

**BALE 'FORGET PEP'S BARÇA - WE'VE WON MORE'**

# FOURFO



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**WORLD EXCLUSIVE**

# JADON SANCHO

WHAT YOU SAYIN?

England's trendsetter on leaving City for Dortmund, beating Spurs and loving Ronaldinho

**WINTERBURN "ARSENAL WERE BETTER THAN UNITED IN 1999"**





Welcome to the Official site of

# Ipswich Town Football Club

The first football web site in the world!

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**SUFFOLK** Web

Suffolk's Dedicated Web Presence Provider

Download a Java browser for scrolling news here.

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News

The Club Strip

“Billy, you’d better not be downloading photos of Alan Brazil again!”





FOOTBALL'S

FIRST

WEBSITES

The Premier League wasn't the only shiny new innovation piped into UK homes in 1992. Dial-up internet allowed fans to access football via the web – starting off with Ipswich Town, and some biscuits...

Looking back, early incarnations of the internet don't seem distinctly wondrous. For starters, the few thousand initial adopters, who in the early-1990s connected their hulking desktop computers to telephone landlines via screeching modems, all had to suffer torturously sluggish download speeds – about 3,000 times slower than today's average. There was also very little content available – just the odd technical or academic site, with hardly anything to interest the average football fan. Few people could have foreseen the impact that the internet would have on the game, and how it would completely revolutionise the way supporters consume the sport.

In 1992, if you wanted to read about Leeds United winning the First Division title, England flopping at the European Championship or Gary Lineker joining a Japanese team, your best bet was to risk getting ink on your fingers from the pages of a freshly-printed newspaper.

There was still relatively little football on television, so radio was the best source of live coverage. If you missed the one chance to hear the final scores, you could look on Ceefax, the teletext service accessed via TV remote controls, with football news and results found on every fan's favourite page number: 302. Ceefax was deservedly popular, although the limited coverage it could provide would soon be washed away by what Microsoft's Bill Gates called "the internet tidal wave".

British boffin Tim Berners-Lee had invented the World Wide Web in 1989, but it was the launch of the first dial-up service for home users in June '92 – by future Fulham shirt sponsors Demon Internet – that turned the stopcock, allowing an information inundation to flow into houses.

Before that, the internet was a tool available only to research and technology firms, and was almost exclusively for official – and boring – use.

But in among pages about telecommunications technology and computer programming software, there was a single experimental football website. And it was dedicated not to Manchester United, nor Real Madrid, but to Ipswich Town.

"I started it in the 1990-91 season before dial-up had even launched, which gives it the claim to be the first football website," reveals Ipswich fan and internet pioneer Phil Clarke, who worked in research and development for British Telecom, giving him access to a prototype version of the web. His site, straightforwardly titled 'Ipswich Town Football Club', was initially little more than a single page. "The original site was just a list of Ipswich's fixtures, which I updated with the scores and scorers," he continues. "It was that simple, really."

This wasn't merely the first website about football – it was one of the first websites about pretty much anything. Most people had still not heard of the new technology. In fact, the word 'internet' wouldn't be added to the Oxford English Dictionary until a full decade later.

"No one knew that the internet was going to become the monster it is today," says Phil, "but as soon as I read about it I thought it would be really cool to put some football information on there, and make it available to anyone who could access it across the network."

In those early days, that meant several thousand researchers and engineers. "Other nerds like me," says Phil, who also created a works site for the BT Research FC Sunday League team. The audience began to grow with the arrival of dial-up in '92, which coincided with Town's promotion to the newly-formed Premier League. Phil added even more content, including colour scans of pictures from the club's 1981 UEFA Cup triumph, meaning some of the first photos that ever appeared on the internet were of Alan Brazil and Mick Mills.

Gradually, the site and its associated mailing list began to connect Phil with a growing community of fans from around the globe. "There are a lot of Ipswich fans in Scandinavia, because English football had

begun to be shown there in the 1970s and Ipswich were really good in the '70s," explains Phil. "Some Scandinavians came up on the mailing list. We were able to get them tickets for a derby with Norwich – we won and they had the time of their lives. The following Monday, they said on the mailing list, 'British football is f\*\*king awesome!' Stuff like that only happened because of the website."

