

# THE DREAM TEAM

When **Clare Hurford's** boss took up a new challenge, so did the PA – managing the working life of Crystal Palace Football Club's co-owner, Steve Parish *BY KAREN GLASER*

**MOST OF US FOLLOW** a football team because of local loyalty or family influence. But Clare Hurford supports Crystal Palace because of Twitter.

The online social networking service is the reason she became PA to the football club's co-owner, Steve Parish. Not that she knew this about Steve when she applied for the job of PA to the CEO of a global design and production agency.

"The job was at Tag Worldwide which Steve used to own. At the time, I was a freelance stylist on various magazines and covered for assistant fashion editors. But I have a degree in creative advertising and I was keen to work in the advertising industry.

"One hour after I had applied for the job on Twitter, the recruitment agency rang to ask if I could go for an interview that evening. It was a Wednesday, and the following Monday I started work as Steve's PA."

It was 2012, and at the end of the year Steve left Tag, having sold the company a year previously. Clare went with him. Steve had already bought Crystal Palace Football Club in 2010, but Clare says that as the club was in the championship at the time, his involvement with it was minimal.

## FASHION MEETS FOOTBALL

Now, of course, his involvement with Crystal Palace Football Club (CPFC) is maximal. And Clare's is, too. But in her case, the beautiful game is a new dimension in her life. "I went to my first football match, an FA cup game, during my first week at CPFC. My dad is a rugby man and we didn't have a local football team where I grew up, so I didn't really have a reason to like football. But I do like the game now. And I also like the exciting world of football."

A couple of hours before that first game, Clare went out and bought herself a new outfit: a pair of black trousers and a white shirt, both from Zara. She wanted to look stylish, but not too avant-garde for the occasion. Her background in fashion means her clothes can seem a bit edgy in the rather conservative, male-dominated world of soccer. "People in the office will often say things such as – 'those are rather loud trousers you are wearing today, Clare!' And it is true, leather trousers are not the norm in this world."

For at least one day every fortnight, though, the leather breeches hang neatly in Clare's wardrobe. On home match days, which take place once every two



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weeks, she works as a mystery shopper at Selhurst Park, Crystal Palace's football ground: and for this exercise to work Clare must not stand out from the madding crowd.

"I get there two hours before kick-off and observe the stewards and the turnstile staff to see if they are polite and knowledgeable. Then I'll go to the restaurant, have a meal and review the catering staff: are drinks poured properly, is the place clean and tidy? I also chat with waitresses and hostesses in the various lounges. The object of mystery shopping is to improve customer service and, where appropriate, to reward staff. And the exercise works because the club employs casual staff who don't know who I am. Though for extra cover, I still dress as plainly as I can!"

### DUTY CALLS

Gym-toned Steve, meanwhile, generally wears fitted clothes, says Clare. Her job doesn't involve buying his threads, but she does research pieces of furniture for his apartment, currently under renovation, and when asked to describe her boss's taste in interiors, Clare doesn't hesitate: "modern contemporary, quite Mayfair."

Similarly, Steve's friends and fans also turn to his PA for advice on gifts for him. "He likes teas, so I always advise people to buy him Earl Grey or green tea. I think it's the best bet for a man who has everything."

Clare's more unusual PA duties have also included buying bedding for Steve's daughters, aged 21 and 16, and she has, on a couple of occasions, cleaned the Crystal Palace chief's bathroom. "It is fair to say that sometimes I feel like his mum!"

Not when she is reporting on the activities of Crystal Palace's membership programme at the club's monthly management meetings, though: "I have to deliver a report on the programme to the other department heads, and at that moment I am also a department head."

Which pleases Steve greatly. "I want a PA who can be me in a meeting, who is an extension of me, if you like - and Clare is that person," he says. "In fact, I don't really see her as my PA. I think of her as an EA."

But not as an EA who takes liberties: "We are a small team here and intimacy can breed familiarity. But not in Clare's case" notes Steve, who appreciates that Clare is never late for work and she doesn't do things such as take Fridays off. "She always maintains the correct level of professional distance."

### THE PROFESSIONAL PA

Far from being late for work, Clare is regularly in contact with Steve until midnight, and checks her emails from 7am daily. "Our phones are always in our hands, we are constantly on Whatsapp," she says. But always being contactable is, she concedes, a downside to the job, as is carving out time in the week for herself. "Being so organised for Steve, means I never have any time to organise my own life. So, my mum has become my PA - it's she who sorts things such as eye tests and repairing my smashed iPhone screen which, incidentally, Steve has been telling me I should sort out for weeks."

The fact Steve can tell Clare to 'sort' her iPhone out is, surely, a measure of their close working relationship. Clare prefers the word 'honest' to describe their rapport. "That's why things work so well. He treats me as a colleague rather than as someone who is subservient to him."

To onlookers, though, this honesty can sometimes be mistaken for something else. A staff member once asked Clare if she saw Steve privately. "No, I do not," was the unequivocal reply.

Just occasionally, though, the duo has disagreements, which do recall wife-husband spats. "Once Steve couldn't find his keys, was in a bit of a panic about it, so I went to his flat and found them," recalls Clare. "When I told him, he denied responsibility, saying 'Oh, you must have put them there and not mentioned it.'"

But set against the excitement of working in a fast-paced environment where rubbing shoulders with Bono, Michael Buble, Billy Bragg, Bill Nighy, Jo Brand and Eddie Izzard, among other big-name Crystal Palace fans, is all in a day's work, such relationship blips are just that. "We do get a lot of famous people in our boardroom, and although I'm not really the star-struck type, it is certainly a privilege to hang out with people who are older and more accomplished than me," says Clare.

Older is the operative word. Aged just 26, Clare has plenty of time to add to her already considerable accomplishments. As Steve puts it: "I just cannot believe how young she is." ■

