Millwall FC Fans' Forum | Monday 28th July 2025
First panel summary:
Panel one: Alex Neil (AN), Mark Fairbrother (MF), Steve Gallen (SG)

Transfers – Incomings & Outgoings:

- **Alfie Doughty**: AN
    - Highly valued by the team.
    - Primarily plays on the left but is versatile enough to play on the right.
    - Provides short-term cover due to injuries (Joe and Zak).
    - Long-term looking to use Alfie in more advanced roles.

- **Mihailo Ivanovic**: AN
    - A key player, shown excellent form in pre-season and looked to have stepped it up a level.
    - The club wants to keep him as he is vital to the plans.
    - While every player has a price, the club is not actively looking to sell and lose any key players.
    - SG confirms Mihailo was homesick in the first few months at the club.

- **Japhet Tanganga**: SG
    - Japhet is a key, highly valued player, secured on a permanent contract last summer after much effort.
    - A release clause was included but not as a result of the club's preference.
    - 2024/25 Player and Players' Player of the Season and remains important to the team.
    - The club is encouraging him to stay and consider a new contract amid interest from other clubs, though no Premier League bids yet.
    - Concerns six weeks ago he would depart, however, Japhet is still with the club, playing well, and happy amongst the squad.
    - The club respects his Premier League ambitions and does not want to block them.
    - While hoping Japhet stays, the club has plans in place to cover his departure.
    - Recruitment aims for quality replacements, not just temporary fills, but the club wants to retain all key players.

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- **Closing the transfer window before the start of the season:** SG

    - Preference for the transfer window to close before the season starts, which aligns with many Championship, League One, and League Two clubs.
    - This year, the window shuts on September 1st at 7pm, marking a tough and busy time for signing players.
    - Signing players is challenging but the club is becoming a more attractive destination, exemplified by Josh Coburn, who was hesitant to join a year ago but was then keen to sign permanently after a positive experience.
    - The signing of Josh Coburn was well-supported by Alex and Chairman, making it a good long-term acquisition.

- **Signing a right-back:** AN

    - There are several options for the right-back position, so it's not seen as a current priority.
    - The club needs to allocate its budget to areas needing more immediate attention.

- **Squad depth**: AN

    - Midfield remains an area needing reinforcement after departures of Ryan Wintle, George Honeyman, and George Saville.
    - If Japhet leaves, the club will need to strengthen there as well.
    - Discussions are ongoing around potential replacements, though the hope remains that Japhet stays.
    - Zak Sturge has been signed to bolster the left-back position.
    - Two new goalkeepers have also been brought in to provide cover and competition. Lukas' injury is considered a major blow; he was a standout performer last season with numerous match-winning saves.

- **Update on the Academy**: SG

    - Josh Stephenson (U18) left for Brentford last year despite significant efforts from the club to retain him, including multiple contract offers and meetings with his agent.
    - Other academy losses included younger players who moved to Arsenal and Chelsea.

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- No players have left the academy this year, which is seen as a significant improvement. This retention is attributed to the club creating a visible, credible pathway from the academy to the First-Team.
- Romain Esse's transfer to the Premier League has inspired belief in the pathway.
- Young players from the U21s are now regularly training with the First-Team
- This day-to-day integration is helping to build belief and connection between the academy and the senior squad.
- The club wants academy players to feel valued and part of the club's long-term future.

Announcing signings - SG:

- **First-Team vs development signings:**
  - Some players (e.g. Tristan Crama, Aaron Connolly, Luke Cundle) are signed specifically to impact the First-Team immediately. Others (e.g. Benicio Baker, Ajay Matthews, Zak Lovelace) are long-term prospects.
  - Internally, the club distinguishes between First-Team and development signings, but this isn't always made public.

- **Balancing communication and development:**
  - It's important to give young players the experience and recognition of a signing without misleading fans about their immediate role.
  - The club tries to balance giving them encouragement and visibility without setting unrealistic expectations.
  - Announcing a young player as "not a First-Team player" publicly could hurt their motivation and image.

- **Parental and fan perspective:**
  - From a parent point of view, equal treatment during signings matters, even if the players are at different development stages.
  - From a fan's perspective, there's curiosity about when and how new players will contribute.

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- Some players are brought in to make an immediate impact, while others are signed for long-term development.
- The club carefully manages how signings are communicated to support the player's growth while considering fan and family expectations.

New investment – MF:

- The club receives frequent enquiries from people interested in buying or investing, often with unrealistic expectations (e.g. wanting any London club).
- Some discussions are advisory, helping direct potential investors to other clubs that are actively for sale.
- The club's stance on investment has already been publicly clarified, and outside speculation often serves other agendas.
- Focus remains on the club's own goals and stability.
- Steve Gallen praised the Chairman as the most supportive he's worked with.

League competition – AN:

- Relegated Premier League teams have a financial advantage due to parachute payments and stronger squads.
- These clubs usually have higher wage budgets than most Championship teams.
- Promoted clubs like Birmingham and Wrexham are investing heavily, making this season unusually competitive.
- Some existing teams in the division appear weaker than last year, which may shift the competitive balance.
- The overall dynamic of the League will be interesting to watch as the transfer window progresses.

Liam Roberts incident:

- **Departing Millwall – AN**

- The club offered Liam a two-year contract and did not want him to leave.
- Following Lukas' injury, Liam asked if he would be guaranteed the No.1 goalkeeper spot next season which couldn't be guaranteed, as it depended on future signings and being truthful is important.
- Liam decided to leave due to not being guaranteed regular football and a desire to return closer to his home in the Midlands.

