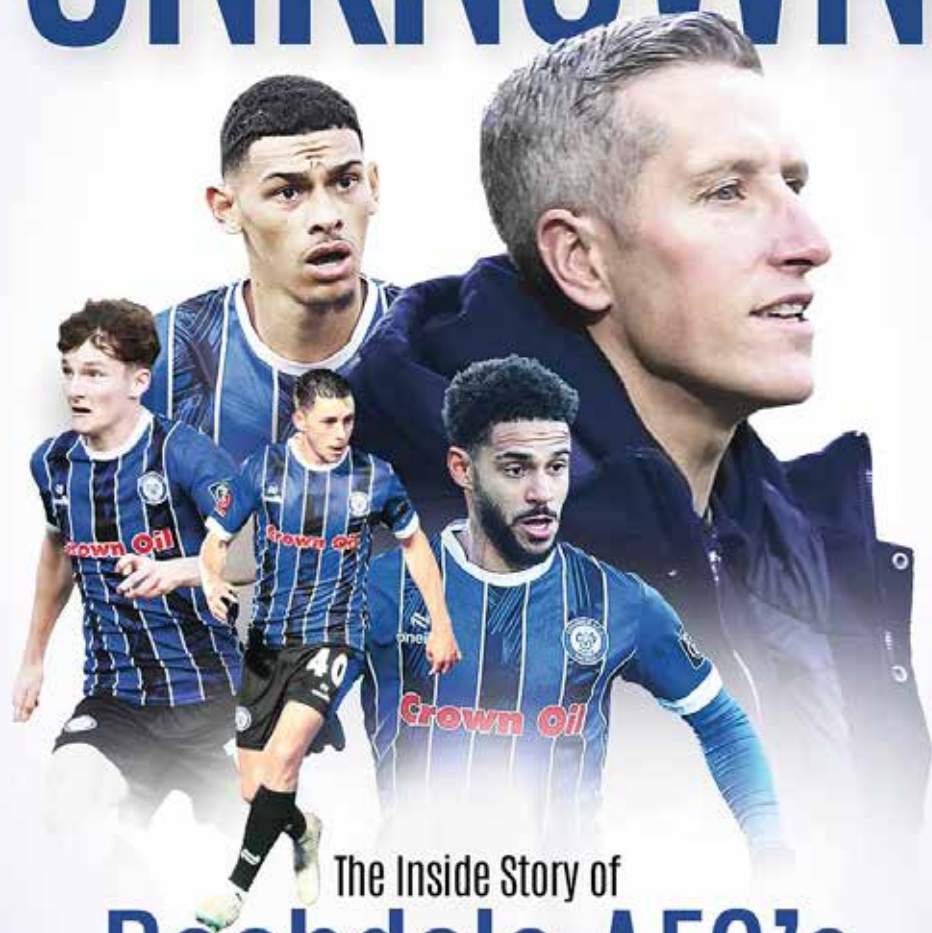


INTO THE UNKNOWN



The Inside Story of
Rochdale AFC's

First Season in the National League

CHRISTOPHER FITZGERALD

Foreword by Keith Hill

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May/June 2023

OVER THE YEARS, Rochdale AFC had garnered a reputation as a club that sticks by its first-team managers. With a glittering trophy cabinet lacking, this ethos was most likely born as much out of necessity as it was empathy. However, having uncharacteristically gone through not one but two managers in the 2022/23 season, and still failed to avoid the drop into the uncharted waters of non-league football, the next permanent managerial appointment would arguably be the most important in the club's history.

It was felt by the majority of supporters that no rookies need apply, and that candidates should also have experience at National League level, either playing or managing. There was a tangible awareness that many a club similar to Rochdale had failed to apply the brakes once entering the fifth tier of English football and consequently ploughed further into the depths of its pyramid system.

To find the man who could prevent this happening, the board of directors had taken the unprecedented step of appointing a football consultancy, MRKT Insights, to conduct a thorough review of football operations at the club. It seemed an open admission that minds had been too focused on off-the-field issues previously and was an attempt to inject some 'football knowledge' into the club.

Still, it came as a great surprise to many when the directors subsequently announced they would, in fact, be sticking with the man who steered the club through the final eight games of the previous campaign. Jim McNulty was announced as ‘head coach’ on a two-year contract and, while he may not have boasted masses of prior management experience, nor possessed any experience at all at National League level, McNulty could at least profess to have experience at Rochdale itself, having represented the club for eight seasons as a player. He joined Dale in the summer of 2015 and went on to make 237 appearances before transitioning into a player-coach for the next two campaigns.

