

A-list  
Hollywood star  
on buying a  
non-league  
~~soccer~~ *football*  
club.



Interview

# 'Buying Wrexham





# was never a joke'

What exactly is it that  
makes an A-list Hollywood  
star want to buy a  
non-league football club?

Helena de Bertodano  
gets to grips with  
Ryan Reynolds, Wales's  
new superhero

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Portraits by Guy Ryan



It is a Saturday morning in the Reynolds family home in Westchester County, New York, and Ryan is home after a week shooting a musical in Boston with Will Ferrell.

The sun is streaming in through the bay window behind him, which looks out on to the corner of the rambling Cape Cod Colonial-style farmhouse he shares with his wife, the American actor and star of *Gossip Girl* Blake Lively, and their three young daughters. Relaxed and friendly, Reynolds sits on a patterned sofa in his wood-panelled den, wearing a white T-shirt, thick-rimmed glasses and AirPods.

He is juggling parenting duties with this Zoom interview. 'Dad?' asks a little voice off-screen. 'One second, Helena,' he says to me, as a colouring book is waved in his face. 'When are you going to be done?' continues his four-year-old daughter, Inez, in a stage whisper, 'because I really want to colour this picture for Mom...'

'I am going to colour that with you,' replies Reynolds gently. 'In 45 minutes. I know that seems like a long time, but I promise I'll be done soon. I love you.'

He turns back to the screen. 'Sorry,' he smiles with a what-can-one-do shrug. 'Three daughters running around... I'm sitting in the den, [which is] the TV room so my kids are unfortunately unable to be distracted by the TV. Hence, "Will you come and colour with me?" instead.'

Juggling is a Reynolds speciality: he is usually working on multiple projects. When we speak, the *Deadpool* star has four movies on the go as well as his headline-hitting, stranger-than-fiction purchase (with fellow Hollywood actor Rob McElhenney) of Wrexham AFC, a non-league Welsh football club that he and McElhenney reportedly invested £2 million in.

'Rob and I were looking to get into that business and we looked at a lot of different clubs throughout Europe. And we ended up landing on Wrexham, and I'm so grateful that we did: everything we found out about the club was more extraordinary and more interesting than I ever could have imagined.'

Wrexham, he says, felt like 'an incredibly fertile story. It is one of the oldest football clubs on the planet, it's a hard-working town filled with incredibly passionate and interesting people... We're not attempting to be the smartest people in the room - there are people in Wrexham who know more about football than I will ever know.'

In a video that Reynolds and McElhenney made after the purchase to announce *Welcome to Wrexham*, a new documentary series charting their takeover of the club, the pair employed a Welsh-language interpreter who interpolated comments of her own, including, 'There's no way this pair can

manage a football team... and the one in the toupee [neither wears a toupee] thinks Wales is in Scotland.'

Wrexham AFC, known as the Red Dragons in a nod to the national flag, is the third-oldest football club in the world. Finishing eighth in the National League last season, its proudest moment was in 1992 when, bumping along at the bottom of the Fourth Division, it beat Arsenal in the FA Cup competition. Perhaps the glory days are back. The actors certainly know how to make themselves popular in the town and last Christmas donated £10,000 to a local children's charity. 'At first I thought it was a scam,' Margaret Williams MBE, who runs North Wales Superkids, said at the time. But she showed the email announcing the gift to her husband, and 'he looked up their names and said they looked all right'.

I ask if the idea of buying the club was a joke that turned serious. 'I am proud to say it was never a joke,' says Reynolds. 'We take the growing and building of both Wrexham AFC and Wrexham the community very seriously. In a town like Wrexham, if the football club is going to do very well, the community has to do very well.'

The idea began when British comedian and writer Humphrey Ker encouraged McElhenney to watch a series of football documentaries. One, *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, hit home.

'During lockdown Rob - being something of a maniac - came up with the idea of, "Let's buy a football team," and it fell to me to find one,' explains Ker. 'I drew up a list of about six options across the lower leagues. He said we're going to need a new sponsor



Reynolds and his wife Blake Lively with their two oldest daughters, James (left) and Inez, in 2016

and got in touch with Ryan (who was just an Instagram friend of his). He boarded the whole runaway train in May last year [and] completely transformed the prospects. Ryan is a burgeoning mogul.'

