

Francis

FORMER NON-LEAGUE DEFENDER



DUKU

ND FOUNDER OF THE SPORTS CIRCLE



GAME MUST MAKE SAFETY PROGRESS

THE death of Billy Vigar is a tragedy which has shocked football to its core and I send my condolences to his family.

That a 21-year-old has left home to play football on Saturday and has suffered an injury that has ended their life just doesn't bear thinking about and has thrown open the question of player welfare. Essentially, that is the key point.

We've heard a lot of talk on this subject in the past, but now it's imperative we make real progress into how we deal with the problem of making grounds safer to protect the safety of everyone who enters a football stadium come match day.

At the end of the day, we need a system of regulation in place. There are a large number of Non-League grounds which require a lot of investment and modernisation, and help is needed.

A large number of grounds have a brick wall feature, built at a time when they were thought to be the right thing to do. Those days are now long gone.

Four years ago, Bath City's Alex Fletcher was involved in a similar incident and that should have provoked a response to start addressing this issue.

I also remember an away game while playing for Dulwich when part of a perimeter wall collapsed while the fans were celebrating, and have seen several reports of similar occurrences since I stopped playing.

So, I have to ask myself if the FA and relevant governing bodies have done enough up to this point – and you'd have to say the answer is no.

Take the Alex Fletcher scenario. He was in a coma for a number of days, so it was no insignificant incident, yet that didn't



TIME TO RAISE THE BAR: Billy Vigar's death has rocked football to the core

PICTURE: Lydia Redman

able and spent.

Football must come together in times like this and I feel we could all do with some kind of mechanism where clubs collectively share information and knowledge to improve the overall infrastructure around the game.

At the end of the day, clubs play away games too so even if they can make changes to their own ground, the safety risk still exists elsewhere. There needs to be some kind of collective action and the support for that has to come from above from the powers that be. That's where the ability to motivate change will really come from.

But I just don't think we should focus on the wall issue. Player welfare as a whole needs addressing just as much.

The fact we've got so many players still needing crowdfunding campaigns is the continual proof of that. Can we take this as a moment to look at everything and what other steps we can take?

This is something we are delivering on at The Sports Circle. We will be escalating this as part of this season's Non-League Day campaign with support of some brilliant relationships we have in place with companies such as international fan engagement specialists Fortress GB (where an ex Non-League team mate Steve Nott-Macaire is a VP), FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence Isokinetic London, and Nuffield Health sites such as at Woking, Guildford, and the Manchester Institute of Health and Performance, who all support our plans to transform Non-League player welfare.

It's not going to be fixed overnight, but for those who agree that change is needed, there is a challenge there to be accepted.

provoke any change.

That said, I think we can all do better. If clubs or individuals know there is a problem in a certain stadium then we can all take our own responsibility and individual action to try and improve it or put in place some steps to mitigate the risk.

Initiative

I have huge sympathy for these clubs, which are mainly run by volunteers, who have day jobs and are not experts in this field.

They need guidance to be able to be clear what's needed and take be empowered to take the necessary action.

This issue should be covered under ground grading requirements but for such a long time now it has seemingly been overlooked.

Hopefully this will be addressed with the work that the FA are now carrying out.

I know of some clubs who are already actively addressing this now under their own initiative which

is brilliant. Hanwell Town, for example, have kicked into action straight away and are looking at various measures such as narrowing the pitch to create more of a "run-off" area.

This is a potentially quick 'win' that (subject to minimum pitch dimensions) many clubs can consider while working out how to remove and replace any dangerous structures currently in place.

The Premier League also has a stadium fund which can provide clubs with

financial support to make these changes and revamp things. Yes, resources are obviously a problem, let's be clear on that. No-one has a bottomless pit of money.

Challenge

But, at the end of the day in this day and age, players are still paid to play, they all wear GPS vests and there are AI cameras for videos and the like, so there's clearly budget there, and maybe it's just a case of balancing in terms of where the funds are avail-