‘The opportunity to lead our team and represent our club, which the fans cherish, has always been a dream of mine,’ he said upon his appointment. ‘To be given the opportunity at a club so close to mine and my family’s heart is really special to me. Within a couple of years of being a Dale player, I knew that this would be the club where I hoped to fulfil that ambition.’

The board was also quick to highlight that McNulty’s selection wasn’t a decision made lightly, stating, ‘Assisted by MRKT Insights, we have carried out a thorough recruitment process that included a long list, which was narrowed down to a five-man shortlist, culminating in his appointment. There was wide-ranging criteria that Jim came out on top of. In his time here as a player, he has seen what success looks like at this club. We are all looking forward to getting behind him as our rebuild and push towards regaining our place in the EFL gets under way.’

I felt I needed to meet with McNulty, to find out about the man who seemed so very ingrained in Rochdale’s recent history and one charged with revitalising the club’s on-field

fortunes. Born in Runcorn, Cheshire, McNulty told me how he began his own journey.

‘Runcorn is an overspill of Liverpool, so it basically is Liverpool,’ he said. ‘It’s just a town consisting of a lot of families who moved out of Liverpool in the 1960s and ’70s, my mum and dad being one of them.

‘In Liverpool, football is an absolute religion. It was a huge part of my dad’s life and was all he ever talked about. He played football mainly at amateur level, but eventually got to the dizzy heights of representing Wrexham’s reserves. He was a goalkeeper, and a very humble sort of man.

‘I spent my youth watching him playing amateur football for South Liverpool, which he did alongside working as a bricklayer. This was my indoctrination into football, I guess.

‘The thing he would constantly say to me, and I’ll never forget it, is, “Don’t be a bighead.” If he sensed there was ever any chance of that happening, that’s what he said to me. That began to shape me. Subconsciously, I think it’s probably why I’m very uncomfortable being complimented to this day. I don’t necessarily think that’s a great thing, because we have to be comfortable growing. It’s certainly affected the way I treat my players. I want them to feel great, but I still want that balance of humility.’

McNulty’s own football journey began when he was spotted by Everton playing for a local junior side at just seven years old. ‘Everton put on a huge regional trial and about 400 kids were asked to turn up,’ he said. ‘They finally reduced this down to a final squad of 22, and I made that 22 along with quite a few guys who have gone on to become big names in football, Wayne Rooney being one of them. Therefore, I was in the football-education system very, very young, and I think that helped me. I think being coachable

and being around coaches most of my life has allowed me to better understand what coaching is all about.'

While McNulty would go on to make his name as a centre-half and full-back, it was in the middle of the park where he first impressed. 'As I moved through the system, through the different age groups, I began to realise that all the midfielders were better than me, but I was a decent enough footballer to adapt to other positions,' he said. 'I was not quite big enough to be a centre-back at that point. I was a bit of a hybrid. I probably would have been more suited to this era actually, rather than my day. I'm not quite physical enough to be a big, dominant centre-back, but I had decent ball skills, so there was a place for me for a while.'

'However, when I was about 15, it started to become obvious I wasn't going to make it at Everton, and so they let me talk to other clubs. At that time, Everton and Arsenal were probably seen as the marquee youth sides at my age group, mainly because we had Rooney, who just scored five goals against anyone we played, so I did get offers based on that reputation.'

'Like my dad before me, I ended up signing for Wrexham, who were a League One club at the time. Denis Smith was the manager and he was a hard, hard man. My dad told me Denis had broken more bones than he'd had hot dinners. He certainly walked like a man who'd broken a lot of his bones.'

'I was quickly put in the picture at Wrexham. I was a first-year pro and, having been at Everton, I thought I'd walk into the side. My dad's words about being a bighead came to the fore here, and rightly so. There were brilliant players at Wrexham, all of who could properly handle the ball and they could properly bollock you, too. They had Andy Morrell, who scored a lot of goals; Lee Trundle, who

was outrageously talented; and Carlos Edwards, who played off one side. It was a joke and I could get nowhere near that side.

‘The club then went into administration and I was offered a new contract on low money. You’re more like a training body at that point. You’re good enough to still be there, but you’re not good enough to impact the first team, so they’ll keep you around because you’re a good sort. That’s the stage I was at.

