



by **MATT BARLOW**

IT DOES not have to be drink, drugs or gambling. There is the story of a former footballer who turned professional at 18 and played through the 1970s and '80s, mostly in the third tier, and invested his savings in a sports-shop business. It proved successful at first and expanded, but crashed in 2008 and he and his family lost their accommodation above the shop. Now in his 60s, he pays £700 a month to rent a home in a rundown area.

Another former player worked in football administration and lived in a property supplied through the job, but when he retired he and his wife had to vacate the house and move in with their son.

A former cricketer lost thousands in a business swindle and lost his home in a costly divorce settlement. Now working part-time without a secure income, he is living mostly with friends and family.

There are countless examples among the vulnerable older generation, some of them bereaved and lonely, some of them retired, others still loosely connected to their sports via scouting which often pays nothing more than expenses.

These stories are all too familiar to Mike Soper and Paul Sheldon, former chairman and chief executive respectively of Surrey County Cricket Club and the driving forces behind the Reposm Sporting Housing Trust. It is a new initiative to provide affordable, sheltered housing for former sportspeople who have fallen on hard times.

It is not an addiction clinic such as Sporting Chance, founded by former Arsenal captain Tony Adams after his much-publicised battles with drugs and alcohol. Nor is it a dedicated home for those living with dementia.

Reposm aims to raise an initial £2million to launch the first stage of the project, a block of 12 flats with a common space and recreational facilities in the south of England, in partnership with East Boro Housing Association.

Soper has been on the board of East Boro for nine years and stepped down this year as the chairman of Cyril Wood Court, a facility in Dorset which has created affordable housing for former actors, musicians, writers, painters and craftspeople. Art exhibitions and musical performances are staged in the communal areas at Cyril Wood and there is studio space for pottery and art.

A similar sporting facility might dedicate areas to use as exercise studios, a gym and show live sporting events, to keep minds active and help in the fight against loneliness and mental health issues, often identified as precursors to dementia.

THE SCHEME has the backing of Sir Alex Ferguson and David Pleat, who are both senior figures at the League Managers Association and particularly keen to see more support for ageing former managers, coaches and scouts.

'For every high-flier, there are many further down the scale in professional sport who have worked equally hard for far less reward,' said Pleat.

'It is imperative that sporting wealth does not ignore those less fortunate and unable to cope.'

The PFA is in talks with Reposm about providing financial support. The equivalent bodies in cricket and rugby union are also behind the idea.

'I've been involved in sport for most of my life and I've seen some people make a lot of money from it and others drift off with very little,' said 75-year-old Soper, chairman of the Reposm Trust.

'We have nothing like it in this country — apart from horseracing, where there is something similar — and I have seen it work so well at Cyril Wood. Talking to people in sport, I am sure it can work equally well.'

● To donate go to: uk.virginmoneygiving.com and search for Reposm

Former Surrey chief **MIKE SOPER** is behind push to provide housing for sports stars who have fallen on hard times... **HOME HELP FOR HEROES**

Campaign: Soper is keen to help those who are struggling EMPICS



Reposm
sporting housing trust



'A caring way of looking after those less fortunate sportspeople who have fallen on hard times in their later years. I hope it will receive maximum support'

— **SIR ALEX FERGUSON**

'I'VE BEEN GIVEN A SECOND CHANCE ...I WANT TO PUT SOMETHING BACK'

MIKE SOPER traces the roots of the idea back to his days as chairman of Surrey County Cricket Club and a life-changing illness which struck like a thunderbolt. Surrey were struggling and £1.3million in debt when he took control, but he and chief executive Paul Sheldon transformed the mood at the Oval and Surrey were crowned champions in 1999. 'We managed to get it back on an even keel and everything was going well,' says Soper. 'The club was rolling and I was about to go on holiday to the US when I started to get chest pains. I was overweight and the job had been stressful but I was sure it wasn't my heart. I was 55 and a bit fitter back then. I tried to prove it to my wife

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

by **Matt Barlow**

Julie by running to the top of the eight hairpin bends on Lombard Street in San Francisco. I made it and my heart was fine but my ribs were killing me.' The diagnosis on his return was grim. He had an aggressive and advanced prostate cancer. His PSA (prostate-specific antigen) measuring the protein produced by the prostate gland was reading 580. It should be around four for a healthy man in his mid-50s.