After a couple of years, time constraints forced Phil to relinquish the website, so he gave it to Paul Felton, a student at the University of East Anglia. "I was able to publish it on my university webspace," Paul tells *FFT*. "I put the message, 'Welcome to the first football website in the world!' on the homepage. A Sheffield Wednesday fan site did contact me to dispute the claim, but when we compared notes we saw they hadn't launched until 1993, so they conceded we were first."

By Phil's admission, Paul took the website to another level in terms of innovation during the '90s, before it was eventually co-opted by the club and replaced with an official site. "We did some pioneering stuff," says Paul, "from streaming audio commentary to hosting webchats. We take that sort of thing for granted these days, but it was radical at the time. I think Matt Holland might have been the first live webchat we did. And the statistics on the site were streets ahead of anything you'd find elsewhere: we had form tables and head-to-head statistics. As a sideline I also built the first virtual reality football website, which allowed people to tour a VR model of Portman Road. Microsoft liked it

and licensed it for their TV adverts – only a couple of seconds, but that helped to pay for my studies!"

While Phil and Paul's Ipswich site was the first, a Reading counterpart can claim to be the game's longest-running webpage.

Launched in 1994, 'Hob Nob Anyone?' is older than many Royals players, and is still going strong in the superfast broadband era at [www.royals.org](http://www.royals.org). Describing itself as an 'internet fanzine', Hob Nob adopted the informal, irreverent style of old-school fanzines, as indicated by the biscuit-punning name. "The Royals were once known as The Biscuitmen," says the site's founder, Graham Loader. "I imagine you would 'hobnob' with royalty, so the title came about from that."

Graham was 19 when he set up the Reading site. Coincidentally he was, like Paul Felton, a student at the University of East Anglia. The Royals were riding high in the First Division, but there was hardly any national coverage of teams outside of the Premier League. "Being away at university, I couldn't read

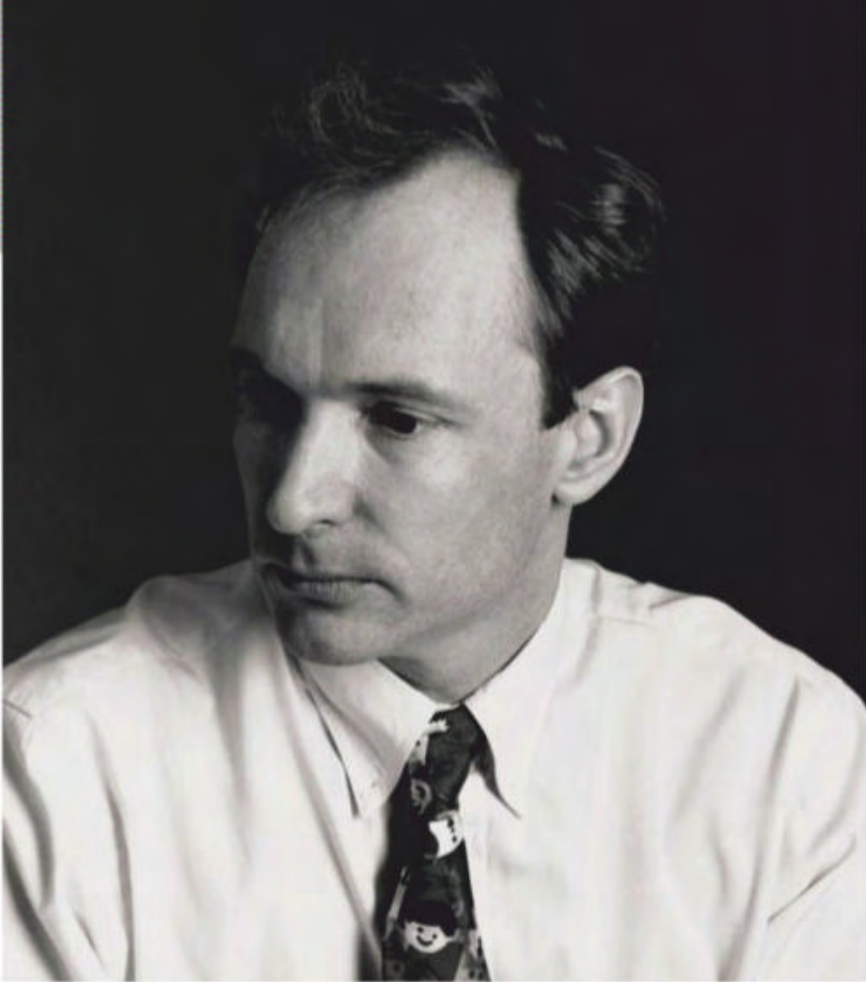
my local papers or listen to local radio," says Graham. "This was well before the days of smartphones, and years before Google or the BBC Sport website. Getting news on the Royals was virtually impossible."

