



Non-negotiables with Thomas Frank - "I've always said that if they work hard and they're on time then I accept a lot of s****"

We sat down with the Brentford manager to discuss the key coaching values and philosophies he won't compromise on and how they influence his management style.

By James Descombes | Published: 12 November 2022 - 1.25am



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During its 30-year history, the Premier League has hosted some clubs you'd never have expected to reach the pinnacle of English football.

The likes of Bournemouth, Burnley and Brighton have shown what you can do with a club when it's run the right way and has talented players that all fight for the same cause.

And there's another team beginning with 'B' that have reached the Premier League promise land and impressed with their style of football – Brentford.

Their Danish manager Thomas Frank learned his trade coaching Danish youth teams before taking on his first big role at Brøndby in 2013.

He was given the opportunity to take on an Assistant role for the Bees in 2016, before getting the top job in 2018. In 2021, Brentford secured promotion to the Premier League.

With two full seasons of Premier League experience under his belt, and 14th and 13th place finishes, Brentford are on the up and continue to impress with their displays against some of the Premier League's big boys.

This season they've carved out a reputation for never giving in, while their talisman Ivan Toney received his first England call up. Brentford's progress has, of course, elevated the reputation of Frank.

We sat down with the charismatic manager to pick his brains about his non-negotiable coaching principles.



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What are your non-negotiables and how do you apply them at Brentford?

you apply mental disciplines:

We need to have passion, you need to have an attitude, we need to be together and we need to have work hard.

A lot of time, the image you see of the team is in many ways the image of the head coach or the manager and his personality.

My non-negotiables are from a combination of factors – how I was raised and what I found interesting.

Start with passion. That passion where you are willing to live and die to either develop, or win, or learn. When you go into work every single day, that's the same passion I need to see from my players.

When we speak about attitude, there are two things. One is that attitude towards always wanting to learn. Always reflecting and always learning.

If I tell them (the players)—not that they can't disagree—you need to go right, okay we go right, and then there's certain times where of course we discuss things, because I think most people that know me know that I'm not like "okay, you do this, this, this, this". I like to discuss and find a way together.

With 'attitude' I want a confident performer. Every single person needs to be confident if they want to express themselves and show the best version of themselves. But if you're not humble, you're not willing to learn and you don't have the passion to learn, it won't work. It's all linked.

Then there's 'togetherness'. I am a person that can only do things together with others. I'm very social as a person and I want to have good people around me. The biggest thing we all speak about is that the best teams have the greatest togetherness or team spirit. And in that togetherness the character is the most important thing.

I have that no dickheads policy.

We need good people that care about each other.

If it could do a one-liner it would be 'work together, love each other'. That's what we need to do.

Then it's difficult because there's egos and they all want to play, and these days only six players can play 90 minutes, because us crazy coaches want to use subs. So, I constantly have 16 to 18 unsatisfied players.

Then the last one – hard work.

No matter what, if you want to achieve something big in life you need to work hard. There's no easy way.

I've worked so many hours to come to this level and I will continue working a lot of hours because I want success for the club, and it's the same with the players. We have to work hard.

In general, if you work hard and you're on time, with me there's no problem.

**"If it could do a one-liner it would be 'work together, love each other'. That's what we need to do."
- Thomas Frank**

Can professional footballer lack passion? How do you instil it, or re-ignite it, in a player?

To be able to control your emotions and keep the noise of it away are two key things that can actually interfere with your passion.

Some players are just born with an unbelievable work ethic or mentality and that passion, so no matter what happens they just keep going. They're passionate about being better, passionate about wanting to learn.

Then there are others where we need to guide them to show that passion. The non-negotiables are linked and there's nothing that can stand alone, so we need to have the passion to want to work hard and show enthusiasm to get better and drive things. With that, it's one-to-one talks to keep reinforcing the message, and also in front of the group.

Did doing a sports psychology degree have an impact on forming your coaching values and philosophies?

There's a lot of layers in my background at the university and speaking to other coaches there and understanding the theory behind all the practical day-to-day work. So, there's

dennately parts or that where you learn about what values mean to people and how they're created.

How values are part of a culture we want to create and how you can use it in one to ones. You can always link the development of one player to the values or to the culture. Those tools of how to work with it – the base came from there. Then there's a lot of practicing every single day and my experience is used. I'm not thinking about theory now. It's just ingrained in me.

How do you maintain your no dickhead policy and ensure Brentford keeps its culture, especially when recruiting new players?