'I said, "Is that serious?" and they said, "It's more than bloody serious, get yourself to Bournemouth Hospital straight away". It was the highest reading they had ever seen at the surgery.' Further exhaustive tests and a biopsy showed it had spread to his rib cage. They gave him six months to live. 'They showed me x-rays and my ribs were covered in cancer,' he says. 'It was November and they wanted to see me again in March. I thought, "Hold on a minute, you're giving me six months to live and you don't want to see me until March". That wasn't very good.' Soper called Sir John Major, the former Prime Minister and a close friend, who pulled strings with former US

president George Bush and arranged a consultation with Christopher Logothetis, a pioneer in the treatment of prostate cancer in Texas. Professor Logothetis prescribed a course of medication and treatment, which, he surmised, together with some dietary changes, could keep him alive for another five years. The fact he is still alive 20 years on is something of a miracle. 'It changed my life,' says Soper. 'I had been given a second chance and I know it's hackneyed but I wanted to put something back in.' He became heavily involved with East Boro, a housing association near his home in Dorset. East Boro were corporate trustees of Cyril Wood Court, a sheltered

housing scheme set up in the 1970s to provide affordable accommodation for artists and musicians. 'It is an amazing place,' says Soper, who became chairman at Cyril Wood. 'There are singers and sculptors, and some of them are 80 and 90 years old. It's not an old people's home. They have their own front doors, their own kitchens, but there is a communal area and an artists' shed where they all have studio space. It gives them a hell of a lot for £400 a month rent. They are not cut adrift. They have care packages, carers for those who need it and they all look after each other. They knock on each other's front doors. They chat in the communal room.

They have music and sculpture sessions. There's no loneliness, they're keeping their bodies and brains active.' Soper is only aware of one case of dementia and came to wonder why there was nothing like it in sport aside from horseracing's Racing Homes scheme. He knew about the dementia crisis in football and the high rates of divorce and depression among former cricketers. As a lifelong Crystal Palace supporter, he heard the tales of Kenny Sansom, the former Palace, Arsenal and England star who has fought alcoholism and spent time sleeping rough. 'I thought, "Right, I'll form a charity and get it going",' says Soper. He founded Reposm and

brought in Sheldon in the hope they could recreate their Surrey success. There have been delays in the last year as Soper overcame another series of health issues. Four years ago, he discovered he had lung cancer unlinked to his prostate cancer and was having chemotherapy last October when he was hospitalised with pneumonia. One month later, he was back in hospital when stung in the eye by a bee and again in March with coronavirus. 'It'll be the bubonic plague next,' he quips, seemingly indestructible and more determined than ever to push through Reposm to fruition. 'It's a no-brainer,' Soper insists. 'A simple idea, at a cost not beyond the

realms of what sport can afford. Football has a vast amount of money and the people today are living on the shoulders of the people of the past who found fame but not money. 'They give to charities and support good causes, but what are they doing to protect people they are mixing with and who might need accommodation in 20 to 30 years' time? 'If all the players in the Premier League and the Championship gave a day's salary and get a tax freeze on it, it'd be enough to build three schemes. It's my vision to have three or four of these built in the next five years, before I snuff it.'

● Pompey's forgotten hero — in part 2 in tomorrow's paper

A SAFE PLACE FOR FORMER MANAGERS AND SCOUTS TO TALK FOOTBALL



by **DAVID PLEAT**

Former Luton and Tottenham manager

IT WAS some time ago, and I was sitting in my car at Wycombe. I was there to see one of the UEFA Youth League games linked to the Champions League between, believe it or not, Celtic and Benfica. Renato Sanches played that night and looked as if he was going to be a world-beater.

The proverbial one man and his dog were there for it. Another vehicle arrived in the car park and three of my scouting associates climbed out and made their way towards the reception area.

I could see two of them were limping: John Griffin, a top-quality scout who worked at Crystal Palace and sadly passed away this year, and Geoff Taylor, who is in his late 80s and still scouting.

For many of the old scouts, those nights are the life and soul. They earn their satisfaction from watching football, reporting on players and hoping someone inside their clubs will react to their recommendations. It keeps their minds active and they get together and reminisce over tea and biscuits.

I thought it would be wonderful for people like them to have the chance to spend their later years together in a safe place where they could care for each other and always have friends to talk to about football.