Graham took advantage of the uni's early access to the internet, just as Paul had done. "I put a few pages online and very quickly started to get visitors from all over the world, mostly from other universities or tech companies who'd landed on what was the first ever Reading website," says Graham. "People back home could send in their reports and news, and for many it became their main source of information. It was groundbreaking, and it was a real buzz to be in touch with so many Reading supporters."

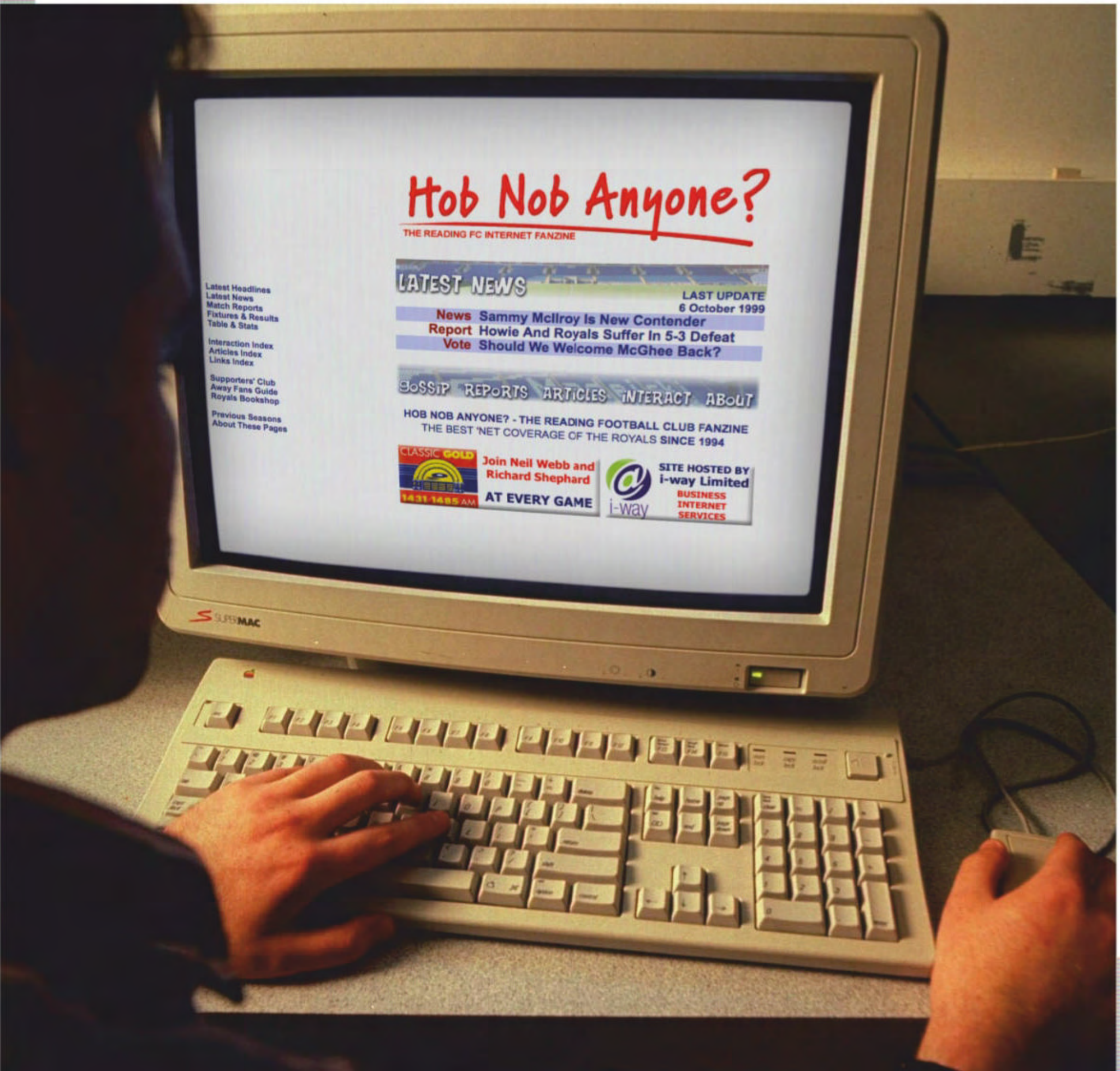
Graham had no reason to keep track of traffic at first, though he did notice a rapid increase in visitors as more football fans got themselves online. And as more fans joined the internet, more football websites appeared. By 1995, fans of more than 40 clubs had launched sites, and the trend was making the news.

