

Matt Riley



# KIT & COMMUNITY



Football's Shirt Stories

# **KIT & COMMUNITY**

Football's Shirt Stories

**Matt Riley**



# Contents

Acknowledgements . . . . .	9
Foreword by Kieran Maguire . . . . .	12
1. John Nicholson . . . . .	15
2. Stanno's Shirt . . . . .	24
3. Honey, I Shrunk the Kits . . . . .	36
4. Up Pohnpei . . . . .	44
5. Nairn County: Honed by Heartbreak . . . . .	54
6. We Wear Because We Care . . . . .	60
7. Grassroot Soccer . . . . .	88
8. Geoff's Story . . . . .	98
9. Uncomfortable Shirts . . . . .	104
10. Football Shirts For Charity . . . . .	113
11. Rock 'n' Roll Football Shirts . . . . .	124
12. Cross Stitch Shirts . . . . .	138
13. York City FC: History Resides In Us . . . . .	152
14. Icarus: The Value in Having Values . . . . .	163
15. ChatGPT – Design Me a Football Kit . . . . .	177
16. The Gambler's Remorse . . . . .	183
17. Love is Love . . . . .	197
18. Mind Always Matters . . . . .	206
19. Hatch, (Football) Match and Dispatch . . . . .	219
20. Corinthians: Wearing Their Hearts on Their Sleeves . . . . .	227
21. A Fool and Their Money? . . . . .	235
22. The Shirt's the Canvas . . . . .	245
23. Comfort in Community . . . . .	259

## Stanno's Shirt

*'Sing a song for Stanno.  
We will never let you go.  
You'll always be.  
At City with me.'*

WHEN ADAM Stansfield arrived at Exeter City in 2006 after spells with Yeovil Town and Hereford United, very few fans realised the seismic effect his four-year spell would have on our team's fortunes and how his footballing DNA would course through our club for decades to come. He was our very own Steve Bull (one for the kids there) in attitude and hairstyle. Both men gave every ounce of energy for every minute of every game for the shirt. Not in some vacuous crest-kissing way for monetised social media, but drawing on determination underscored by battering, battling skill. Stanno's footballing passion was passed down from his dad Roger, a huge Nottingham Forest fan. Roger's description of his son as someone who 'just kept plugging away' was one of the many reasons why

## STANNO'S SHIRT



the Big Bank took him into our hearts and never let him go.

Adam didn't even turn professional until he was 23, by which age Bull had been playing for Wolverhampton Wanderers for a couple of years in the Fourth Division against Exeter before going up as champions in 1988. Adam would go on to grace the City shirt for four years, playing 142 times and scoring 37, often barnstorming goals. He joined us while we were in the Conference

and was in the team that won a return to the Football League after beating Cambridge United 1-0 at Wembley in the 2008 play-off final. But, in April 2010, he would be diagnosed with colorectal cancer. Then, despite surgery and chemotherapy, he died four months later at the heartbreakingly young age of 31.

Fast forward to 2 September 2022, and the bipolar platform of Twitter was lurching from City desperately needing new blood to what seemed like delusional fantasist talk of Adam's son Jay choosing to leave Premier League Fulham for our little trust-run club in sleepy Devon. Claim and counter-claim ricocheted around this often fact-free environment and, by the evening, there were even those wearied by the talk of Stanno 2.0 joining us. We are so conditioned to players, once in the hermetically sealed Premier League universe, preferring to warm subs' benches rather than leave for the Championship or, heaven forbid, League One. Stockpiled talent carelessly collected by state-owned behemoths kick their heels and kill careers while collecting outrageously expensive tat for Instagram to gorge on. But then, at 4.51pm, the club sent out a 'nine-minute warning tweet' teasing a new player we all knew could only be Our Boy. The video showed the shirt (which had been retired by the club after Adam's death), the number nine and a dozen years of chanting for Stanno melded into one pure moment of joy. Like a street-corner born-again Christian, seeing that shirt I knew it was him. I had to tell someone, anyone. 'Have you accepted Stanno into your life? I know you are only here to deliver the post, but this was Stanno's will.'

Every week as I stood on the Big Bank basking in the sunshine or stamping my frozen feet, we sang our ode to Stanno. When the Adam Stansfield Stand (financed by the sale of Ollie Watkins to Brentford) was still under construction, the house-sized Stanno shirt would often be hoisted across the emerging structure that also followed us to our three heartbreaking visits to Wembley play-off disaster (at least only our cardboard cut-out selves were there to witness the hat-trick of heartbreak). When it was placed over us on the Big Bank, there was something collegially spiritual about reaching up to touch his shirt together and move it on for other fans to commune with. There always seemed to be onions sliced in the pie shop to our left on days when that happened. Strange.

