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QPR: LET THE REVOLUTION BEGIN

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
WITH AMIT BHATIA

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TURNING DREAMS INTO REALITY

AMIT BHATIA is a young man in a hurry . . . which is why QPR could be playing in the Premier League next season – or the season after at the latest – and India will be winning a record number of medals at the 2012 London Olympics.

That's not an idle boast, just a statement of intent from a whirlwind businessman still a couple of years away from his 30th birthday whose father-in-law just happens to be the fifth richest man in the world.

Amit is a London-based hedge fund and private equity fund manager, while his wife's dad, Lakshmi Mittal, is an Indian steel magnate with almost twice as much in the bank as Roman Abramovich. And the Russian has nearly £11 billion, give or take a few quid.

So, it's fair to say that the £7 million Mr Mittal and his son-in-law forked out to buy a 20 per cent stake in QPR last year was little more than a drop in the proverbial ocean.

There is quite a lot more where that came from and their partnership with Formula One tycoon Bernie Ecclestone and Renault millionaire Flavio Briatore in taking over a Championship club that was on the verge of going bust before they came on the scene is now beginning to register with the rest of football.

Chelsea already grudgingly admit that they are no longer the richest club in west London, and the 12 players Italian coach Luigi De Canio brought in to Loftus Road during the January transfer window reinforces – if reinforcement was needed – that Messrs Bhatia, Briatore and Ecclestone mean business . . . big business.

So far it has been a quietish sort of revolution, but revolution it is. Amit and his partners are not used to settling for second best so, with the composure and style of men who are used to money and everything it buys, the three of them are planning for QPR's exciting future in football's top flight. And it promises to be a rich future, too

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Amit, who runs the thriving Mayfair-based Swordfish investment companies when he isn't following his love of most things sporting, brooks no talk of failure at Loftus Road. He and his friends Briatore and Ecclestone are, quite frankly, now in football's fast lane.

Money has already been handed over to De Canio to strengthen the team. This summer much more is likely to be invested in the stadium and its facilities as well.

“Most businesses you make a decision with your head and not



your heart. This is slightly different. We have let the heart be a factor,” he admits.

“We listened to other proposals but the heart was never totally in them. Something didn't work. In this particular instance, however, sure the money has gone in and nobody wants to lose money. But if you enter football hoping to make money, it is the wrong reason. To be able to enjoy the sport and to let the heart decide slightly is important. We don't want to lose money, but we hope to take the club forward and progress.”

That progress has already happened. And quite quickly at that. When Amit and his family bought into QPR the club was 24th in the Championship and, seemingly, going only one way. Just look at them now.

“As a family we are also close friends with Bernie Ecclestone and Flavio and there are no two other people more successful than them in making business out of sport. They have done wonderful things for sport. They came to us after they had become involved and when we sat down at the table we loved everything about QPR,” he continued.

“Our idea wasn't just to spend money on buying an equity stake, it was that money should also be invested in improving

the stadium so the supporters have a better experience. It was a £7million investment that included a significant amount of money on the stadium. That is everything from the amenities within the stadium to the corporate boxes to the caterers, the toilets and the turnstiles etc.

"All of this leads to giving the supporters the best possible experience. It's not just about taking money to buy players and forgetting the fans. We are all pulling in the same direction which is making sure that the experience is the best because the supporters are just as important as the team. The supporters wouldn't come if the players weren't good and the players wouldn't play very well if they had no supporters. That's why we are prepared to invest money in the stadium."

Despite his personal success just seven years after coming to this country and the Mittal family's massive wealth, Amit Bhatia remains an unassuming young man. Which is why talk of comparisons with Roman Abramovich and Chelsea are politely sidestepped . . . for the time being.

"The idea is to build a team and if we need new players we will go out and buy them, but

we will spend wisely," he insists. "We have a very prudent and intelligent coach who we believe has spent very wisely. He has bought a lot of young players and his idea is to buy young players we can build our future with."

"Are we out to compete with Roman Abramovich? No, we are not. That is not our game plan."

"If we were to be promoted I am sure we would look to spend more money. Would we put our hands in our pockets? The answer is yes. but that is definitely not required at this point in time. Chelsea is a great team, and is a great success. When we are in the Premier League we will need to spend more money, but at this point, now, we are spending in accordance with our requirements."

"It would be like comparing apples and oranges, comparing us with Chelsea at the moment, but when we are in the Premier League, who knows? A comparison then could be more warranted."

"None of us, Bernie, Flavio or myself has

a dream to be second best when we get to the Premier League. The dream is to go the Premier League, to go to the Champions League, that's the dream. Being mid-table in the Premier League is a pretty pointless dream, isn't it? Our dream is to break into the Premier League and be one of the best teams in it, as we were in QPR's glorious past. Are we dedicated to making it happen? Yes. Will it cost us money? Yes."

"We believe that QPR's potential is massive - its history, its supporters its players and Manager. All three of us feel that all we have to do is polish this



"The dream is to go the Premier League, to go to the Champions League."

uncovered diamond. We want to give it a bit of love, polish it and look after it."

Amit Bhatia has no doubts that the club that was favourite to drop into Division One not so long ago is now heading in the opposite direction towards the Premier League. And fast at that.

"I am absolutely convinced," he says. "I would hope next year, but if it doesn't happen then the year after. And we will support the team until we get there."

"We want to give our supporters the best experience and that means we will go out and actively look for the best caterers, for instance. We are going to make sure that it is not what exists today. We have a responsibility to make it more affordable and exciting. We want the whole experience to be better."

"We all think about the Premier League, of getting to Wembley in the play offs, of course we do. We were dead last when we took over. But even then there were 16,000 people in the stadium and that to

me is what QPR represents."

"We have set ourselves a target and we will make it happen. And within reason, no matter what it costs. We have an idea of what it will cost to get there and what it will cost to stay there. We have already spent a substantial amount of money and we are willing to spend to get there and stay there. Flavio and Bernie are astute businessmen also, so we will spend – but carefully, wisely and shrewdly. Not wastefully at all."

The revolution isn't just happening on the field, either. It wouldn't be a Bhatia/Mittal concern if it wasn't a successful business as well. And that is what they are also aiming to achieve.

"We hope to make QPR more successful and more corporate and also do better things in the community," he added. "We want to make it more attractive to the corporate community. These things are just as important."

In the meantime, Amit and his father-in-law will also continue to chase their other dream of seeing more Indian athletes on the winners' podiums at the London Olympics.

It follows a life-changing experience when they went to the last Olympic Games in Greece together and

were sincerely saddened by the fact that the best India could manage was one bronze medal.

From that disappointment was born the Mittal Champions Trust, a family-financed body with the sole aim of recruiting, training and nourishing more Indian Olympic medal winners.

"The country really should produce more Olympians than it does, so we effectively groom potential medal winners. We give them the best coaches, pay their expenses, put them in the best centres, the best amenities. We pay for it all and take nothing back. It is about social responsibility and doing the best we can do."

Chances are that when that particular dream is realized in four years' time QPR could actually be playing in the Champions League.

And as far as Amit Bhatia and his father-in-law are concerned it won't be for the want of trying . . . or spending.