

UNTIL TWO YEARS AGO IT WOULD HAVE BEEN easy to describe what Mathieu Flamini did for a living. He was a professional football player for the English Premier League team Arsenal. But in late 2015, news broke that the Corsican-born Flamini was the co-founder of a green energy business. According to reports, the company was potentially worth billions and was about to topple the global oil industry.

Not for the first time, the UK tabloids were guilty of exaggeration. The company, GFBiochemicals, was not about to overturn the world's century-long dependence on oil, but the technology it pioneered was turning heads in the biochemical industry and beyond. How could a man who had played at the highest level of professional sport find the time to create a business deploying highly specialist chemistry? After many years keeping the secret, even from his family, he was ready to tell the world what he had been up to.

As we spoke with Flamini, it became clear that the story that broke nearly two years ago only scratched the surface.

And you kept it secret from every one for a long time. Why?

People have ideas about what they expect a football player to be. There aren't many who pursue business interests while they are still playing. It would have brought lots of pressure on us to have everything happen in the spotlight. So I chose to keep it secret – even from my family who I knew would worry about how I was spending my money.

But now it seems like the bet has paid off?

Well, it has been nine years now since we started the company and we are lucky that we have a great team who have turned the idea into a reality. We now have a factory producing levulinic acid and we are striking partnerships with other companies to build out more capacity and bring products to the market. We expect to turn a profit later this year.

Is levulinic acid going to topple the oil industry?

We really don't see it as a challenge to the industry. We want to work with oil and chemical companies to help them develop green alternatives to what

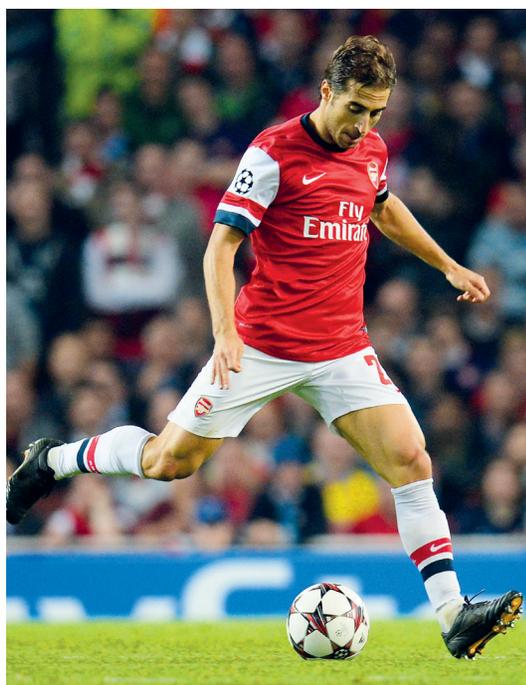
Football star and entrepreneur **MATHIEU FLAMINI** talks to Brunswick's **STUART DONNELLY** and **SIMON MAINE** about sustaining two demanding careers

GREEN ENERGY

Mid-career as a professional football star, how did you find yourself in the extraordinary position of starting a biotech company?

It started when I transferred from Arsenal to AC Milan. I was 24 years old and keen to pursue something off the pitch that allowed me to match two things I was interested in at the time: finding meaningful solutions to climate change and starting my own business. Soon after arriving in Milan, I was introduced to my business partner, Pasquale Granata, and we began talking to people who knew about the sector, particularly scientists.

While we were exploring the idea of investing in biofuels, one scientist told us about a product they were working on called levulinic acid, which was a molecule that reacted exactly like crude oil but could be made from waste wood. One thing led to another and we chose to invest to help them develop the technology and figure out if they could make this product at scale and acceptable cost.



Mathieu Flamini in action for the Arsenal "Gunners," a London-based football team. Flamini played with the club from 2004 to 2008, and 2013 to 2016, appearing in more than 160 games.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF MATHIEU FLAMINI



they already produce. Our product can do that without necessarily increasing costs. That's an incredible win-win. Right now we just want to talk with people about how we can make that happen.

Were there some puzzled faces among your teammates when you told them?

It was funny because people just don't talk about that kind of thing at football clubs. I was playing at Arsenal again when the news came out and I hadn't really planned it. I was showing politicians our plant in Italy and a local journalist recognized me and wrote a story. Before I knew it, the English papers were writing all sorts of things about me, and about how big the company might be. I think the Arsenal players were just a bit surprised, but in a good way.

How involved are you in the day-to-day running of the business?

I'm involved in all major management decisions from acquisitions to capital allocation, personnel to strategy. My business partner is on the ground in Italy, and we speak all the time and schedule major meetings around my training commitments. It is not easy but we make it work.

Was juggling two very different careers something that just came naturally to you?

