

Sport The lowdown

If Mary could cope with pregnancy at 14, QPR had a chance against United

Saturday Soapbox

This week
Rev Dr Bob Mayo



Faith and football are growing concerns in Shepherds Bush. QPR are back in the Premier League after a 15-year absence and St Stephen with St Michael is growing and thriving.

I am chaplain of one and vicar of the other, and so this Christmas brings a rasing three cheers from me for football and the faith.

Last Sunday I was in church preaching on the Virgin Birth at 11am and QPR were due to kick off an hour later against Manchester United. In my sermon I told the congregation that if Mary could deal with an unexpected pregnancy at 14 [her age at the time], QPR should have a go against United. I had preached, prayed, consecrated and blessed, and still had time to make it to Loftus Road for kick-off and Wayne Rooney's first-minute goal.

The churchwarden is on the staff at QPR and so understands my passion. Last year we had blue-and-white lighting in the crib and a strategic QPR scarf draped round a statue of our patron saint, St Stephen. Caroline [the churchwarden] and I like the fact that Mary is depicted wearing blue and white. Women are acquiring more prominence in football and the Church, and the race is on to see which will come first, a female presenter of *Match of the Day* or the first woman bishop.

I am lucky enough to share the role of chaplain at QPR with Cameron Collington, the vicar in the next-door parish of St Simon. Cameron can work a room as well as anyone I have ever known and we work hard together.

QPR are a family club and we have been able to stand alongside people when things have gone wrong. In the year that we first joined the club, QPR experienced three separate tragedies. Kiyon Prince, a member of the youth team, was stabbed and killed, Harry Smart, a member of the same team, was



ILLUSTRATION: NATHALIE LEES FOR THE TIMES

trapped under a train at Earls Court and Ray Jones, a first-team player, was killed in a car accident. In recent weeks there has been a lot of comment on the pressures faced by players in the professional game and specifically where players are affected by depression, and chaplains can play a vital role in offering help and being a confidential ear to those in need.

Cameron and I help QPR to serve the unseen needs of their supporters. Each month there will be a fan that has died and the family wants his ashes to be interred at Loftus Road. People like the fact that the last physical remains of their family member are kept inside the ground and invariably joke about the fact that he would not now have to pay to get in.

We are also able to help to ease the aches and pains of those who are involved in what is a community club. There are armies of people working behind the scenes, away from the

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glamour of the TV screens. Soccer trainees pay a high price for their dreams. They are old people in attitude and young men in age but still at least 80 per cent will never play in the Premier League.

The idea of a football club chaplain is not unique to QPR. Some 60 per cent of the clubs in the Premier League and Football League have chaplains and what Cameron and I do for a single club, Matt Baker does across the whole league. Matt works for SCORE (soon to be renamed Sports Chaplaincy UK) as pastoral support director in English football. His job is to oversee, encourage and train all the chaplains. The Premier League, Football League Trust and the PFA jointly fund Matt's role and are encouraging more clubs and players to embrace the support a chaplain can offer.

● Rev Dr Bob Mayo is chaplain of Queens Park Rangers and vicar of St Stephen, Shepherds Bush, West London.

Couch Potato

Alyson Rudd



Premier League Legends

Today, 7pm, ESPN



Five hours of devotion to gods such as Eric Cantona, Gianfranco Zola, left, and Roy Keane, segmented into half-hour slots so you can pick and choose your deities. Couch recommends a nip of sherry with Matt Le Tissier at 7.30pm. Heaven.

Gordon's Christmas Cookalong

Live Tomorrow, 10am, Channel 4



Those formative years, or at least weeks, at Ibrox prepared Gordon Ramsay for the sacrifices of the Christmas fixture list. A live show on Christmas Day might be beyond Nigella but not the maligned Michelin Scot.

Strictly Come Dancing

Tomorrow, 8pm, BBC1



Those sensible celebrities who would not commit to months of Brucie's jokes star in a one-off show. Barry McGuigan has to be favourite to win, the former boxer having been the first among them to claim the clichéd but effective two left feet excuse.

The Toys That Made Christmas

Tomorrow, 9pm, BBC2



As you dab your eyes while Robert Webb dwells fondly on the joys of Matchbox cars and Subbuteo, your kids will roll their eyes and shuffle off to their PS3s, where they can become Lionel Messi or even David Ngog.

Live Test cricket

Tomorrow, 11pm, SSI



Christmas Day to us but Boxing Day Down Under so we are off to Melbourne in a Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come kind of way to see how those average batsmen known as Australia fare against India. Couch recommends more sherry.

Passions

Ali Williams Fishing

I'm a pretty enthusiastic fisherman. Although there are many great things about being a rugby player, I like nothing better than getting out into the middle of nowhere, being on my own and catching some fish. I've recently bought myself a boat so I can get further out into the deep blue sea to enjoy my passion.

● The thing I love about it is that while it is so peaceful, it can also be so intense. It is you versus the fish.

● That's not to say that fishing can't be great fun

with a bunch of lads drinking beers — after we won the World Cup we all went out on a boat for a day of fishing — but I enjoy the solitary fishing best. And I'm always grateful that someone invented golf in order to keep lots of people away from the water.