That number nine shirt teased on a Friday evening by our amazing media team of Craig and Scott had been retired for nine years. Suddenly we knew. No one else would wear it other than Jay, who had left us in 2020 to join Fulham where he made four appearances, was capped for England's under-18 and under-19 teams and, displaying his dad's Steve Bull-style shaven head and furious tenacity that drew Stanno to our hearts, now one of our own was coming home (admittedly on loan) after maturing through our academy system.

When Adam's parents spoke to The Athletic's Peter Rutzler in January 2022, the inspiring memories their son forged wearing the City red and white allowed them to cope with his death by creating the Adam Stansfield Foundation to help save the lives of others. As well as educating people on the insidious signs of bowel cancer,



it also makes magic happen by focussing on one simple mission statement that changes lives for the better. As it declares on its website, ‘The foundation is committed to providing charitable funds for young people/youth football teams who would benefit from the assistance.’

Underscoring this understated declaration comes a legion of stories. Young players who can’t afford transport for training or trials. Those who love to play but wear glasses and need them protected with expensive covers. Children who can’t afford boots. All



of them are referred to the foundation for assistance and every act of support becomes a hat tip to the memory of Adam. When he passed, the family was inundated with previously unreported stories of his kindness, but it was the shirts filling up their postman's sack that gave those memories a place to breathe. As his mum Gig shared with Rutzler:

‘At the Cat and Fiddle, Gig has a brought bag of vintage Exeter shirts to be passed on, ready for auction. From signed shirts to jockey breeches, all kinds of equipment have been sent their way. “The poor postman,” says Jack [Vickery, who is a key driver of new income through tireless fundraising]. “The stuff just piles through the letterbox.”

“I suppose in a way, for us to be doing this foundation, it's always there. They have seen that their dad played a lot, they have all got their phones and see social media. But the ongoing stuff with Adam, with the foundation, you are conscious of it, it's almost like he's still with us.”

Iconic former Sky Sports presenter Jeff Stelling, who in 2017 used Exeter's St James Park to start his March for Men to raise money and awareness about prostate cancer by walking 15 marathons in 15 days and visiting 40 football clubs before finishing at the other St James' Park in Newcastle, spoke for us all on 3 September 2022: ‘So today, assuming he [Jay] starts, he will run out for the club his dad graced, he'll play in the shadow of the stand named after his dad and he will wear the number nine shirt that had been retired: the shirt that his dad graced.’

Stanno's oversized shirt and his name that many of us carry on the back of our replica kits have sustained us for these dozen years. So many players have come and gone, often without leaving much of a mark apart from creating obsolescence for their shirts (I always used to chuckle seeing shirts from 2016 with former Spurs reserve Troy Archibald-Henville on the back. A man who was to make 20 appearances for the club – over four years). More than most clubs, the cream is often removed either before we have had a chance to enjoy it (Alfie Pond to Wolves and Ben Chrisene to Aston Villa being dispiriting examples) or made us dream of promotion before being picked up by lowballing Premier League clubs such as Ethan Ampadu to Chelsea, or respectful ones willing to pay a fair price with empowering add-ons as with Ollie Watkins to Brentford, but Stanno stands for stability. Despite leaving us in the worst way imaginable, our shirts carry the memories, aspirations and stories of a man who, like 'Bully', were of his place and never lost the feeling of wearing a shirt that gave him an invitation to enjoy what he loved more than anything. To play his beautiful game.

For visitors to City's Cliff Hill training ground (lovingly called by old codgers like me the Cat and Fiddle), there is a constant reminder of Stanno. Draped over a tailor's dummy is a classic red-and-white-striped home shirt of his above a pair of boots and team sheets, a matchday programme and also shirts from Stanno's two other clubs, Yeovil and Hereford. Part commemoration, part inspiration, these artefacts speak to a man steeped in the club and whose spirit continues to watch over

every young hopeful or grizzled old-timer passing through the training ground gates. Jay also has his dad's shirts on the wall of his hallway alongside his own at home in London.