We take a lot of references before we recruit a player, from former coaches, team mates and other agents, physios... you know, everyone that could have worked with the player. Then that gives us a very good guideline to work from. If we're the slightest in doubt, then no. We're not even going near that situation.

If I knew, black and white, a player had a bad personality, but they were a stand out player, I would not trust him.

Now we've created a culture, where it's clear. There's a good understanding of how hard we work. And in terms of that attitude – confident but humble. The attitude to learning and helping is a key thing – and you can see it. Look at the way we've come back in three games now – 2-0 down, 2-0 down, 1-0 down. It's quite incredible how we keep going.

How important is it to have players on the pitch who represents and encourages all the values you've talked about?

In the match it's difficult because it's ongoing, but I think I'm privileged in having a captain group of David Raya, Pontus Jansson, Christian Norgaard and Ivan Tony. All of them are top characters and they're all different in the way they drive the team and help the team.

The personality of all of them is to learn and to give, but also they have the understanding that they are part of something bigger. They all rely on each other and that's quite unique, I'd say.

While in the Championship you introduced a more disciplined approach. Was that a risk and also a turning point?

Yeah, I think in general human beings like certainty and rules, and everyone would like rules so they know, okay it's inside this box I can do everything inside this box. Or I need to be on time for this. I think everyone likes that, so it's actually about guiding and helping people.

I've always been that if they work hard and they're on time then I accept a lot of s*** (laughs).

Of course, they need to be respectful. But if they do that then they make mistakes, no problem. You know, it happens, football is a game of mistakes. That's a big part of me, and what you're speaking about, I've already done it at Brøndby.

If they have one second late, I just close the door of the meeting and they can wait outside, because I'm not shouting, but I promise you next time if the door's shut you can't come into the meeting.

Just as a normal reaction, next time you'll be thinking: "Shit, I need to be in the meeting next time on time."

If they're late for the final meeting on a matchday, the rule is they don't start. They know there's no excuses for that. I've had to use that rule two or three times during my time here in Brentford.

How do you promote togetherness at the club?

I say to the players a couple of things. Me and the staff can create this culture and togetherness 90%. The last and most important and hardest 10% is inside the group.

That's about the right personalities and characters in the dressing room. I say that openly to the players.

I stress it to especially the captain's group or other players like Vitaly Janelt – he's a leader, but he's not in the captain's group. He can drive things as well.

I try to reinforce all my messages or send them a link to a podcast or a nice little quote. I try to do it once in a while. I'd like to do it more.

In terms of togetherness, I cannot do anything alone. I'm so privileged to be part of a fantastic staff. They're also good people. No dickheads. That's very important.

My approach to everyone is to be smiling. I'm very open, I'm saying "good morning", and then I can snap because I have that craziness or focus. I'm very open minded as a person. I think that's very important. And then I try to reinforce the message when we do things together. Communicating to staff and players. We need every player – it's all of us together.

I praised Vitaly Janelt the other day and I said "I know you're not happy, you're not starting every game, but you're so important for us. Your attitude, your passion, your hard work is so important."

I try to praise the players that aren't the 11 starters or the top dogs.

How do you judge hard work?

If the levels drop in training I'm massively concerned. They can't produce if they don't train hard every single day. These days we measure everything, so we know that we can't over-push them. I constantly have my Head of Performance in my ear saying Thomas "easy now, easy now". I have a fantastic relationship with him, so we push each other to the limit.

I always trust my eyes first but I get all the stats, so when I look at a player and think "he's not there" I look at the stats and say, "I knew it, they were lower."




There's some players I'm never in doubt of, but there are other players I can just see, because of the way they're built, that they need to work harder. I'll go to my sport science guy and get the numbers from the training. I'll look at a specific number, like the intensity number, and if it's not high enough I'll go to my analysis and say "I want these three clips – he didn't press aggressively enough, or he didn't run with a sprint there."

Then I'll pull him and say "look, the numbers. You are here, and you need to be here." I constantly try and give feedback so it's not just "you didn't run enough today in training". I back it up with numbers and clips. I don't see it as pushing them, I see it as maximising their potential.

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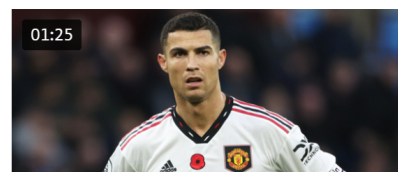
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