

# CRAIG KING

## THE IMPORTANT THINGS

### THE FASCINATING STORY BEHIND CITY'S LATEST SIGNING

As a teenager in the Luton Town youth system, Craig King was hotly tipped to carve out an illustrious career in the professional game.

On the pitch, King was a man on the up; breaking into the first team and holding his own despite his tender age. In his personal life, however, the young goalkeeper was secretly waging a personal war against crippling anxiety and depression which caused him to despise the game he once loved.

The 21-year-old said: "As a kid you're constantly being thrown in at the deep end, once you finally learn to survive, you get thrown into another deep end.

"I was getting sleepless nights. It became so bad that I wouldn't want to go to the games.

"Sometimes, I was hoping I'd get injured so I wouldn't have to play"

After suffering in silence for the majority of his time at Luton, King made the crucial first step of opening up to club physio Simon Parsell at the age of 18. A referral to the NHS Wellbeing Service allowed him to access treatment for the first time but, while the experience was useful in the short term, there are no quick fixes for mental illness.

wouldn't be able to recover whilst still in the sport. In June 2017, he announced his departure from Luton Town FC.

King's decision to leave was met with an outpouring of support from the wider footballing world, a response which has inspired him to do all he can to help others who are suffering from mental illness.

**"THE FIRST TIME I WORE GOALIE GLOVES SINCE LEAVING LUTON WAS THE THURSDAY BEFORE THE WHITEHAWK GAME."**

The cruellest part of King's situation was that the pressure he felt all came from within. With the full support of the coaches and medical staff at the club, he battled on for another season; but it became clear to him that he

"When it came out why I was leaving Luton the amount of messages I received from people who were going through the same thing - and doing it in silence - was staggering.

"I'm still in contact with a lot of those people now and trying to help them get through the hardest times.

"It gives me a boost to know that I'm helping other people."

Now, after a six month break, the stopper is back in action with Oxford City. The move meant a reunion with former Luton Town academy coach Joe Deeney, with whom he has worked since the age of 12.



Craig King  
@\_Craig\_King\_

Just had a great first session with Alex from @NeuroSports1 to kickstart the journey back into football ⚽️ A professional team being an ambassador for reducing #MentalHealth 🙌  
Go give them a follow and see what good work they are doing! #MentalHealthMatters #DontStruggleAlone ❌

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"I finally made the decision last month to start playing again and it just so happened that Joe phoned me up.

"It was one of those things where I couldn't turn Joe down."

Although the Hoops suffered a 1-0 defeat on his debut, the experience was largely a positive one for King:

"I was watching some of the football we played and I was shocked at how well we were playing: it was one of the best footballing performances I've been involved in.

"Joe had told me how good the guys were but it blew me away a bit!"

His return hasn't been entirely smooth sailing, however, as the 6'4" stopper tries to shake off the rust:

"The first time I wore goalie gloves



On his debut against Whitehawk, few watching King would have believed that he hadn't touched a ball in six months.

since leaving Luton was the Thursday before the Whitehawk game. I'd literally put the ball away completely.

"Hopefully, game by game, I just get back into the swing of things and get back to the level I was at."

Stories of mental illness typically

typically involve an ongoing series of successes and setbacks - those that have explosive endings tend not to be the happy ones - and King is keenly aware that his has only just begun. He knows that his return to the game is in no way a sign that he is somehow completely cured; he admits that his current mental state is far from perfect but focuses on the improvements he has made during his break and has a clear plan of what he needs to do to progress further.

Most importantly of all, King recognises the importance of surrounding himself with the right people: he attributes much of his recovery to the support of his family and recently began working with a specialist coach from London-based Mental Performance Consultancy NeuroSports to address the football-specific challenges in his life.

He also realistic about his own limitations:

"The main focus for me is just trying to enjoy football again and I wasn't doing that last season. I'm trying to be positive about everything and fight off the demons in my head.

"Whether I'll do that here or need another break I don't know"



The unexpected departure of Jack Stevens meant that King's move happened very quickly, his debut coming only two days after his first training session.

King's story isn't the first well-publicised battle between a professional footballer and depression. The stories of Clarke Carlisle and Aaron Lennon have made both back- and front-page news and the tragic suicide of Gary Speed acted as an even greater wake-up call to everybody involved with the game. The landscape of mental health in football - which, we must not forget, also includes the spectre of addiction which has run wild throughout the game for decades - is a decidedly ugly one to gaze upon.



King commanding his box during his debut against Whitehawk two weeks ago at Marsh Lane.

## “WHEN PEOPLE THINK ABOUT FOOTBALL THEY ONLY THINK ABOUT THE MONEY, BUT WHAT'S MONEY WORTH WHEN YOU'RE NOT HAPPY INSIDE?”

Conversations about mental health are slowly becoming not only more common but also better informed; the use of the term 'get well soon' in a number of messages directed at Aaron Lennon show that depression in particular is at last beginning to be viewed as the disease that it is. However, the pace of change may not be fast enough for many young people currently coming into the game. For their sake, King believes change cannot

come quickly enough.

“The PFA and the FA need to take a massive look at this because its one of the biggest issues facing football at the moment. A lot of players are suffering in silence.

“When people think about football they only think about the money, but what's money worth when you're not happy inside?”

King is exceptionally realistic about the journey which still lays ahead of him: the road back to full health will not be easy and its impossible to predict what kinds of challenges he may face along the way. His motivation, however, is simple. He plans to show the young people who look up to him that it's okay to not be okay and, most importantly of all, that depression can be beaten.

If you think you or someone you care about may be suffering from depression, please contact your GP. For immediate support: consider contacting NHS Direct (111) or Smaritans (116 123) free of charge or visit any local hospital.



Great to see you getting back between the sticks with the rest of the ex-Hatters at @OxCityFC Kingy!! Good luck @\_Craig\_King\_ #COYH

Craig King @\_Craig\_King\_

Thanks for all the messages! 🙏🙏 Really appreciate all of them! Hopefully won't take too long to get back into the groove 😊 but buzzing to be back and playing with @OxCityFC #OnTheWayUp

*Craig King spoke to Ryan Bratley from the Oxford City Media Team on Sunday afternoon.*