The League Managers Association committee agreed it would be a good legacy to provide somewhere for managers, coaches and scouts who retire without making a fortune out of football and fall ill and cannot work, or are bereaved and lonely.

We found out the cost would be prohibitive as a venture purely funded by the LMA but our chief executive, Richard Bevan, became aware Mike Soper and Paul Sheldon, with their backgrounds in cricket, were thinking along similar lines. We have met up to share our thoughts.

There are barriers to overcome but we hope we can set up a property, ideally near the seaside, where we can look after our fellow managers.

Project is backed by Sir John Major

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entwined in a single project led by Soper, who has served for years on the board of a successful sheltered housing scheme for former artists and performers, in partnership with a housing association in Dorset. 'David Pleat was the inspiration,' Ferguson told *Sportsmail*. 'And he has worked hard to help sportsmen and women to get the help they thoroughly deserve, at a time when they most need it.' Former Prime Minister Major said: 'All sports lovers have their heroes — they are

always remembered in their prime. But heroes age. Their skills fade. So does the memory of them. The Reposm charity has been established to help and house those who have fallen on hard times.' Soper and Paul Sheldon, a former chief executive at Surrey, will pitch their business plan to the PFA next month, hoping the union will inject finances into the fundraising effort. They want to launch with a unit of 12 homes which they believe will help to fight loneliness and keep mental illness and dementia at bay.

EXCLUSIVE
ALAN KNIGHT
INTERVIEWby Matt
Barlow

THROUGH the clear eyes of 11 sober years, Alan Knight can make perfect sense of his personal crash into the ranks of the homeless.

He acknowledges his mistakes with honesty and regret as he retraces his steps and he appreciates the perils awaiting professional sportspeople when age forces them into the real world. At the time, however, it was a high-speed blur.

Knight, a one-club legend with 801 senior appearances for Portsmouth, spiralled out of football, out of control and into depression via alcoholism, a broken marriage and a medical emergency in the USA.

'I've had those moments where you think about ending your life,' he says. 'I've done that. I was sleeping in the car when there was nowhere else to go and you would sit in there and think about all sorts of things.'

'Hosepipe into the car? Would that be the easiest way? All those things go through your head when you're at your lowest.'

At 59, Knight is an ambassador for Pompey and active in their community projects in a city where homelessness and addiction are prevalent. Who better than someone who can empathise and offer proof of a way out?

The key for him was to overcome the embarrassment of talking about his predicament and accessing the support network. He was fortunate to have family and good friends on hand, and agencies such as the PFA and the Sporting Chance addiction clinic.

There are gaps in the system, however, and Knight believes Reposm, a new charity established to help former sportsmen and women with affordable housing highlighted on these pages yesterday, will go a long way towards closing one of them.

'It's very easy to slip through the grid,' he says. 'More common than people realise. It comes down to pride with a lot of lads I see, and that was my biggest problem. People told me I needed help, that I was an alcoholic and I should go to the PFA but I wouldn't accept that.'

'I was wrapped up in myself and there's fear and embarrassment. Where to go? Who will help? I know lots of footballers who have struggled to access help they needed.'

When Knight's playing career ended in the late 1990s, he was on about £50,000 a year and dropped to £25,000 to become the club's goalkeeping coach. There had been a windfall from a testimonial in 1994 and another benefit match a decade on.

The £30,000 it generated soon disappeared to repay debts. 'A lot of people worked hard and people

paid to come and watch,' says Knight. 'I'm grateful and I feel I let them down.'

'Unfortunately, my personal life was unravelling. I split from my wife and I was haemorrhaging money. I lost the house and instead of sorting the finances, I buried my head in the sand and tried to make out everything was going well.'

'My drinking had escalated. I can look back now and see that I was a functioning alcoholic when I was playing. There was a big drink culture but you couldn't drink two days before a game.'

'As a coach, I didn't have those rules. I'd go out on a Friday or, if it was an away

game, I'd stay up drinking in the hotel with some of the staff and I'd be kicking balls at the goalies in the warm-up still half-drunk. I was losing self-control.'

From Portsmouth, Knight accepted a job coaching in the USA with Colin Clarke, a former team-mate who was in charge of FC Dallas. It was going well until his appendix burst and he

needed emergency surgery. 'They found it was infected and I nearly lost my bowel. Then came the conversation about who was paying the \$100,000 bill. My contract said medical care was covered but Dallas hadn't put it in place and the hospital said that was my problem. It was settled in the end but it created a bad feeling.'

