

Life after the beautiful game

After eight years as a professional footballer and England star Rob Jones crashed out of the game through injury. A less strong character might not have been able to cope but, with the help of his family, Rob has fought back with a new career... setting up nursery schools!

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Pictures: Ian Park

As a passionate fan of 'the beautiful game' for many years, the thought of meeting ex-Liverpool and England footballer Rob Jones was an exciting prospect - even for an avid Manchester United supporter like myself!

Fans on both sides who remember Rob's Liverpool debut against Manchester United in 1991 were quick to spot the energetic young right-back's Man of the Match performance, notably because he marked Ryan Giggs completely out of the game. It is a memory that has earned the gushing praise of the Kop faithful and the grudging respect of the Stretford faithful.

I had firmly decided prior to our meeting that the interview should not focus on his illustrious playing career however, nor the unfortunate succession of injuries that forced him to retire in 1999 aged just 28. The injuries in particular have been analysed continuously for years, steadily reaching the point of exasperation.

We know all that there is to know on the subject. Therefore, consciously resisting the temptation of asking obvious questions, my hasty attempts to formulate ones that hadn't been asked countless times before initially proved difficult.

As The Stables Nursery School in picturesque Lower Whitley came into view, it dawned on me that a new chapter had opened in Rob Jones' life with a sense of purpose deep in contrast to his playing days. It is a chapter that I would discover has been built around being with his family and providing a valued service in the community with the nurseries he and his wife Sue have established.

"We just want to ensure that our nurseries provide the very highest quality of care and that the children are well looked after," explains Sue. "Our nurseries' ethos is to support the parents and nurture the children."

The laughs and giggles of contented kiddies reverberating round the playground is an encouraging sign that Rob and Sue's nurseries are doing well.

Many people would assume the career transition from top professional footballer to running a chain of nurseries would be an



Rob Jones in his heyday with Liverpool FC

unlikely and difficult process. For Rob and Sue however it was a perfectly natural step forward.

Rob benefited from the fact that he would have more time available to spend with his family and be able to assist Sue in the running of the nurseries. Sue had always wanted to become actively involved in childcare and nurseries so it was a great opportunity to fulfil her lifetime ambition.

"After Rob retired, we were obviously in a state of shock and felt we had to decide quickly what we were going to do next," she says.

"We spent the next four months thinking about things and planning our new move."

Luckily for the couple, fate played a kind hand as they chanced upon The Laurels Nursery School in Seockton Heath during a return visit to Sue's hometown of Appleton in 2001. They acquired the property and everything started to fall into place.

"It was brilliant that things took off with The Laurels so quickly.

Everything spiralled from there," says Rob.

Sue agrees: "We have five nurseries now - The Laurels, The Stables, Holborn Willows and the latest one is called Kalgarth Grange, which will be completed shortly. We have five more proposed around Cheshire that will come into action over the next five years."

"It's great that we have been able to expand around the area in a relatively short space of time but that has been due to the enormous amount of provision at our disposal. It's also encouraging for us that schools in the Warrington area have a good reputation. We are getting involved with the kids during the early stages and aiming to develop their skills and personalities."

Sue, who successfully completed a two-year childcare course in just six months, has also attained an NVQ2 in early years and childcare. Her impressive achievements serve as a strong basis when training staff in-house.

"The main priority is to ensure that all members of staff are provided with high standards of training," says Sue.

"In order to maximise the quality of childcare in our nurseries, Rob and I do our best to make sure that the staff are thoroughly prepared



Rob and Sue Jones outside The Stables nursery

and happy with all aspects of the set up."

Rob is cherishing the greater amount of time he now has for Sue and their three children, Naailie, 10, Amy, five, and Declan, two. It is probably the most significant change in his life since the football career as his playing days at Liverpool consumed his spare time. It is a change that the whole family has vigorously welcomed.

He says: "It's amazing that I now have plenty of time to devote to Sue and the kids. Christmases have been great because I feel I can put all my energy into the family and without having to worry about the obvious pressures that come with being a professional footballer."

"My social life these days is also more relaxed - a definite change for the better."

As well as helping Sue in the running of the nurseries, Rob is passing on his skills and experience to budding footballers around the north west with a series of soccer schools. Areas he has visited include Ellesmere Port and Appleton.

The sessions have been highly rewarding for both Rob and the youngsters. "The course is good and is designed to develop a range of skills and general fitness," says Rob.

"I have been really impressed with the standards of the players who have got involved and it's encouraging their interest in the courses has

spread rapidly. Those involved are really eager to learn. It's a privilege to provide an impetus and develop the talents of others."

Rob still enjoys playing in exhibition games so he keeps himself in shape. He has travelled around the world as a member of the Liverpool Legends squad, featuring Kop idols such as Terry Neal, Super Sub David Fairclough and Ian Rush. They are due to appear in Bangkok sometime this year.

He says: "I really enjoy touring with the team and we always have lots of fun. I enjoy it because I get to play with the stars. I looked up to as a youngster. It's a special feeling."

The overall mood in the Jones household is one of pure happiness, which under the unfortunate circumstances with Rob's career being mostly cut short, could have been an outcome of bleakier settings.

"We are as happy now with our lives as we have ever been," says Sue. "We remained optimistic and really pulled together. Things could have been a lot different but we had the support of our families and each other and thankfully we sorted ourselves out."

"We are perfectly settled here, the nurseries are doing great and we hope our happiness continues."

For more information on Rob and Sue's nurseries, contact Sarah Spencer at Foundation Nursery Group Ltd, on 01925 730055.

Relaxing at home



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