‘At the same time, I was offered a part-time contract at Caernarfon Town in the League of Wales on way more money than what Wrexham offered full time. It wasn’t head-turning money, but it was more money, so I took it. Despite it being more money, it was at this point I got a bit of a reality check. I had to get a part-time job doing night-shift work at B&Q combined with day work labouring with my dad.

‘It was then I turned into a right moaning bastard. I’d been a pro and was one of the better players at Caernarfon, and I was making it known, you know? I’d exited a system that so many kids dream of being in and had not fully appreciated it when I was there, and now I was a part-time footballer.

‘I remember we played Afan Lido and there was one guy I was giving mouth to. I was letting him know I’d been a pro and all that. I thought I was better than him, them, the entire level. This fella looks at me and calmly says, “After this game, I’m going to splat that big nose all over your face.” And I was like, “Yeah, good one. Whatever. Blah, blah, blah,” thinking it was just the usual bravado I’d heard a hundred times before.

‘What I found out is, in the Welsh league, when someone says they’re going to do you, they are actually waiting in the

car park and they are actually going to do you. That was an eye-opener. I'm pulling out of the car park. He's blocking the exit. He's saying, "You're getting out of that car and we're going to dance, like we said."

'So here I am, in a Welsh league club car park, doing night shifts at B&Q, and getting my nose broken by some 32-year-old man who will die for the £60 he's being paid.

'It was then I knew I had to get back to full-time football, whatever the sacrifice.

'I wrote letters. Lots of letters. I had got into the League of Wales team of the season, so I was standing out. I wrote to TNS because they were the only full-time team in the Welsh league and had competed in the Champions League. My dad suggested I write to English Football League clubs, too. So, I did. I wrote to all of those who I could get to geographically, if I was to be offered a trial.

'My letter was pretty basic. It's the type of letter I see now, and the type I try to never ignore, as I know it's someone desperate for a chance. It said something like, "Hi, I'm Jimmy McNulty. I'm a six-foot-two-inch, left-footed, left centre-back, or left-back, looking for a chance."

'I got a response from Brian Horton at Macclesfield Town. He invited me for a trial. I played a few games. It was going all right, not brilliant, just all right. My trial was on a bit of a knife-edge. Then something happened that I still to this day believe was fate.

'Brian Horton was good friends with Sir Alex Ferguson. They lived close to each other in Alderley Edge. They'd go for Sunday dinner at the same place, that kind of thing, and became good friends. As a result, every year, Macclesfield used to play Manchester United in a pre-season friendly. Man United would send an XI that usually contained some household names.

‘Prior to this particular fixture, on the Monday morning, Brian offered me a one-month contract worth £300 a week, plus £100 per appearance. I was earning about £600 at Caernarfon, including what I earned at B&Q and from my dad, but I knew I had to take the cut if I wanted to get back in. It was effectively Brian’s way of saying, “I’m not convinced by you, but I’ll give you this for now to impress me.”

‘While I mulled it over, I played against Man United on the Tuesday night. Rio Ferdinand was on for a bit, and so was Rooney. I marked a couple of wingers that night, one being Chris Eagles. I knew I’d had a good game.

‘This is where fate intervened. The Macclesfield media team, as they do, asked Sir Alex how he felt our club’s new signings had fared. He told them, “I thought the young left-back looked a good athlete.” That’s all he said. The next day, Brian offered me a one-year deal. I’m utterly convinced it was because of that one comment. And do you know what? My pro career took off from that moment.

‘I always had a thirst for getting better, and that’s something I try to instil into the players here at Rochdale. Every day is an opportunity.

‘Once establishing myself at Macclesfield, I got bought by different clubs during quite a few Januarys in a row. First by Stockport, then by Brighton, then by Barnsley, before injuries levelled things out for me in the Championship. However, this is where I first properly met Keith Hill and David Flitcroft.’

Rochdale’s legendary managerial duo were in charge of the Tykes, in the Championship, when they signed McNulty, but Jim said his association with Dale might have begun much earlier.

‘I played against Hill’s Rochdale team at Wembley in the League Two play-off final [in 2008] and Stockport won

and went up. We then played Rochdale in a friendly that immediate summer. Jim Gannon, the Stockport manager, wasn't playing me because I hadn't yet signed a new contract. I was warming up, up and down the touchline, and Keith came out of his technical area at one point and said, "What the fuck are you doing on the sidelines?" He carried on trying to tap me up for quite a while until I decided to move to Brighton. He finally got me when he got the Barnsley job.