● I got started when I was a kid, dipping my rod in rockpools. We used to see the fishermen on the back of the ferry and from the age of about 5 my brother and I would go down to the beach and try to catch our own fish. We would leave home at 5am and sit there as a whole tide came



and went. Some days we would come home with nothing but on other days we would land a big one.

● As I got older, I would start finding my own spots to fish. The important thing was to find somewhere that had lots of fish but no one knew about them.

● The dream location for fishing would be on the Hauraki Gulf on the North Island of New Zealand. In the last few years I've got into diving, so I can now see what the fish are doing before I try to catch them.

● New Zealand has a lot of fascinating fish. Mostly I catch snapper but I might

go after something bigger like kingfish. Generally I throw the fish back, unless it is a really big fish who has done his penance. I try to keep only as much as I will eat.

● I always keep a sharp knife and some soya sauce on my boat so that I can prepare sashimi. The best Japanese restaurant in the world is on my boat.

● Ali Williams, the All Blacks second row, has played 73 times for New Zealand, including this year's World Cup final. He was speaking to Patrick Kidd at a signing session for fans in Harrods's new team-sports area, arranged by All Blacks kit-supplier adidas.



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, PHIL SHEPARD-LEWIS

Johnson tussles with Laurent Koscielny during City's 1-0 Carling Cup quarter-final victory over Arsenal but is concerned about a lack of regular opportunities

City rotation leaves Johnson in a spin about his England future

'D'd be gutted to miss Euros', says winger as he seeks Mancini meeting

James Ducker
Northern Football Correspondent

Adam Johnson believes that Manchester City's squad is so strong that it would be "hard not to win games".

A 3-0 victory against Stoke City at the Etihad Stadium on Wednesday ensured City were top at Christmas for the first time since 1929 and meant Roberto Mancini's team will finish the year unbeaten at home in all competitions.

But while Johnson expects Manchester United to push them all the way this season with the battle for the title already threatening to turn into a two-horse race between the bitter local rivals, the England winger is convinced City have the strength and depth to cope with whatever is thrown at them over the coming months.

"I just think that you look at our squad and it's hard not to win games," he said. "The players we have on the bench and in the squad, we can pick a team that nine times out of ten is going to cause problems for other teams. We do that and the manager has got to see how the way he wants."

"On the pitch, I think world-class players just know how to play with each other. Everyone knows what others are going to do and we are on the same wavelength. When you look at our record here for the calendar year, we're unbeaten so it definitely

shows how confident we are at home."

City face West Bromwich Albion at the Hawthorns on Monday hoping to maintain or extend their two-point lead over United at the top, but Johnson is not underestimating the challenge presented by the champions. With Tottenham Hotspur nine points behind City, albeit having played a game fewer, Chelsea 11 points off the pace and Arsenal 12 points adrift, Johnson believes that a gap is beginning to develop that may be difficult for the others to bridge.

"There was a lot of talk after our 2-1 defeat at Chelsea that they were back in the race but we beat Arsenal and then Stoke, and have gone back to the same gap that there was before we got beat," Johnson said. "That just shows our character and mentality."

"Without a doubt, United are United — you can never write them off. They will always be there or thereabouts and will never give up. There is still a long way to go and people are talking about it being a two-horse race, but a lot can happen in the Premier League."

"Hopefully we can [move away from the rest]. As long as we are in contention coming towards the end of the season, with our squad we can always have fresh players coming in."

The winger admitted that a lack of regular opportunities has left him concerned that his place in the England squad for the European Championship next summer could come under threat. "I was speaking to my dad about that," continued Johnson, who has started only five of City's 17 league games this season. "That's another thing that's in the back of my mind because I know Fabio Capello [the England manager] likes players to be playing every week. It's a major thing for me, to try and go there having missed out on the World Cup."

Striking impression

● Adam Johnson has made almost as many substitute appearances for Manchester City as he has starts since he joined the club from Middlesbrough for £8.5 million in January last year.
● But the England player's scoring record when he does make Roberto Mancini's first XI is formidable for a winger, with 14 goals in 46 starts, or one every 3.2 games. That ratio has been even better this season, with Johnson having scored six goals in eight starts in all competitions, a goal every 1.3 matches.
Words by James Ducker

"I would be gutted to miss out [again]. I don't think I've missed a squad under Capello except when I was injured, so to miss out after playing quite a big part in the qualifying campaign would be very disappointing."

Johnson conceded that he was going to discuss the matter with Mancini. "I was thinking about it because I hadn't started since October," he said. "As a player, it does play on your mind a bit but when I found out I was starting against Stoke, I was happy. I don't mind the rotation system as long as it's fair and hopefully that's going to continue now."

Johnson has not always reacted well to Mancini's policy of tough love. He had to be persuaded to board the team bus home after a Carling Cup tie away to Wolverhampton Wanderers in October when the manager declined to praise him, despite a man-of-the-match performance in which he scored. But the winger said he accepted that Mancini was hard on him because he believes that the 24-year-old has the talent to become one of the best players in the world. "He can criticise as well as praise you," Johnson said. "That's what he does and I've never had a problem with that. I take it on board and continue to work hard on my game in training every day so there's no problems there."

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