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- His decision was not influenced by the incident at Crystal Palace and he appreciated the support received from the club and fans.

- **Crystal Palace incident – AN**

  - Spoke to CPFC chairman Steve Parish post-match and disagreed with his half-time interview and defended Liam.
  - Stressed the challenge was mistimed and accidental, not malicious.
  - Once momentum was involved in the play, it couldn't be stopped - Liam went for the ball but unfortunately caught the opponent's face.

- **Media backlash & club response - MF**

  - The club handled extensive negative media coverage behind-the-scenes, especially after the Liam Roberts incident.
  - One media outlet ran up to 17 articles focusing on Liam, which the club considered excessive and harmful.
  - The club banned this organisation from future access and explored all legal options to defend the club.
  - A number of other actions taken that due to nature cannot be disclosed.
  - The club stood firm on protecting its players and pushing back against unfair coverage.

Aspirations for start of the season – AN:

- The goal is to start the season well and pick up early points to avoid playing catch-up later in the campaign.
- The team finished last season strongly and pre-season is vital for preparing the squad, building fitness and integrating new players.
- The club has already added players and plans to bring in more before the transfer window closes.
- Player availability and transfer timings are unpredictable - deals often depend on a domino effect as other clubs make moves.
- The club feels well-prepared heading into the season, with clear goals and ongoing recruitment efforts. Keen on building momentum early.

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Loaning young players:

- **Balancing development and opportunity - AN**
    - Young players are only loaned out if there's no realistic short-term First-Team opportunity.
    - If the First-Team lacks depth or a signing falls through, academy players may get promoted instead of being loaned.
    - Ralph Lamptey and Sheldon Kendall have shown promise in pre-season but lack regular U21 experience, so likely to stay, play in U21s, and train with the First-Team.
    - Alfie Massey has experienced U21 football. If he's not featuring semi-regularly in the First-Team, a loan move for senior football is likely.
- **Loan strategy - AN**
    - Most loans include a January break clause to recall players if they're not playing enough.
    - Decisions on loans depend on First-Team squad needs, player age, U21 experience, likelihood of First-Team minutes.
    - It's often difficult to find loan opportunities for young players, especially in competitive Leagues where managers prefer experienced players over 18 or 19-year-olds.
    - Convincing lower League clubs to take young prospects can be a challenge due to performance pressure.
- **Players heading out on loan: SG**
    - Receives regular calls from clubs interested in loaning players.
    - Prefers to keep young talent training with the First-Team and praises Jack Howland for the experience he's gained training alongside senior pros like Japhet, Coops, and Lenny and for his goal against Wimbledon.
    - Emphasises the value of pre-season involvement before making loan decisions.
    - Confirms that some loans will happen, though no names can be shared yet.

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Contracts – AN:

- George Honeyman and George Saville were offered contracts that reflected the expected squad roles moving forward.
- Both were brilliant influences in the dressing room, but the club is focused on evolving the squad. Billy and Casper became the regular two when available in midfield.
- Casper has a contract extension option the club can activate.
- Jake Cooper has been made captain for his leadership skills and is highly valued; discussions on his future are expected and likely to be constructive.
- Simpler contract talks happen earlier; complex ones are delayed avoiding distraction.
- Financial discussions are handled by Steve Gallen, club executives and agents.

On signing a new contract – AN:

- Feels a cultural and personal alignment with the club's working-class roots.
- Despite the family being based up north, there is full commitment to the club and balances time between locations.
- Long-term goal is promotion to the Premier League**,** though without immediate pressure for this season.
- Clear dedication to driving the club forward in the coming years.

Squad updates:

- **Joe Bryan & Zak Sturge - AN**
    - Joe Bryan picked up a groin issue after the Crystal Palace game. A recent scan showed positive results.
    - Zak Sturge has returned to training and is expected to be integrated into match action soon.

- **Aidomo Emakhu - AN**
    - A unique talent with explosive pace, capable of beating multiple defenders and focus on helping him improve end product.
    - Longest spell without an injury since arriving at the club and played over 200 minutes in pre-season.
    - Will start against Sutton United.

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- **Kevin Nisbet: AN**

    - The club had been watching him closely and reviewing all Aberdeen his clips - Steve Gallen attended games in person.
    - Clean slate and the opportunity to prove himself this summer.
    - Suffered an injury two weeks ago, which is why he hasn't featured in pre-season matches, but he's now back training on the grass.

- **Young talent: SG**

    - Zak Lovelace: A strong, athletic forward, but has struggled with long-term injuries (hamstrings, knee). Currently undergoing a careful rebuild. Desperate to play and has strong physical attributes.
    - Benicio Baker**:** Technically gifted, very skilful and a raw talent.
    - Ajay Matthews: Just 18, signed from Middlesbrough (who were reluctant to let him go). Seen as a long-term project with potential, but patience is required.
    - The trio were low-cost signings with a long-term view. If even one makes it to the First-Team and is sold on, it would be considered a success.
    - The club is taking a low-risk, high-upside approach with these young players.
    - Emphasis on patience and physical development, especially for those transitioning into senior football.

- **Adapting to the League: AN**

    - Young players can lack prior Championship experience, which is a physically demanding League.
    - Early on, players such as Casper had limited availability, but with time, improved to full availability (e.g., Casper last season).
    - Similarly, Japhet struggled prior to joining Millwall but increased his game time significantly after joining.
    - Players with previous higher-level experience (like Japhet) tend to adapt faster because their bodies are already conditioned.
    - Younger players coming from lower levels need time to physically develop and adjust to the Championship's intensity.
    - The club is focused on carefully building their fitness and readiness to compete consistently.

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