'Keith loved me and I loved him. He challenged me to do things I never thought I'd end up doing. I became so deep about things. He used to say to me, "You're capable of a lot more, but your destiny is in your own hands." "You're too nice," he would say. "Whatever happened to nice old Jim McNulty, anyone remember him?" He made me captain and asked me to challenge the players. Keith was an excellent motivator that way.

'Rather than immediately follow Keith when he went back to Rochdale, I actually went from Barnsley to Bury with Dave Flitcroft, even though I don't think me and Flickers were as compatible. We didn't see the game in quite the same way as me and Keith did. Before stats and everything came to the fore, me and Keith could reflect on a performance, as we used to know the same things about performance visually, before we'd even seen the stats, because the same things were important to us.

'We have slightly different styles now, but I'm managing in an almost different era to Keith, so why wouldn't I have? I'm glad I got to play for Keith at Barnsley and that he brought me here to Rochdale eventually, which is where I've felt at home ever since.'

* * *

TEN SENIOR ROCHDALE players from the relegation season remained under contract heading into the 2023/24 National League campaign, with three year-long extension options also triggered. However, the board sent a stark message to supporters regarding the budget Jim McNulty would be operating with.

‘Several players who remain under contract have been placed on the transfer list with immediate effect,’ a club statement said. ‘Any player remaining in discussions and opting to stay with the club next season would be required to accept a significant reduction in salary.’

There was also the issue of McNulty’s job title. Rochdale had traditionally eschewed modern football terminology, preferring the classic designation of ‘football manager’. However, with input from the analysts at MRKT, it appeared that the individual overseeing the first team would now be referred to as the ‘head coach’. This raised questions about who would be responsible for player recruitment.

According to McNulty, he would assume primary responsibility in this area.

‘This is my team,’ he told me. ‘I interviewed for the job based on my vision for the team’s style of play and the players I want to see in it. Before my appointment, MRKT presented a blueprint to the board outlining their vision for the club’s future. They aimed to revitalise Rochdale as a selling club, a model the club once thrived on, where player transfers generate revenue.’

‘They wanted to create a brand that would help turn Rochdale back into the selling club it once was, where we move our guys on for money, but all the while playing attractive football and winning football.’

‘In terms of recruitment, on staff I have John [Shannon] for analysis and Kev [Gibbins] as my assistant. Kev is one

of the most undervalued members of staff the club has probably ever had, which is why I was so keen to bring him straight back. He knows me so well. He will challenge me on everything that's important to be challenged on, which is perfect for me because I don't know everything, definitely not in this role, not yet.

'We each identify our own transfer targets – me and my team and MRKT, before going on to compare and contrast our lists respectively. I did sit down with MRKT initially and discuss a game model, which was an hour and a half of me going through the different shapes that I want to move the players into, what the players need to be doing in those shapes, and so on. They were taking notes and asking questions. They then went away and provided an initial scour of the market based on what I had told them.

'The initial lists MRKT produced were a mixture of players from a range of levels. Based on the nature of the budget available, a bulk of the players they came back with were from a level below where we play, so we had National League North and National League South players listed, some even lower. The players listed also came with data that, statistically, stated what they should be capable of.

'From that list, we then honed in on the most suitable targets. We've tried to refrain from naming individual players to MRKT in the initial stages, as I don't want to slant what they do. The odd time, there's been something I've already identified in a player that the data has reinforced, so it's nice when I see somebody flagged that I already like. Reinforcement is a very useful tool.

'Every signing that comes in is down to me, John and Kev, though. Some of them may have been brought in for us to look at, but, mainly, it is players we know of and like.

‘Signing players will be a little bit different to what we have been used to in the Football League, however, as there is no transfer window to manage at this level, as such. Identifying the players is the easiest part. Other things then have to fall into place – we have to agree terms with the player, their club, if they’re at one, their agent, if they have one. That’s the difficult part, the part where everyone needs to be patient. Our budget is the humblest budget the club has had in my time here. The [board] is unhappy at how the budget has been spent in previous transfer windows and is keen that, what they perceive as past mistakes are not repeated this time. We need to do as much due diligence as we can on players. MRKT are very useful in this regard.

‘Recruitment and shaping the squad ahead of next season has been the main focus this month, and the thing I’ve had to learn pretty fast, in terms of focusing my energies, is how to ignore a lot of the noise around being a manager. That’s where being the head coach has been important, rather than a manager. There are situations I do have to manage, of course, but you can get distracted by so much else. There are so many other people around the football club, and around the game itself, who suddenly want to be in touch with you. Each one of those people want 15 or 20 minutes of your time and, before you know it, you’ve lost important hours or days in identifying players and helping the team get better.