"Supporters are harnessing the network that links computer users across the globe to trade jokes, terrace anthems, match reports and reams of statistics about their favourite teams," reported *The Times*. It was noted the website of fourth-tier Colchester United had attracted a full 127 "net surfers" in just 10 days, which wasn't bad considering that fewer than two per cent of the UK population had access to the internet at the time... ▶

## IN 1995 THE TIMES NOTED THAT THE WEBSITE OF FOURTH-TIER COLCHESTER HAD ATTRACTED A FULL 127 "NET SURFERS" IN JUST 10 DAYS



**Left** Tim Berners-Lee and the NeXT computer that he used to write the first browser, WorldWideWeb  
**Below** The consequences





**Above** Soccernet proved a game-changer for fans seeking the latest scores  
**Left** \*Asks Jeeves: 'Are moustaches cool in '96?'

Other early sites included Millwall's 'You'll Never Make The Station' – an ironic reference to the terrace chant – and Luton Town's 'WHOSH' ('Worldwide Hatters On The Super Highway').

As well as transposing typical fanzine content onto the web, these sites provided a new means of communication between supporters, with messageboard and mailing-list functions able to host pub-style chat before and after the game between fans all over the world.

That was all very well, but if you wanted general coverage of football then you were stuck with newspapers or Ceefax – until the arrival of a pioneering new site, created by a young Brighton & Hove Albion fan who had only just hit his teens.

Thirteen-year-old Tom Hadfield founded Soccernet in August '95 with the help of his dad, Greg. Tom had been online for only a few months, after getting a computer for Christmas, but had quickly taught himself enough to create a basic football page displaying a list of scores copied from radio reports and Ceefax. What sounds pretty rudimentary was revolutionary then, particularly for overseas fans of English football. "Before the internet, there was literally no way to follow matches in real time in most countries," Tom tells *FFT*. "I'd listen to games on the radio, and every time there was a goal I would update the live scores page. I had a lightbulb moment when I realised thousands of people were waiting for me to post live updates."

Tom went to his dad with the idea for Soccernet – a website that carried live scores for English and Scottish football and published match reports and league tables, all available online before they could be printed in newspapers.

Greg, a journalist at the *Daily Mail*, loved the idea, and he convinced his paper to allow them to post match reports before they went to print. And so, *Mail on Sunday* reports could be read on Soccernet on Saturday nights – a total game-changer, albeit a rather labour-intensive one. The Hadfields would drive between the newspaper office in London and their home in Brighton with Tom's computer in the back of a car, and sit side-by-side for hours on end, typing and uploading content.

"Our tagline used to be, 'As soon as it's in the net it's on the net', which now sounds dated!" laughs Tom. "I have fond memories of spending hours and hours every Saturday evening, manually entering the English and Scottish league tables from Ceefax into a HTML file. Sometimes, I would become so engrossed in adding new features that I'd stay up all night. I also found time to play as a goalkeeper at Brighton's youth academy, but I probably spent too much time as a teenager sitting in front of the computer in a dark room."

Soccernet was the only site on the web providing such wide-ranging and up-to-date football coverage, and was an instant success. Within a year it was sold to the *Daily Mail* for £40,000, with Greg staying on as the editor. By then, Soccernet was offering Euro 96 results and reports alongside its domestic and European league coverage. "All the results, every league table, comprehensive lists of top scorers, and the best match reports," said the website's homepage. "Only Soccernet brings you every goal as it happens!"