Clarke was sacked after

losing on penalties in the 2006 play-offs and Knight returned home.

'That was when things became really difficult,' he says. 'I had nowhere to live and getting a job in football proved impossible. I had no money for rent. I was running on empty.'

He lived in spare rooms and slept on sofas in the homes of friends and former

team-mates, unable to offer rent, afraid he would outstay his welcome, and he picked up cash doing manual labour and occasional coaching sessions at Bournemouth, Havant & Waterlooville and Dorchester, but he was still drinking and unreliable.

'I always ended up in a pub,' Knight admits. 'I could always go into a pub in Pompey and someone would look after me.'

Then came the emotional breakdown. 'I woke up one Saturday morning in Southsea in clothes I'd had on for a couple of days, a suit and a white shirt covered in dirt, and I walked over Fratton Bridge. Pompey were at home and supporters were



Battling on: Knight today and (above) in his Portsmouth playing days
IAN TUTTLE/GETTY IMAGES

course. He emerged clean. 'I had an epiphany, I think,' he smiles, but stepping back into society was daunting.

'I can't thank Sporting Chance and the PFA enough, so I don't want to sound disingenuous but the big bit for me was at the end. Where are you going to go? I didn't know where I was going to live. I didn't have a job. I was lucky to have some very good friends and family who supported me.'

Knight found a job doing groundwork on construction sites. 'I wasn't very good, but at least I was reliable because I wasn't drinking.'

And he returned to coaching, first at Horndean in Wessex League Two, step seven of the pyramid, and later at Aldershot with Kevin Dillon, another former team-mate, and as manager at Dorchester.

The labouring took priority, however, because it paid more. Eventually he could afford rent on lodgings to call his own and regain some control. 'I was in a bed, with a better sleep pattern,' says Knight. 'It didn't feel like I was sofa-surfing. I had the stability of my own space.'

'I met my wife, Heather. She has been a massive help with my sobriety. I got my head straight and started to face my issues.'

'There were times when I thought it never would, but my life changed. I have a better relationship with my two daughters. I have three grandkids. I have a wife, a stepson and stepdaughter, a new life and it has been great to get back into football.'

Knight returned to Portsmouth as goalkeeping coach in 2013, before becoming an ambassador.

Uncertainty lies ahead, once again. He was on furlough through the pandemic and volunteered delivering food parcels with Pompey in the Community. He knows clubs in League One are facing difficult decisions.

But Knight is safe in the knowledge he has faced greater fears and survived.

To donate to the charity go to uk.virginmoneygiving.com and search for Reposm

Reposm
sporting housing trust

I THOUGHT
'HOSEPIPE INTO
THE CAR. WOULD
THAT BE THE
EASIEST WAY?'

I must have looked like a bag of s***.
I could tell by the looks people were
thinking, 'Look at the state of him'

THE MONEY CAN DRY UP FAST

by CHRIS
SUTTON

THERE is a perception that football players earn ridiculous amounts and see out their days living in mansions. Some do. But supercars on driveways and swimming pools in back gardens are exceedingly rare. Careers in football are short and, for various reasons, that money can soon go. It might be because of poor financial advice. It might be because that business you opened suddenly collapsed — something which has become even more of a risk in this time of coronavirus. It leaves older generations vulnerable, some without a home of their own and forced to move in with family members. Former players, managers, coaches, scouts, those who operated at the top level and those who

FOOTBALL

circulated the lower leagues — it can happen to anyone. Life doesn't always go according to plan and those who once made headlines in the sports pages can find themselves falling on hard times. As one can imagine, this causes mental anguish and it's wrong of a sport to turn its back on those who gave it so much. That's why this initiative by the Reposm Sporting Housing Trust can only be a good thing. It is a genuinely heartwarming scheme which *Sportsmail* is supporting and going to be donating towards. Hopefully, this can help anyone out there who's lost their way to get back on track. I'm backing it, and so are Sir Alex Ferguson and David Pleat to name two others. I hope you will be, too.