‘There are a number of managers who are my friends at this level, and they’ve told me that they were working towards transfer targets from February last season, so they were recruiting last season for this season, in effect, before the season was even finished. They were ready to go with their offers as soon as the last day of the season was done. I got this job ten days after the season finished and was then

trying to build a staff. It hinders you a little bit in terms of trying to sign that first round of players, and, just as we began to move on them, they were gone. We got on the phone to certain players who said, "I've just signed for a club yesterday. [Rochdale] would have been perfect, too." This is the learning curve we are on.'

One player McNulty would need to do without for the coming campaign would be Ethan Brierley. The Rochdale-born midfielder was sold to Premier League side Brentford for an undisclosed six-figure sum before June was even out of first gear. Despite his young age, Brierley had been a standout in Rochdale's midfield the season prior, his passing ability putting to shame that of many of his more experienced contemporaries.

Having joined the Rochdale academy as a seven-year-old, Brierley made his first-team debut at 16 before going on to make 45 appearances for the club. His defining moment came the season just ended, however, when he sent over the perfect ball for Ian Henderson to net against Salford City, allowing him to break Reg Jenkins' long-standing record as Rochdale's all-time leading goalscorer. One bright spark in an otherwise dismal campaign.

Two of the very few remaining shining lights from the previous season were next to depart. Danny Lloyd chose not to accept a new deal, while Toby Mullarkey made the most of his relegation-release clause by opting not to return to the National League, from whence he came via Altrincham, instead deciding to remain in League Two by signing for Grimsby Town.

Perhaps less surprising was Liam Kelly deciding to reject a new offer and opt to join League Two Crawley Town. The diminutive midfielder had shown what he was capable of only in flashes during his time at Dale.

Next out of the door was goalkeeper Richard O'Donnell, signed by Blackpool, just relegated from the Championship. A considerable loss on the face of it, with only the relatively young and inexperienced Brad Kelly on the books posing a viable replacement at that point.

McNulty was quick to restore some of the trust deficit, however, by bringing in 24-year-old left-footed midfielder Harvey Gilmour from fellow National League side FC Halifax Town on a two-year deal.

'He can play a number of positions in midfield, and he's very comfortable with the ball at his feet,' McNulty said of the Sheffield-born player. 'He's proven himself at National League level and is someone who I think could play higher. He's just had a brilliant season with Halifax, playing a full campaign there, which culminated in him winning the FA Trophy Final against Gateshead.'

Gilmour's signature was quickly followed by those of free agent Kairo Mitchell, on a two-year deal, and Cody Johnson on a season-long loan from League Two neighbours Stockport County.

Mitchell, a 25-year-old forward, had played at National League level for Notts County the season prior, as well as a small portion of it on loan at Eastleigh. Interestingly, at the time of his signing, he was away on international duty with Grenada, for whom he already had 15 caps, as the nation attempted to qualify for that summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup.

'He is another player that I believe has Football League potential and has already gained good-calibre National League experience,' McNulty said. 'I'm really happy with his addition. I'm impressed with his relentless running for the team. He is a mobile target man in that sense, I guess. He will prove a handful for two centre-halves, never mind

one. He can score goals for the team, but his presence on the pitch will also create goals for the team.'

Of 18-year-old midfielder Johnson, McNulty added, 'He's an exciting prospect that I know Stockport think a lot of. After watching him, we think he will be a brilliant addition to our squad.'

Next through the door was 6ft 5in centre-half Kyle Ferguson, son of Rangers legend and former Scotland international Barry. Ferguson, again brought in on a two-year deal, boasted both Football and National League experience, not to mention that which he had garnered on the continent and in the USA.

'He can handle all basic requirements of defending in the National League but is also very comfortable with the ball at his feet, so it's exciting to have him with us,' McNulty said of the signing.

Ferguson was followed by Swedish-born 19-year-old wide forward Moe Shubbar, who had been released by League Two side Crawley Town; another player with some non-league experience having originally played for Cheshunt and Edgware Town, and having been loaned to Worthing and Slough.

'He is a player that can be a very exciting prospect for the future, but is also ready to compete for a place in the team right now,' McNulty said.

The new faces were, of course, welcomed by the Dale supporters, but, as June drew to a close, the squad still seemed concerningly short on numbers, especially between the sticks.