



Few would disagree it has been an eventful season for Accrington Stanley so far.

Despite failing to win in their opening 12 league matches, James Beattie's men managed to beat Championship Middlesbrough at the Riverside in the Capital One Cup.

A few blips aside, the Reds have gone from strength to strength and recently recorded a memorable 3-1 win over SkyBet League Two leaders Chesterfield despite being reduced to 10 men in the first half.

But, perhaps one the most consistent features of the club that's improving at an unprecedented rate is the successful community trust department.

Managed by former Stanley goalkeeper Martin Fearon, the unit has experienced many changes over the last four months.

In December, the Trust appointed four first team members as PFA ambassadors in charge of social inclusion (Luke

Joyce,) sports participation (Peter Murphy,) health (Dean Winnard,) and education (Nicky Hunt.)

Each member liaises with the trust, helps drive programmes and acts as a role model.

However, the trust's work certainly extends further than player appearances.

Activities range from 'Little Stanley Kickers,' football for two to four year olds, weekly disability football sessions which saw over 100 people participate in its first year and 'It's a Goal programme,' taking place at the Crown Ground every Wednesday to help young men suffering with depression.

They were one of the first foundation's to trial and implement the 'Futsal scholarship,' where boys of school leaving age can play futsal for the club whilst also gaining a BTEC National Extended Diploma in Sport, equivalent to three A-Levels.

In under a month's time, the Women's Super League season kicks off with a newly-formed division, Women's Super League

Two, competing with the elite league in the cup and providing a promotion and relegation system.

It is widely hoped the increased coverage on BT Sport will help fan bases expand and interest will rise.

In conjunction with its ever-increasing popularity, Stanley are now targeting women's and girls football.

In January, the club appointed Blackburn Rovers ladies player Amy Bland as women and girls football officer having coached at the club since July last year whilst completing her studies at Accrington Rossendale College.

And Bland, who as well as featuring for the Premier League North side has vast experience in coaching and volunteering says grassroots football should remain the focus.

"The likes of Liverpool are putting a lot of money into their professional women's team and bringing players in from abroad which is great for the publicity and clearly paid off as they won the league last season," she explained.

"But, I'd hate to see money stifle progression within communities.

"Interest in women's football is increasing but I feel there's still a long way to go and we must start with a bottom up approach."

The town of Accrington has a long established history with women's football at a local level.

England and Everton Ladies goalkeeper Rachel Brown-Finnis hails from Burnley but played for Accrington girls as a youngster.

At the turn of the millennium, her career took her over to America where she developed and studied but the 33-year-old has not forgotten her roots.

She is now honorary president of Accrington Girls and Ladies FC, regularly giving advice and presentations to the town's new generation of female footballers.

The goalkeeper engages in a lot of work with Everton in the Community, the Goodison Park outfit's charitable arm, and coaches in Merseyside schools.

Manchester City and Liverpool have invested heavily in the women's game and Brown believes the elite clubs can help raise participation levels.

"The game is unrecognisable to what it was when I first started 15 years ago in a good way," she explained.

"Teams like Manchester City have fantastic resources and the professional clubs have the development of players at their core, it's not just for the elite.

"I feel the ladies players have increased participation as their focus and each and every one of them would love to see more females interested in the sport.

"With my role at Accrington Girls and Ladies, I am able to show that you can achieve anything if you're determined and committed.

"The Football Association, Sport England and the Women's Super League have all worked closely together for years and I hope we see them get their just rewards with more girls entering the game."

Clearly, the backing of football's main authorities cannot be underestimated.

The Football League recently upgraded Stanley's popular girls football programme from a Level one to a Level two project, increasing funding and enabling the trust to go into even more schools delivering girls football.

And, according to Bland this extra financial benefit is crucial.

"The hardest part of my job is trying to encourage girls to play in leagues," she added.

"Girls, especially teenagers often feel inferior to boys when playing football which is crazy given that we're in the 21st century.

"My role is to dispel that myth and encourage girls to try sports which of course has a positive impact on other areas such as health."

For more information on our girls football sessions please contact us on 01254 30 40 71 or email info@stanleytrust.co.uk

Words Emily Liles