In late 2022 I spoke to Stanno senior's infectiously enthusiastic parents Gig and Roger (known as 'Rog'). I had ordered some foundation merchandise and, in a mark of their character, they came to my house to deliver it. You don't get that with Jeff Bezos. They told me more about what their number nine means to them, 'Right back to the beginning when Adam was born in the ninth month, we lived at 9 Exeter Street, Launceston (he was born in Plymouth hospital as that was nearest), so Devonian, not Cornish! So, there was a number nine and the Exeter path already starting. There were only a few times from getting his first nine shirt at the age of nine that he didn't have nine on his back. So when he signed for Exeter and was given the nine shirt it meant so much to him. He was very proud to be Exeter's number nine. It just seems so right to see "Stansfield 9". Adam's three sons – Jay, Taylor and Cody – have all worn nine for Twyford Spartans. So now for Jay to be at Exeter wearing that same shirt with such pride but in his own right, well that written path continues.

'After Adam passed, we thought the foundation we started in his name would last for about six months until we had donated all the money raised immediately after his funeral, but here we are 12 years later and it is bigger than ever. This is down to Adam's fans who proudly and emotionally display the giant "Stansfield 9" shirt and sing his song at every game. Not only are they paying a great

tribute to Adam but they are keeping his name alive, so the charity thrives. There are so many young people who we help in grassroots football who weren't even born when Adam was playing, but they know who he is!

'Jay will wear that number nine shirt with the same pride as his dad and also with the same desire to give his all and do his very best for his team. And we continue to drive our car with reg number EX09TER now with a current "Stansfield 9" playing for Exeter.'

But then, in a heartbeat, it was 7 May 2023; the last time we would see Jay wear the red and white at St James Park. The Big Bank faithful trooped into SJP bluffly diffusing the emotion to come by distractions about the season behind us and what we had in store next time around, but we all knew there was bottlenecked emotion in need of cathartic release. This is not a sentence you usually write for a home game against Morecambe. Two hours later, Jay had scored a magnificent hat-trick (unfortunately at the away end) and ran to his dad's stand to pay homage to him and be engulfed by his team-mates. On that day, somewhere in Gloucestershire, a Sprocker puppy was being born. After two dogless decades, we went to see him and instantly fell in love. So now, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our Stanno.

You'll always be at City with me.

\* \* \*

### **Adam Stansfield Foundation: making a difference in the community**

The Adam Stansfield Foundation, a UK-registered charity, continues to make a significant impact on the



lives of children and young people in Devon, Somerset, and Herefordshire. Established in 2011, the foundation's mission is twofold: to provide opportunities for young people to engage in football and to raise awareness of bowel cancer. Underpinning its mission, the Adam Stansfield Foundation has funded various projects, bringing football and hope to communities while championing the fight against bowel cancer. Let's take a closer look at some of the remarkable initiatives the foundation has supported over the years.

### **The Adam Stansfield Community Hub**

Recognising the importance of dedicated spaces for local football clubs and community groups, the foundation established the Adam Stansfield Community Hub in Exeter. This state-of-the-art facility not only serves as a training ground but also features a welcoming cafe and versatile meeting spaces. The community hub has become a vibrant centre for fostering community

spirit, allowing people to come together and celebrate the beautiful game. It provides a space where people can connect, share their passion for football, and create lasting memories.

### **The Adam Stansfield Bowel Cancer Research Fund**

The foundation understands the significance of research in the fight against bowel cancer. To contribute to advancements in the diagnosis and treatment of this disease, it has established the Adam Stansfield Bowel Cancer Research Fund. This fund has been instrumental in supporting numerous research projects, including a groundbreaking study on the implementation of artificial intelligence to detect bowel cancer. By investing in research, the foundation aims to make a lasting impact in combating bowel cancer and improving the lives of those affected by it.

### **Impact and achievements**

Since its inception, the Adam Stansfield Foundation has raised an incredible £150,000 through the support of generous donors and dedicated individuals. This reflects the unwavering commitment of the foundation's supporters to improving the lives of children and young people while raising awareness of bowel cancer. The funds raised have been instrumental in funding various projects, creating a tangible difference in the community. Through its initiatives, the foundation is fostering hope, resilience, and a sense of belonging among the young people it serves.

### **How to support the foundation**

If you would like to join the Adam Stansfield Foundation in its mission to make a difference in the community, there are several ways to do so. One is to donate online at [www.adamstansfieldfoundation.com](http://www.adamstansfieldfoundation.com). Every contribution, no matter the size, helps the team continue their vital work. Additionally, you can reach out to the foundation by calling 01392 423900 to learn about volunteering opportunities or to explore other ways to get involved. Together, we can support the foundation's efforts to create a brighter future for children and young people.