



State of Play

Queens Park Rangers

A Game of the People report



West London's wilderness club

QPR's future depends on the club being able to grow against the backdrop of a new stadium with greater commercial opportunities. Without relocation, there is a great deal of uncertainty about their prospects, especially in the post-virus world.



IN 2018, an English newspaper named Queens Park Rangers among the worst managed clubs in Britain. This was largely due to a poor record in the transfer market, overspending and a lack of stability caused by short-term managers and a high turnover of players. QPR, desperate to be part of the Premier League gravy train, have only been in the top flight for seven seasons in the last 28, with the Championship (level 2) now appearing to be their natural home. Clubs such as QPR have an uncertain future due to the Coronavirus pandemic and it remains to be seen if all mid-sized entities will survive the inevitable fall-out of no football, macro-economic collapse and political turmoil.

With London a crowded football market, QPR have Fulham (3.2 miles), Chelsea (4 miles), Brentford (5 miles) within close proximity. While QPR enjoyed their moment as the leading club among this quartet, the resurgence of Chelsea and Fulham over the past 15 years has pushed them down the pecking order. The club's financial limitations, despite wealthy backers, means QPR struggle to compete locally, while on the pitch they have declined significantly.

New ground for old

QPR's Loftus Road stadium, currently called the Kiyon Prince Foundation Stadium, is limited when it comes to expansion. An old-fashioned inner-city ground with a good atmosphere, the club cannot create the facilities it needs on the 4.5 acre site to grow revenues and diversify income streams. There are hopes that a new ground, at the Linford Christie Stadium, could shake the club out of its current malaise.

QPR's management has said that the club is unsustainable at Loftus Road and the current board is eager to make the club financially sustainable. However, the club wants to stay in the neighbourhood, but the priority is sustainability. QPR are looking to move to a new 30,000 community stadium which will have the flexibility for all year-round use. The club has been searching for a suitable location for almost 20 years. The Linford Christie Stadium, which is part of Wormwood Scrubs, is just 1.5 miles away from Loftus Road. There has been talk of a 45,000 capacity stadium, but QPR admitted this is too big, and arguably too ambitious, for the club's requirements.

London clubs have multiple challenges in successfully achieving relocation. Arsenal were fortunate in moving nearby to land that was available and Tottenham knocked-down White Hart Lane and rebuilt next door but West Ham have not found the relocation to the Olympic Stadium an easy transition. Brentford are moving to Kew Bridge, but Chelsea's Stamford Bridge project has been sidelined.

QPR are also hoping to build a new training ground in Ealing and prior to the Coronavirus shutdown, director of football, Les Ferdinand, said work would commence in 2021-22.



A declining audience?

Considering the club is close to the heart of the city and the West London area is heavily populated, Queens Park Rangers have struggled to build broad support. Their stadium now has a capacity of little over 18,000. Only half a dozen times in their history have QPR drawn an average of over 20,000 – the last occasion being the 1984-85 season. Even when QPR finished runners-up in the old first division (1975-76), there were complaints that they couldn't fill Loftus Road. The club have always had Chelsea and Fulham to contend with, but with Brentford something of a rising force, competition for the neutral has got that little bit tougher and QPR's neighbourhood also has the Westfield Shopping Centre to distract would-be spectators. Loftus Road, despite its quaint ambience, belongs to a different era.

Furthermore, the club's chequered recent history, has undoubtedly been a factor in the flat-lining attendances, despite an attempt to win over fans through a price freeze on tickets. Over the past decade, QPR's gates have declined in six of the last 10 years and until the Coronavirus stopped the 2019-20 season in its tracks, gates were down another 1% to an average of 13,721. The current utilisation rate at Loftus Road is 74%. QPR's share of local support has also fallen over the past 40 years. In 1975-76, QPR's average attendance accounted for 41% of support across the four clubs in West London. By the 1991-92 season, the last pre-Premier campaign, this had dropped to 30% and in 2018-19 it was just 15.6%. Chelsea, Fulham and Brentford have all grown, while Rangers have seen their local presence diminish.