An actor, film producer and entrepreneur, Reynolds is something of a marketing genius who masterminds the advertising side of everything he does, through his production company Maximum Effort (named after a catchphrase of his superhero alter ego, *Deadpool*).

*Forbes* magazine hails Reynolds' approach as 'a new style of vertically integrated marketing'. He invests in a product then targets his 80 million-odd social-media followers with witty, pertinent posts. He was behind the recent announcement that TikTok would





now be sponsoring Wrexham AFC. It's an obvious match, jokes Reynolds today. 'Wrexham has been telling stories for centuries and TikTok's been telling stories for almost five years.' Of course, he used the opportunity to launch his own TikTok account, appearing as Deadpool in a Wrexham strip. Within a week he had six million TikTok followers.

Reynolds' upcoming movies include *Spirited*, the musical comedy he is shooting with Ferrell; *Red Notice*, an action comedy thriller with Dwayne Johnson; and *The Adam Project*, a science-fiction film with Jennifer Garner. But today he is promoting *Free Guy* – an adventure comedy co-starring Jodie Comer, which he produced and stars in, playing a bank clerk who realises he is a character in a video game.

**N**ow 44, the Canadian actor has become one of the biggest movie stars in the world. Named Sexiest Man Alive by *People* magazine in 2010, his high-profile relationships include an engagement to the singer Alanis Morissette and a three-year marriage to Scarlett Johansson. But he seems to have found the perfect match in Lively, who shares his sense of humour – the couple troll each other relentlessly on Instagram and Twitter.

'She's pretty damn funny. I'm very lucky to have married someone that makes me laugh. She's got a real acerbic kind of wit that I love. I have to work quite hard to outwit her to keep as equals.'

One Father's Day, Lively, 33, paid tribute to her husband with a photo of him and this

message: 'Happy Fathers Day!!! ... @vancityreynolds. Since the day our baby was born, I've felt so strongly in my heart that you were most likely the father.'

On Lively's birthday, Reynolds posted a tribute to his wife with a photo of the couple together, cropping most of Lively out of the frame. Their three daughters – James, six, Inez, four, and Betty, one – are targets too. 'I'd walk through fire for my daughter. Well not FIRE, because it's dangerous. But a super humid room. But not too humid, because my hair.' Or this one, which seems particularly apt today: 'My daughter's traumatized for life. 50 Shades of Grey = Worst f—king colouring book ever.'

'As much as I joke about not liking my kids, I adore every cell in their bodies,' says Reynolds. Yet the next minute he is describing (in jest) how singing and dancing in a musical has made him evaluate them differently. 'We have a lot of dance parties here but now I'm just a little bit more competitive than I used to be with my daughters: I will crush their tiny bones in a dance party.'

Our conversation is punctuated by occasional laughs and shrieks – as the colouring plans go awry. It is a decade now since Reynolds left Los Angeles to move to the countryside with Lively, deciding that Hollywood was no place to raise a family, and 'I didn't feel like [Los Angeles] was great for my self-esteem.'

He hastens to add that he 'loves Hollywood' and returns often. 'I'm never going to be that person who's going to scoff at it. I recognise how stupidly lucky I am to star in movies.' As a child, he remembers visiting Los Angeles for the first time from his Van-

'She's pretty damn funny. I'm very lucky to have married someone that makes me laugh'

cover home with his older brother Patrick. 'I remember walking along Hollywood Boulevard and seeing all those stars [on the Walk of Fame]: names like Cary Grant and Eddie Murphy.' Now, of course, he has his own star. 'If I could talk to my 10-year-old self and say, "Look where you are," that kid would be blown away.'

