at the end of your period of time doing the CPM machine and eight to ten weeks non weight bearing just off you go and just get away." You know, just stuff like that when they could tell that you need a little break. It's not all by the book. A lot of it is just that feel and those relationships.

Andrew

So interesting that a lot of it is that human touch side that you've spoken about there. A really key message that, I suppose, I've taken out is that it is not only the physical stimulus of different activities, but the new mental stimulus as well.

Steven

I find it's the same in coaching. Periodisation of your coaching philosophy usually means in the next day after a game you do the warm down. The guys that don't play will train but sometimes it just doesn't work mentally and for the feel of the group. Sometimes actually the best thing is to have a day off away from the training ground, clear the head, then physically it might be a four-day lead in or no days off in the week just to get you fully prepared. But sometimes it's about the feel, it's about the atmosphere in the dressing room and what the lads might need just to switch off from the game.

Andrew

It'd be interesting to get your experience - what did you find were some of the challenges moving from club and international football based on some of the bits we've spoken about? It'd be interesting to hear from you if you've gone through different changes and uncertainty with injury, communication between

medical staff, if you were in constant communication with staff yourself. It'd be interesting to hear that side of things.

Steven

Yeah, the major challenge with that is the amount you can do and the recovery period because more often than not a meet ahead of a Wednesday or Thursday international would be the Sunday night, but a lot of the time we might have the Celtic boys, might even be the Old Firm derby where you got Ryan Jack from Rangers and you got, John McLaughlin from Rangers and you got the Celtic players playing against each other on the Sunday. You might have Andy Robertson playing for Liverpool on the Sunday. So, they're recovering Monday and Tuesday. Then you're at match day minus one. So, can't do very much before the game on the Wednesday or the Thursday so it's actually how much you can do with the players. But I always found the dialogue was really good. The clubs were always really open about sharing data around the training loads of the players. We'd like to think we were quite sensible as coaches so we kind of knew about recovery days and how much the players can do.

Head of Performance Graeme Jones was fantastic with Scotland. He dealt with a lot of the liaising between the club and

the international team. He would often go out and visit the players, go into clubs for visits and catch up with the players as well. If players were injured, we might as coaches obviously check in with those players and see how they're getting on. So, I think the main challenge is they're not your players so sometimes you've just got to be wary of not knowing exactly how they are physically. You're not seeing them every day. You might not know to the exact detail what their training load or training week looks like. So, there are a lot of challenges with that. A lot of challenges again from a personal point of view and from a coaching point of view, was the gaps between games: you have a November international and then you've got to wait until March to see the players again. You hope that they turn back up in one piece.

Andrew

Now we've moved on to the coaching part of your career a little bit more, do you mind telling us a bit about when you were approaching the end and why you decided to leave coaching and set up on your own?

Steven

Yeah, I'd been thinking about it for a little while. I had quite a brief sort of break when I was at Crystal Palace. I stepped away from Crystal Palace in 2018 to take



a break but it didn't last too long. I was toying with the idea of exploring what I'm doing now back then, but to be totally honest I didn't really have a plan as to what it was going to look like or what I was going to do. I was still unsure whether I would go back into coaching after that break. I think I got a little bit scared with the uncertainty of going into the unknown, not being sure what it was going to look like. Then the phone rings again and you can quickly be back in it, back on the hamster wheel. Then I ended up being back in coaching for some time and I started to explore courses. I'd already got my level two counselling course by that stage and it's something that I've used personally, something that I believe in, and I've always wanted to do. I just felt going out at the top as well after a promotion with Forest was a great way to go out. Although I'd been thinking about it for some time and what I kind of wanted to do and want to get qualified in and you just simply can't do it when you're in a full-time coaching role. So, the decision was made to step out of it, get qualified in that but in the meantime, kind of be a mentor, crack on with the coaching that I'm doing with individuals - players and coaches.

I've gone to a couple of academies to present what the journey could look like - I present in all honesty a lot of factors that the players are likely going to face on the journey whether it be injury, whether it be the form, whether it be family pressures, whether it be living away from home, whether it be performance pressure, whether it is that imposter syndrome when a player gets a move, whether it is about episodes of panic attacks at different stages in my life which other players have shared with me since I shared this openly in the media.

It's just been nice as well to, bottom line, spend some quality time with the family.

The kids are at an age where I'm still kind of just clinging on to them. They're starting to get older and starting to do their own thing. Spending four out of the last seven years being away from them, I've realised that I don't want to miss out on too much more of that.

Andrew

You've mentioned a bit about the pathway into counselling. Tell us a bit about that part of the journey and a bit more about what you're doing now in your various roles - you mentioned going into clubs and some of the other bits and pieces.