QPR's attendances 2009-2019 versus local rivals

	QPR	Chelsea	Fulham	Brentford
2018-19	13,866	40,437	24,371	10,257
2017-18	13,928	41,282	19,896	10,234
2016-17	14,616	41,508	19,199	10,467
2015-16	15,994	41,500	17,566	10,310
2014-15	17,809	41,546	18,276	10,822
2013-14	16,656	41,482	24,977	7,716
2012-13	17,779	41,462	25,394	6,303
2011-12	17,295	41,478	25,293	5,643
2010-11	15,635	41,435	25,043	5,172
2009-10	13,349	41,423	23,909	6,018

Ownership

QPR's string of owners have come in for a fair amount of criticism over the past 15 years. In 2007, Gianni Paladini sold the club to Flavio Briatore and Bernie Ecclestone with a four-year plan installed aimed at restoring QPR as a top flight club. In 2011, the club did win promotion back to the Premier, but the ownership changed with AirAsia's Tony Fernandes acquiring a 66% stake in the club for £ 35 million. This was the start of a spending spree that, frankly, was a disaster.

Fernandes has said that in his early years at the club, he was exploited by agents and intermediaries, but at the same time, he admitted he had made mistakes. QPR's wage bill was far too high, exceeding income, and they were not getting value for money. It's fair to say the club has not really recovered from that time of excess. Fernandes resigned as chairman in 2018 and the role is currently filled by Amit Bhatia, the London-based head of Swordfish Investments. Fernandes now has a 46% stake at present and Total Soccer Growth (Ruben Gnanalingam) owns 51% while Lakshmi Mittal has 3%.

Finances: Repairing the damage

Queens Park Rangers demonstrated what can happen when a club gets over-zealous in the pursuit of success and, when it doesn't work, the mess that has to be cleaned-up. QPR constantly lose money, although the 2018-19 financial figures showed they are working at repairing the damage of a period when, at their peak, wages represented 195% of income. Revenues were up by 10% in 2018-19 although the club was still benefitting from "parachute payments" to the tune of £ 17 million.

The Championship, generally, is profligate in its bid to reach out for the promised land of the Premier League and QPR pursued a strategy of trying to buy their way into the top bracket. In 2013-14, QPR's turnover was £ 39 million while wages were £ 75 million, the highest in the Championship by a considerable margin. The club eventually had to pay a settlement of £ 42 million due to breaching Financial Fair Play rules in 2018.

In a three-season period between 2012 and 2015, QPR paid over £ 200 million in wages, while generating revenues of £ 185 million. In that timeframe, QPR made operating losses of more than £ 180 million. QPR appear to have a handle on their expenses, the £ 36 million incurred in 2018-19 was the lowest since 2010 and around a third of 2015's £ 117 million. Wages totaled £ 24 million, 12% lower than 2017-18 and less than every season since 2009-10. In 2019, the wage-to-income ratio was 69%. Net debt has also come down significantly and in 2018-19, this totaled £ 42 million, an improvement on the period 2012-15 when it climbed as high as £ 193 million. While some progress has been made, it is a long way back for QPR and the Coronavirus of 2020 can only be seen as a major setback.

Ten-year financials

	Turnover	Profit/Loss	Expenses	Wages
2018-19	34.6m	(10.4m)	(35.8m)	24m
2017-18	31.3m	(37.6m)	(44.1m)	30.7m
2016-17	48m	(6.4m)	(45.2m)	30.7m
2015-16	41.9m	(11m)	(52.2m)	40.8m
2014-15	85.9m	(45.7m)	(116.8m)	72.9m
2013-14	38.7m	(9.8m)	(95.4m)	75.4m
2012-13	60.6m	(65.4m)	(114.6m)	78m
2011-12	64m	(22.6m)	(80.8m)	58.5m
2010-11	16.2m	(25.4m)	(39.4m)	29.7m
2009-10	14.4m	(13.7m)	(24.3m)	17m

Managers and players: Stability a problem

Managers do not last long at QPR, the average number of games per incumbent over the past decade has been just 48. Current manager Mark Warburton (pictured) has been in charge for 41 games and has a win rate of 36.59%. He's been in the job since May 2019. Since 2010, QPR have had 11 full-time managers and a number of caretakers. Only Harry Redknapp reached 100 games and not one manager has had a win-rate of 40%.

