



**BOB MAYO:** The QPR co-chaplain at Loftus Road after burying a fans' ashes

# Football's unseen friends

By Joshua Jones

BEHIND the lavish lifestyle, footballers can often hide their personal struggles.

In tough times, they need a special kind of person to confide in. Someone they can trust. Someone like Bob Mayo.

Bob, alongside Cameron Collington, has been the chaplain at Queens Park Rangers for ten years. Since September 2016, Stuart Cashman has done the same at Brentford.

Although their roles range from burying fans' ashes to spiritual support, Bob and Stuart prioritise availability and relationship-building, providing a pair of ears for whoever needs them.

It echoes Sport Chaplaincy UK's mission statement: pastorally proactive, spiritually reactive.

The pair talk to everybody. The stewards. The first-teamers. The chief executives. They are simply available.

Stuart, 45, said: "I'm a bit self-deprecating and say my job is to interrupt people!"

"Injured players are often bored and pretty frustrated with life so they are happy to chat. Conversations are often not too deep and meaningful.

"It's just getting to know people and build up relationships, finding out about them. I'm poking my antenna out to listen for where somebody has got a pastoral need."

At a club with 12 managers in the past decade, the presence of Bob and Cameron at QPR gives welcome stability.

Bob, 55, said: "In a football club a lot of people come, a lot of people go.

"There's an element that the people who have been there so long provide a sense of continuity.

"You're one tackle away from injury. One month from the end of a contract. You need a few people just being there. To have a 'chappy' who just sits and talks with more ease in their time schedule, a portable pair of ears, is a great addition to have."

And it's at the darkest times chaplains are needed most.

Soon after joining QPR, Bob and Cameron had to deal with the deaths of two QPR players: Kiyon Prince, just 15, and 18-year-old first-team player Ray Jones.

Prince was stabbed, and Jones died in a car crash the following year. It was an understandably difficult time for the club.

Bob said: "We get drawn

in more during crises. We've had players over the years have family members die. It's been great for us to have relationships with these players."

Stuart handwrites cards and displays love and care to whoever requests it.

Managers usually appreciate having a chaplain around the club. Brentford's Dean Smith really saw the benefits at Walsall and warmly welcomed Stuart in.

But Bob has seen cases where chaplains are undervalued.

"We've had a couple of managers who've not felt so comfortable with chaplains. We've just had to pull back, wait and respect, work around the edges."

Nigel Pearson too enjoyed having former Leicester City chaplain Bruce Nadin around the club during his first spell in charge.

"Stop pestering the players, Rev!" he would joke. Pearson signed Bruce's leaving present with the phrase.

Bruce, 51, is now chaplain at Ajax Cape Town and notices a significant difference between his roles in the UK and South Africa.

He said: "The overarching emphasis at Leicester was on relationship building and on

pastoral care. In South Africa there's much greater openness to faith, the concept and idea of God, it's a lot easier to engage on that level. I get asked after every home game in the dressing room to close the evening in prayer."

The moment they realised they had been accepted was

when they became the brunt of the banter.

Whether that meant having your head size compared with Rob Green's, having a football thrown at you, or an ice bucket emptied over you.

Bob is wary, though, of giving it back: "It's a way of relieving pressure. They can

be quite harsh, they do give it hard but that's part of the culture which I'm lucky to be part of," he said.

"I've got to take it a little bit because it's their world and I'm below them in the pecking order. It's not my right to give it back. They're inviting me into their world, I'm their guest."



**BRUCE NADIN:** Ajax Cape Town's chaplain (far left) with the players