

Dunfer in tear club from oblivion may be lost cause



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THE voice of Pars icon Jim cracked with emotion as he said the club could be only hours from financial oblivion.

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Jim Leishman at today's media conference

Alan Harvey/SNS Group

JIM LEISHMAN used to revel in being the court jester at Dunfermline.

Yesterday he shed the tears of a clown and spoke in a voice that cracked with emotion while explaining what it will take to prevent the club he loves from dying a painful death.

Leishman once took over the management of the team when they were three games away from SPL relegation in 2005 and pulled off the miracle of survival.

Sitting inside East End Park's Kingdom Suite big Jim stated that the job of saving the club from going under would make that act of escapology on the park look like chicken feed.

One of Scottish football's greatest characters is effectively running Dunfermline now, and is charged with the responsibility of seeing that they simply make it beyond tomorrow to begin with.

Then it's the week after that, and the one which follows.

But not any more beyond that unless substantial sums of money can be found to address immediate debt requirements.

"This is about short-term survival and not the long-term future," Leishman said at a press conference that threatened to turn into a protest rally at one point.

Police manned the main entrance to the ground in anticipation of a supporters' demonstration.

But Leishman pre-empted the prospect of a negative spectacle for the TV crews in attendance.

He invited the fans who had turned up to come inside and stand at the back of the function suite, making them feel part of the shared distress he and his fellow members of Dunfermline's steering committee were experiencing over the club's flirtation with closure.

The 59-year-old said: "I was offered the role of deputy chairman on Monday but I don't want any title now because that's not what's important.

"We're all about evolution and not revolution and this is the hardest job I've ever done for Dunfermline.

"Will I be able to do it? I honestly don't know. What I do know is that I can't be doing with any negativity around about me at this time."

Leishman's voice began to tremble and his eyes started to well up when he spoke about the people who had accused him of being "Gavin Masterton's lackey."

Masterton is the club's majority shareholder and had been a board member for the past 22 years.

But his presence was, until his resignation on Monday, the issue that most divided the fans from those responsible for the running of the club.

Leishman now has to assume the role of figurehead while uniting the dissident fan groups into a cohesive unit who'll give the club sufficient money to keep going until the end of the season.

It seemed as if the task of telling a mixed audience of media and fans that he was his own man prompted Jim to speak from the deepest recesses of his soul.

He said: "If I'm a lackey then I'm a lackey for Dunfermline Athletic Football Club.

"I'm a lackey for Jim Jefferies because he's the manager of my football team. I'm a lackey for every man, woman and child who's a Dunfermline supporter because I'm one of them.

"I know what I have to do on their behalf, and I don't have a lot of time. But if I get any interference I'll walk away, and that's a guarantee."

It was at that point, subconsciously dealing with the grim reality of his club's situation while obliged to spell out the survival strategy to a battery of cameras and a sea of faces, that Jim admitted his tears symbolised how overwhelmed he was by the scale of his task.

Even if he manages to bring unity where there is disharmony and staves off his club's creditors, Leishman knows the road back to better health will involve a huge amount of pain.

The club budget will need to be slashed and the squad size will have to be significantly reduced.

Wages are killing a First Division club that can no longer generate the kind of income necessary to sustain them.

And, inevitably, the tax man is standing with his hand outstretched at the same time. Leniency has been shown from that quarter, though penalties for late payment have been extracted from the club.

But push has come to shove and there's no more wiggle room. The Pars created a club model they felt suited them and now they find it's a tight fit. Tight to the point of suffocation and expiry unless they can negotiate the critical days ahead.

Leishman knows the toxic nature of the relationship between the main shareholder and the fans, who are fearful of handing over money they

suspect might go into one of Masterton's portfolio of companies.

But all he could do was issue another reminder that he didn't have space in his day for internal wrangling.

He said: "I don't have time to worry about how things were between people.

"I need to find the money to pay the bills and keep the club alive. If we don't pay our bills then the club will shut.

"Is it already too late for us? I'll tell you that in two or three weeks.

"I've already apologised to the players and staff who haven't been paid for the state we're in. I'll apologise to the fans as well if you like but this is a crucial time and we must get on with saving the club."

Leishman has asked to hire Carnegie Hall in Dunfermline on Monday night for a supporters' rally at which he'll do what he does best and tug at heartstrings.

Unfortunately, no philanthropist like Carnegie is waiting in the wings with an 11th hour pot of gold.

Leishman has to stand centre stage and beg for financial pledges. It will be the performance of his life from the man once notorious for putting his thoughts on the game into verse for the public's delight.

Now he's fighting to save a club that has lost its financial rhyme and reason.

Leish needs money, and the more the merrier. Otherwise there's a tragedy in the making.