A WAY HOME FOR THE RETIRED

By MATT BARLOW

THOSE who provide a housing lifeline in the horseracing community are certain there is nothing to stop other sports succeeding with similar models. 'I see absolutely no reason why it wouldn't work if there is the will and funding to do it,' said Dawn Goodfellow, chief executive of Racing Welfare, the charity supporting those who work in British racing. 'It could be a really exciting prospect and there's all sorts of potential. 'When you're building new stadiums, why couldn't there be some sort of social housing with an area reserved for retired elite sportsmen?' Racing Homes is the housing association that owns and manages 155 units in racing hubs such as Newmarket and Lambourn on behalf of Racing Welfare. There are bedsits for young people, although more than two thirds is housing for the sport's retired community, including former jockeys and trainers, stable staff, stud staff and ground staff from the racecourses. Last year, a new block of 21 two-bed retirement flats was built in Newmarket for £3.5million. There is a points system for eligibility and rents

RACING

set below social housing levels. None of it is sheltered but there is a close link between the housing team and welfare officers. 'Traditionally in racing there was a lot of tied housing,' said Goodfellow. 'Homes went with the job, and that would have been the genesis for it. There is less tied housing these days but the pressures are different. 'Newmarket is becoming a dormitory town for Cambridge and property prices are going up. In Epsom you're talking London prices and that's a challenge. A lot of our retired people have to move away and we know social isolation damages mental and physical health. There's research to show being lonely can be as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. 'One of the great values of our housing is that it enables people to live within the racing community. 'We've moved people into Newmarket from places where they were socially isolated and into a community with people who understand what they're going through.'

IT'S A STRUGGLE FOR SO MANY

by CHRIS
COWDREY
Former Kent and
England captain

CRICKET has some awful statistics when it comes to mental health and levels of divorce, bankruptcy and suicide among former players.

It is not a sport awash with money. Cricketers have never been looked after for life, although the Professional Cricketers' Association do an increasingly good job.

Things are better than they were but I know plenty from my generation who have really struggled and some are still struggling. They could do with the help of Reposm.

I hope that all sports can come together and get this up and running to help as many people as possible in different stages of their lives. I am firmly behind this *Sportsmail* campaign. These problems are more widespread than people realise. Circumstances are different but life can throw you a few tricky deliveries

CRICKET

and it is hard to get moving again. It is OK to hold up your hand and say you need help. David Bairstow was a great friend of mine who tragically took his own life at the age of 46, while Graeme Fowler, who suffered terrible mental health problems for 20 years, has done well to confront his issues and help others. Cricket is an all-embracing lifestyle. You are among friends, surrounded by groups of people. Although the travelling could be a hardship, it was fun because you'd go to play at Yorkshire and you knew on the close of the first day you would go out for a few beers with 'Bluey' Bairstow, which was something to look forward to. It was a social game. Then, all of a sudden, you retire and you don't have a team around you. The fraternity is gone and the money stops. It would be great to know Reposm was there to help those who struggle to cope.

FOOTBALL
DIGESTBIG PAY DEAL
IS REWARD
FOR ANTONIO

WEST HAM have held initial talks about a new deal that would make Michail Antonio one of their top earners after he inspired them to Premier League survival with eight goals in his final seven games. Antonio, 30, has one year left on a contract worth about £65,000 a week. A new long-term deal would see him climb up their wage structure, which is topped by Andriy Yarmolenko, Sebastian Haller and Jack Wilshere who are paid at least £100,000 a week.

ADRIAN KAJUMBA

● FORMER Liverpool and England striker Daniel Sturridge, 30, is seeking a Premier League club. His contract with Turkey's Trabzonspor ended in March after he received a four-month ban for breaching FA gambling rules.

● MACCLESFIELD have been relegated from League Two, with Stevenage reprieved, after an independent arbitration panel issued a six-point deduction. It follows a misconduct charge over non-payment of player wages in March.

'NO FIRE SALE'
PLEDGE KEY
FOR TINDALL

JASON TINDALL insists he would not have taken the Bournemouth manager's job if a fire sale of the club's best players was imminent. Tindall, promoted after being Eddie Howe's No 2, said at his unveiling: 'If the club said there is going to be a fire sale and "you're going to end up losing eight or nine players" I wouldn't be sitting in this seat.'

Defender Nathan Ake has already moved to Manchester City for £41million while a £12m Sheffield United offer for goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale has been rejected.

ADRIAN KAJUMBA