His childhood as the youngest of four boys was not easy. Reynolds' rage-prone father was a former cop. 'I grew up in a hyper-masculine environment where we didn't really share or express our feelings,' he says. 'I often felt like a skin-covered antenna: I would read the room constantly as a survival mechanism. Whatever my dad was going through, he projected the energy in such a way that you could be chewing and

blowing bubbles with his energy in the room. So if he was having a bad day, everyone had a bad day. If he was having a good day, everyone had a good day. Those were lessons you can either repeat or lessons you can remedy, and I wanted to make sure – especially having three kids – that I didn't carry that forward. I wanted to make sure that if I was having a bad day, it was OK to talk about having a bad day instead of making everybody feel my bad day.

'This isn't to say my dad was some kind of moustachioed villain. Like many people, he was very nuanced: he was very charismatic. He was funny, charming, he could be very loving. And he could be very challenging. He could be scary. I don't look back and bemoan it. I think everything that felt like a challenge adds another level of character and perseverance.'

In an attempt to defuse the tension, Reynolds would try to keep the house as clean as possible, or voluntarily mow the lawn for his father. 'It's a self-defence mechanism: you're trying to make sure everything is just right so other people will not lash out. But as a grown adult, you start to say I [couldn't] give a f—k: let people manage their own emotions and their own feelings and their own gardens.'

First appearing on television aged 14, in a 1991 teen drama called *Hillside*, Reynolds tried college out for just 45 minutes and then quit to drive 1,275 miles to Los Angeles and be an actor. On his first night in town his car was vandalised, and he spent the next four months driving around without any doors. After joining an improv group, in 1998 he landed a lead role in the sitcom *Two Guys, a Girl and a*

*Pizza Place*. His first Hollywood movie was the 2002 comedy *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*, and he picked up a much wider audience with *The Proposal* (2009), playing Sandra Bullock's fake fiancé.

**H**is rise to fame was gradual, and he's grateful for that. 'I'm very, very fortunate to have had a career that was built in aggregate, not all at once.'

From 2004, the idea of making a film about the sarcastic superhero Deadpool became an obsession. He began to develop the character, playing him in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* in 2009. Eventually, Reynolds' drive to create a successful superhero franchise saw him reportedly personally pay for two of *Deadpool's* screenwriters, when the wisecracking mercenary became the title character of his own 2016 film.

It was a huge critical success and earned over \$783 million, having cost a mere \$58 million to make. Since its release, Reynolds'

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With his parents in 2005

fame has snowballed. Inevitably, *Deadpool 2* followed in 2018, and now *Deadpool 3* is in development.

**R**eynolds met Lively in 2010 on the set of *Green Lantern*, a superhero flop. 'That movie I look at like a gift in so many ways – not only for that reason [meeting Lively, whom he married in 2012], but it was also where I learnt how to deal with career disappointment. I've had fun playing with that movie in pop culture since then.' He uses it to make jokes at his own expense. 'There's no one I love laughing at more than me...' He pauses. 'And Hugh Jackman, maybe.' He and Jackman have a mock rift that dates back years, employing attack ads and tweets.

He and Lively try to alternate movies. 'We usually all travel together. It's an obscene luxury to be able to do that [but] it's the best way we can keep our family together. Now our oldest daughter is starting proper school next year, I will have to slow down [and] stop shooting movies abroad.'

They have given up trying to carve out time together without their children. 'We would end up going out for dinner together and just talking about the kids or laughing at pictures of them. Thankfully they go to bed a little bit earlier than us...'

His daughters are aware of the couple's fame. 'They get what Mommy and Daddy do: we don't ignore it; sometimes it can be a little odd [with paparazzi].' He would not want his daughters to go into show business – at least not as children. 'It places a really scary level of responsibility on a child. You may as well just enrol them in cocaine.'

The pandemic, he says, 'was

## STARPLAYERS



**Sir Elton John**  
Watford FC

A Watford supporter since childhood, Elton John became director and chairman of the club in 1976. The singer is now honorary life-president, having resigned as chairman in 2002. Under his ownership, the club went from the Fourth to the First Division.



**Delia Smith**  
Norwich City FC

English chef Delia Smith is joint majority shareholder of Norwich City FC, alongside her husband, Michael Wynn Jones. She attends most home and away games, and has described the team's supporters as the best in the world.