Such instability has hampered QPR's ability to maintain competitiveness and they are some way from being a promotion contender, despite bringing in some relatively big names to manage the team such as Mark Hughes, Neil Warnock, Redknapp, Ian Holloway and Steve McClaren.



As for players, QPR has been an open market for buyers due to the club's financial position. While acquisitions are largely free transfers – the only fee paid in 2019-20 was the £ 50,000 for Livingston's Liam Kelly – they have sold players like Darnell Furlong and Luke Freeman for sizeable fees, raising more than £ 6 million. The last season where the club was very active in the transfer market was 2016-17.

Players effectively come and go – 12 new signings were made in 2019-20 and half a dozen players were taken on loan, all from Premier League clubs. The last line-up before the Coronavirus lockdown included no less than seven players who had joined the club since July 2019. QPR have 25 players out on loan and have transferred another 18. The club has little choice but to focus on bringing through home-grown talent, supplemented by players they can pick up without paying large fees. QPR are certainly not alone in taking this approach, but it is a long way from the time when the club finished runners-up in the Football League in 1976 with a team of talented internationals. Nevertheless, the introduction of home-grown players has raised the spirits of some fans who remember the days when hired guns were recklessly being signed.

On the pitch: Lost boys of London W12

Since relegation back to the Championship in 2015, QPR's league performance has steadily declined and in 2018-19, they finished 19th although there were 11 points between them and relegation to League One. The 2019-20 season, until its suspension, saw QPR in midtable, with narrowing hopes of catching the play-off contenders. The club's economic position and the financial fair play saga, which prevented transfer activity, has been hard to overcome. The club also has a poor record in cup competitions, they reached the fifth round of the FA Cup in 2019-20, their best run since 1996-97. QPR's record in the Football League Cup is equally dismal over the past decade.

10-year performance

	League	Position	FA Cup	FL Cup
2018-19	Championship	19 th	Round Five	Round Three
2017-18	Championship	16 th	Round Three	Round Two
2016-17	Championship	18 th	Round Three	Round Three
2015-16	Championship	12 th	Round Three	Round Two
2014-15	Premier	20 th	Round Three	Round Two
2013-14	Championship	4 th	Round Three	Round Two
2012-13	Premier	20 th	Round Four	Round Three
2011-12	Premier	17 th	Round Four	Round One
2010-11	Championship	1 st	Round Three	Round One
2009-10	Championship	13 th	Round Three	Round Three

Conclusion: Uncertainty for all

The future for all medium-sized clubs is uncertain, the prolonged suspension of income will undoubtedly hamper the business models and possibly change the shape of football in all countries. Queens Park Rangers' finances are not especially robust and the crisis has not come at a good time for them – a club in recovery mode with existing competitive disadvantages. The fans have had to be patient at Loftus Road but the Coronavirus crisis may mean the threshold of patience will be severely tested. But once the crisis subsides, QPR may find public interest booms across all levels of football. On the other hand, it could also see an air of caution that includes a reluctance to gather in large numbers. Some experts have predicted the crisis could be the death knell of some clubs, particularly smaller ones that have a greater reliance on matchday income. QPR fall in the category between small and big clubs but the club needs stability, a defined strategy that looks beyond one or two years and the ability to avoid making knee-jerk decisions that can be as damaging as a global crisis. The future for QPR is therefore as uncertain as it could possibly be for a club of its standing and current position. We can only wish them well.

Words: Neil Fredrik Jensen

Photos: Press Association

© Game of the People, April 2020

www.gameofthepople.com



Game of the People

flying the flag for football as it should be played

Clubs featured so far in the State of Play programme: Birmingham City (August 2016), Charlton Athletic (June 2017), Nottingham Forest (January 2018), Sheffield Wednesday (February 2019), Ipswich Town (March 2019), Derby County (April 2019), Brazilian football (June 2019), Queens Park Rangers (April 2020).