

## When I'm not at my desk, it's... TIME FOR **A TOUCHDOWN**

In the annals of American football, Halton Spartans may not figure too prominently for some. But in the sport's North West stronghold, these new kids on the block are aspiring to excellence – and helping them on their way as a home-grown youth generation rises through the ranks is Paul Jenner.

Chief Operating Officer of electrical wholesaler buying group the IBA, Paul still finds time in his hectic schedule travelling the UK to volunteer his weekends coaching the junior squad for the BAFA NL Division Two NFC South club, formed four years ago.

A lifelong devotee of what many would deem a deeply mystifying pursuit, Paul was first bitten by the bug at college. Standing 6ft 4in, his position in this sporting life was perhaps pre-ordained.

"American football was a sport introduced to me at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne when I was a chemistry/psychology undergraduate there in the mid-80s," he says.

"Channel 4 had started televising it and I wanted to participate in a team sport but had two left feet for football. So, with my rugby player build, I signed up for duty."

Space does not permit even the briefest overview of American Football intricacies, other than to say that the game is played with "an oddly-shaped ball", as it is in rugby and that teams score with touchdowns, field goals and safeties.

"My first position was cornerback," says Paul, before referencing Richard Sherman as "One of the best".

"You should be tall ideally and I was fast with it. (How times have changed!) My key task was stopping the other schmuck from



catching the ball."

Sensing Paul was "in the zone" we move on quickly to his second season. "Offensive Right Guard and Defensive Line were my next positions [Paul references J J Watt as one of the greats].

"My responsibilities were to protect our quarterback or to sack [tackle] the other team's, so pretty much every play involved contact with the opposition."

Appearing none the worse for his footballing exploits, did Paul suffer injury during his playing days? "Nothing too serious," he answers nonchalantly – "a couple of broken collar bones and a broken arm". Hmmm.

"American football is a physical game and players are prone to injury," he continues. "On the field, you give it your all but what happens on the field, stays on the field."

We move on again. "After university I stayed in Newcastle joining Tyneside Tigers for a couple of years on the Offensive Line before moving to Lancashire with work and another two years at Lancashire Wolverines.

A ten-year spell with Yorkshire Rams followed as Paul shifted his work base. "I started off as Offensive Right Guard then changed position to defensive end, attacking the quarterback," he recalls.

"Injuries and sprains" sparked a rethink and Paul hung up his boots in 2002, before being appointed IBA's COO in 2013.

That would have been the end of American Football for Paul but "watching the Super Bowl on television last February I realised how much I missed the game.

"At 50 I was too old to play but I could contribute to the game in another way. I contacted the local team - Halton Spartans – based in Widnes, completed a Level 1 coaching qualification and took up my new role in the sport."

Paul's first season coincides with formation of the Spartans' junior team. "We have around 20 players, aged 14 to 19 and we're training them up with a view to playing in the junior league with 14-16 and 17-19 age groups and acting as a feeder for the seniors. It seems harder being a coach than playing as once the team goes on the field, you have to trust

to others to follow the training."

The Spartans do not have the luxury of three feeder universities to source players, as local rivals Chester Romans do, Paul explains.

"All the universities are affiliated with clubs already so we will have to rely on bringing forward juniors as the club needs a senior squad numbering 40 to 45 players."

As assistant coach, Paul works within a six-strong team, each with special responsibilities for different player positions. "I'm currently focusing on general training [the season runs from April to September], ensuring the best talent play in the right positions."

The club's junior Playbook is under development too. "Every play is pre-planned so we are increasing the number and ensuring every player knows what they have to do when the play is called on the field by audible or signed coded messages, usually from the quarterback.

"We hope to have 30 plays next season." Seems like an awful lot to commit to memory in the heat of battle. "Everything is held on a wrist holder on the lower arm," Paul reveals.

"If plays don't, or no longer work, we take them out and introduce new ones after extensively practising them." Matches are videoed so that games can be analysed afterwards, adds Paul.

As American football is strictly amateur status over here, officials give their time freely. "My slot is Sundays," he says. "Assistant coaches turn up for weekends practice while the head coach attends at least two evenings a week, on Sundays and also analyse video footage.

While the prospective buyer for Wembley Stadium, who owns Jacksonville Jaguars, eyes the opportunity to stage professional American football under franchise at the home of the English game, the grassroots version is live and kicking, no more so than in the North West.

Passionate, committed supporters like Paul help make it so.