**Mindy Kaling**  
Swansea City AFC

The American actor Mindy Kaling, star of the US version of *The Office*, is a one per cent shareholder in Swansea City. She has spoken about how Oprah Winfrey inspired her to invest in something 'she believes in', adding, 'I believe in this team.'



**LeBron James**  
Liverpool FC

American basketball player LeBron James has been a minority shareholder in Liverpool FC since 2011. He reportedly has a two per cent stake, worth \$4.9 million at the time of his investment, and is an avid supporter of the Premier League club.



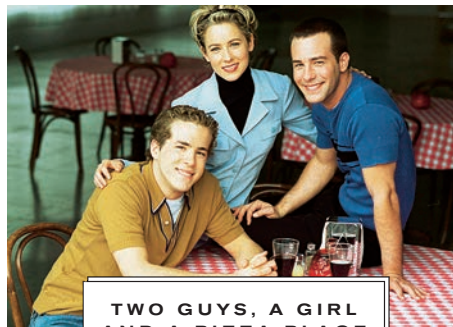
**Robert Plant**  
Wolverhampton Wanderers FC

Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant has been a fan of Wolves since he was a boy, and in 2009 he became the team's vice-president. Sometimes he even plays Wolves chants before his gigs.





HILLSIDE  
1991



TWO GUYS, A GIRL  
AND A PIZZA PLACE  
1998



THE PROPOSAL  
2009

quite an interesting ride' on the home front too. 'I could use a little me time. No, I'm joking. My wife and I were fine. But trying to make sure that our kids are still learning and still stimulated was a huge priority for us... They're also a non-stop question factory. We try to have a united front on everything. Sometimes we'll be texting each other in front of them. It's like a version of telepathy that didn't exist when I was a kid.'

He is open about his battles with anxiety, which he thinks are a by-product of his childhood. 'I'm very lucky to have the life I have... [But] sometimes the cloud comes over. I overthink everything, I have always overthought everything... I could lay awake at night and surf that wave until the sun comes up.'

His mind, he says, is sometimes 'a merry-go-round. It's your job, your life, your family, your home, that thing you said this morning to somebody that you really wish you hadn't said. I have a tendency to sometimes over-function. I'm much better at managing that as a grown man in his 40s than I was in my 20s, even my 30s. I'm not trying to manage

'We cannot wait to start the new season – we're going to be in Wrexham all the time'

others' emotions any more, whereas as a kid I would do that, absolutely.'

He is happy to seek help when necessary. 'I have a pretty decent history with therapy; I don't step away from that stuff. And when I see someone who's struggling, I make a point of asking them if they have someone to talk to. When I was very young, I didn't do that [for someone] and it ended pretty tragically for that person.'

He also finds meditation helpful. 'If I'm really having trouble sleeping, I'll get out of bed and sit down and focus on that for 10 minutes, and sometimes I find that clears my mind of all the debris and then I go to sleep.'

Recently, because of the musical, he is wearing a fitness-

tracker watch. 'It's great with the movement and the steps, but it mocks me with the sleep. It will say, "You suck at sleeping" all the time. Also it gives you a f—king score – next to a word like "poor" or "moderate". Or, if you're really lucky, "decent"... I'm a mediocre sleeper. I'm mediocre at quite a few things and sleeping would be one of them.'

The great thing about Reynolds, says Ker, now Wrexham's executive director, is that 'he's very much as he appears. He's scurrilous. He loves an inappropriate joke. It's probably the first time anybody has come before a fans' trust board of a venerable football club and used the word motherf—ker on multiple occasions.'

Fortunately the fans decided to embrace this earthy approach, and overall the reaction from locals has been good.

'I'm sure there are outliers but I think [the reaction] was incredibly positive,' says Reynolds.

His ambitions for the club are 'huge: promotion, promotion, promotion'. Because of the pandemic, he has not been able to visit Wrexham yet. But that will change soon, he promises. 'We cannot wait to start the new season... We're going to be over there all the time.'

Free Guy is released on 13 August



FREE GUY  
2021



DEADPOOL  
2016



GREEN LANTERN  
2011