However, competitors were beginning to emerge. Ahead of Euro 96, *The Guardian* launched Eurosoccer.com – the newspaper's first website of any description – and it was soon getting a million hits each week. *The Guardian's* general football website, Football.co.uk (later renamed 'Football Unlimited'), appeared in 1997. By that point, Sky Sports, the Premier League and several top clubs had all launched official pages. In 1998 the BBC Sport site arrived, and *FourFourTwo's* own came in '99. That year, the *Mail* sold its controlling interest in Soccernet to Disney for £15 million. It would be renamed ESPN Soccernet, then ESPNFC.

By the end of the '90s, every major newspaper had its own website, and readers were increasingly used to getting football news online,

instantly and for free, rather than waiting to buy their morning paper. This would have a major impact on newspaper circulations, because football news had been a key driver of sales for more than a century. Football journalists also had to adapt, with their words often published in pixels before they were printed in ink.

Roger Domeneghetti is now a lecturer in journalism at Northumbria University and wrote *From the Back Page to the Front Room: Football's Journey Through the English Media*, the definitive book on the subject. Back in January 1997, he joined the internet revolution as a reporter on the new Sportinglife.com website, the online arm of a title that had existed in print since 1859. Covering football and horse racing, among other sports, it was one of the first general sport websites.

"We didn't consider we had any competitors back then," says Roger. They had hardly any readers, either – but within 18 months, during the site's coverage of France 98, it was getting a million hits per month.

Roger left to join a regional newspaper after that, and the shift from online back to print journalism represented a culture shock. "Only one computer in the office had the internet," he reveals. "Other journalists would roll their eyes and say, 'Oh, you worked on the internet!' as if I'd been sitting in a dark cupboard somewhere. They didn't know how to use it and they didn't take it seriously."

This trend would have long-lasting consequences for newspapers. "In the first 10 or 15 years that I was a journalist, the internet passed

newspapers by," recalls Domeneghetti. "Because they never took it seriously, they never charged for it, so people got used to that. They shot themselves in the foot. If they had charged from the beginning, people would have become used to it."

However, Roger believes the internet's arrival and the demand for instant updates didn't necessarily change the way football journalists worked, largely because they were used to the pressure of rattling out on-the-whistle match reports to hit their print deadlines. "The job didn't change a great deal until Twitter and social media came along," he explains.

"Social media has probably had a bigger impact than the internet, but that's due to the technology. I can go to a match now and snap a photo of the team-sheet, or players coming out of the tunnel, and then tweet it. You couldn't do that in the '90s – I don't think I even had a mobile phone in the '90s."

Today every fan has a smartphone, with football content in all forms available at the swipe of a digit.

A Google search for 'soccer' generates 2.3 billion results. Livescore.com, currently the web's most popular football site, receives more than 20 million unique visitors per month.

Reading's long-standing Hob Nob Anyone? doesn't get quite as many as that, but it still has its place. "Hob Nob used to be unique, but now there are hundreds of websites with news and reports on the Royals," says Graham Loader, now a professional web developer. "There's no way we would ever be first with breaking news now, but I think fans enjoy using the site to get a summary of what's going on and discuss it with other supporters. We get around 40,000 users a month. There is a hardcore set of forum users who have been using the website for 20 years and are still there. We have new sign-ups as well, so there's plenty of life left in the old site yet!"

Soccernet's Tom Hadfield now relies on the type of football websites that he pioneered as a teenager; CEO of a tech company in Texas, he follows the English game back home via the internet. "Instant access to information has changed what it means to be a fan," says Tom. "We take it for granted that we can follow matches live and view an almost limitless flow of information about our favourite teams and players with just a couple of clicks. It's a long way from the dark days of the '90s, waiting for the newspaper to be delivered."

Or even waiting for your mum to get off the phone so that you can go on a virtual tour of Portman Road. ●

**"I'D UPDATE THE SCORES PAGE WHENEVER THERE WAS A GOAL ON THE RADIO. SOON I REALISED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WERE WAITING FOR ME"**