Steven

I had counselling from quite a young age. I think probably from 17 I had quite an intense spell for a period of time. Then it sort of dipped into more sports psychology work through my football career. It was only when I left Crystal Palace that I felt like I needed that bit of help again. Forgetting the performance side of things, this was about just some issues that I was kind of going through and dealing with. All of the issues that we spoke about. So, did some work on myself then with a counsellor and it's just something that I believe in. It's something that I've wanted to pursue for quite a while. I've just got this almost dream of just having little set up - a little cabin in the garden that can be that safe space when fully qualified for that side of the work.

I think that the counselling side of the work is different to the coaching and the mentoring. The counselling is more about allowing that safe space for players and coaches to just get a lot off their chest that they feel. Because they're in football, they feel they can't moan about anything because a lot of people don't get it. It's a coaching and mentoring service and it's one that, along similar lines, players and coaches can come and share some of the

issues they're dealing with but it's also for talking about potential plans. Could be potential life after football. What does that look like? How can we go about finding out what that does look like? Whether it's the coaching journey, getting your Professional Footballers Association (PFA) number, you investigating when that coaching course might begin, it might be something completely away from football. You know, it might be a coach that is going through similar issues that I've been through in my coaching journey, and it's just allowing that space to talk about it and hopefully provide some of the tools that actually did help me in not only the mental side of it, but physically. Because you often find in coaching that as soon as the results dip, as soon as the pressures on, we can come away from all the stuff that we know makes us feel better and that helps us on that journey. So, it's been really interesting.

The presentations as well I think have been really useful to the academy players that I've spoken to. On the back of that there's been one or two that have sent WhatsApps after just wanting to pick my brains a little bit more because something's really resonated with them. I think it's important that what I have said to them is that I never knew any of this stuff existed when I was sixteen to twenty-one years old. I thought I was the only one experiencing all of these sorts of issues that were going on with myself. In football everyone looks like they're loving it. Everyone looks like they've not got a care in the world. I thought I was the only one carrying a lot of stuff. So, I think it just can be quite comforting for a lot of players to hear that I've had that journey, I've been through these issues. You're not alone and, by the way, even despite having all these challenges and issues I still played twelve years in the Premier League, played in the World Cup, coached in the Euros, coached in the Premier League and coached international football. So, many think that they can't do it because of what they're going through but with the right support and the right help it is possible.

Andrew

You've spoken really openly there but also mentioned a lot of really useful tools. You've had a very unique journey in the sense of your playing career, coaching career and going into the wellbeing, confidence and leadership coaching and now obviously the counselling studies as well. Do you have any recommendations for clubs looking to support not only players but support staff as well?



The counselling is more about allowing that safe space for players and coaches to just get a lot off their chest that they feel.





Steven

Well, that's a big issue. I think it's a massive issue because in terms of support networks, I've got to take my hat off to the PFA. Some of the work they do is incredible around support. With the counselling, obviously got that connection with Sporting Chance that I do some work with. They do all sorts: coaching badges, education support but that's for PFA members.

I always think to myself, if I'm support staff e.g. analyst, physio, masseur or chef in a football club, I'm not sure where they go to, to be honest. Sometimes it's not really that clear if you're a player or if you're a coach, but it's the support staff that are often doing the hours often not on great money, that are often living away from the family, dealing with all of those pressures in the high pressure world. But I think the number one thing for me is actually being in that good place yourself because I often found as a coach when I was having some struggles, when I was maybe going through a difficult time, you can't recognise it in others a lot of the time. You're so caught up in your own little bubble, it's very difficult to

recognise it in others but I think we need to create these environments where it is safe to effectively talk about this stuff. Need to have people in place that are skilled and can offer that support within the football club across the board. I know it's about players and it's about winning games, but it is having that open and transparent support and options for anyone within that football club. Whether it is a meeting at the start of the season to let every employee know: if you have an issue mentally or physically or going through a tough time, these are the processes that we've got in place and this is the support network we've got in place. But I think one of the key things is that it's external because of stigma. If someone has to go through a club's channels, there's a fear of "how does this look", a fear of "I'm not going to progress", a fear of "this might do me harm in my development at the club or on my journey going forward." But it is just finding that support network for everyone, all employees throughout the club, because I think at times it is all geared around the players, but I've seen first-hand that there's a lot of staff that put in a lot of hours that are going through a lot of issues themselves and almost don't know what to do.

Andrew

That's brilliant. Steven, I can only thank you very much for joining us today and sharing a lot of your insight having been on a very unique journey. But there's also a lot of key take homes, I think, for listeners. I know primarily a lot of our listeners are medicine and performance staff. So, having also worked not only with players but support staff across the board - as you mentioned - there's certainly a lot more that we can do in this space, something to support players but also to support the support staff by trying to tap into some of our own education and teaching. Also, what can we try to put in place to maximise not just the performance of the players, but to maximise the performance of support staff?

Listeners, we'll put up links for any articles and web links mentioned on the podcast. If you enjoyed today, please subscribe to the FMPA on our Spotify, SoundCloud or Apple Podcast accounts where you can reach all of our podcasts. Alternatively, our podcasts are also available for free via the podcast section of the [FMPA website](https://www.fmpa.co.uk).