The important thing for me was to fix the goal and then set smaller objectives along the way. All the way through these past nine years I've had a clear sense of the short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives. We moved forward always keeping in mind the long-term goal. I treated the goal like a challenge and I've always enjoyed a challenge in my football career – so I just applied the same mindset.

When you were a young man, you quit your law degree at the university in Marseille to pursue football full time. Do you ever wonder what might have happened if you hadn't made that call, or if your football career hadn't panned out?

At the time I wanted to be a lawyer and my mother was really concerned when I dropped out of the university. It turned out OK, but if it hadn't, I think I could have enjoyed life as a lawyer. But I'd be a very different person – I wouldn't have experienced so many cultures, countries and interesting people.

Do you think your experience in football gives you an edge over other people in business?

I used to worry that the people I was dealing with in business were better educated or more experienced

than me. I definitely over-compensated by reading a lot so I felt prepared going into meetings.

But I think also that football did give me some qualities that I've found useful in business: determination, leadership and performing under pressure. I experience the same adrenaline rush when we close a deal as I do when I play football – and I live for that.

And presumably football has given you experiences that others can only dream of?

Definitely. If I'd stayed studying in France I don't think I would have left that young and had the chance to meet people from all over the world. Imagine that when I was just 24 years old I had already spent four years in London and just arrived at AC Milan playing with the likes of Ronaldinho, Shevchenko, Kaka and Maldini – all legends of the game. Having access to these successful people, you have the chance to learn so much quicker.

Who was the person in football that has most influenced your approach to business?

Arsene Wenger played a big role in my career. He brought me to London when I was young and his intellectual style of management was so different to a lot of other managers at the time.

And Carlo Ancelotti was important because he brought me from Arsenal to Milan, leaving the UK to go play in Italy.

Which led you to meeting your business partner, Pasquale Granata?

Exactly. It played a bigger role in my life than even I was expecting!

What about outside of football – who are the leaders you most admire?

Two people I have never met but have a huge amount of respect for are Steve Jobs and Elon Musk. Both completely changed the mentality in their industries, and took on great risk to do so. At times, they had to prevail against what many others, including their own boards, were telling them, but they made the tough decisions necessary. As a young businessman, that's obviously an inspiration.

Changing the mentality of a whole industry is a high bar to set. Why not aim for something like simply building a profitable business?

My main motivation has always been my passion for the environment – it drives everything I have done in business. We owe it to the next generation

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MATHIEU FLAMINI

Co-founder of GFBiochemicals, a green energy business, Flamini is also a professional footballer. He has played for the French national team, as well as professional clubs across Europe, including Arsenal, AC Milan and Marseille. He currently plays for Crystal Palace.

GFBIOCHEMICALS is the only company to produce levulinic acid at commercial scale. Founded in 2008, the company operates in Italy, the Netherlands and the US.

and the generations that follow to stop the relentless harming of our planet. Educating people and building awareness is an important first step.

However, to make real progress we must come up with solutions that help people change their mentality and change their habits. That is where GFBiochemicals fits in. It is our attempt to be part of the solution.

And does that principle of seeking solutions go further than just business?

Absolutely. It's critical in how we campaign for change on the environment. One project I'm involved with is the creation of a new global organization called the BioWorld Alliance.

Our ambition is to bring together actors from across the bio-economy to figure out practical solutions to how we use and recycle materials in a more environmentally friendly way. We're involving everyone – from producers, users and recyclers of raw materials, to academics, politicians and campaigners to find practical ways to reduce carbon emissions in their supply chains.

Have you found it easy to engage people and companies with this?

We're building knowledge slowly. We need to educate people about what exactly the bio-economy is to attract more of the younger generation to work in it. If I ask you right now, can you name a well-known person who works in the biochemical sector, or even in the broader chemical sector?

I'm afraid not.

Exactly. It's not easy is it? When you are growing up and deciding which direction you want to go, you identify with certain people – like Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk. To inspire a generation to move in the direction of renewable energy, I believe you need someone successful whom they can identify with.

Are you the role model that people need here?

If people can identify with what I am doing, that's great. But it must go wider than that, to how we educate the next generation of biochemical professionals. One of the initiatives that GFBiochemicals is involved with is creating Europe's first Master's degree dedicated to the bio-economy, BIOCIRCE, in partnership with several leading Italian universities.

Another is BioJournal, an online magazine designed to make the bio-economy interesting

and accessible to a wide group of people. I am passionate about promoting this industry further and wider than it currently is.

You've also taken a role on the Paris 2024 Olympic bid.

I was honored to be invited to join the Paris 2024 bid environmental excellence committee. The Paris team has assembled experts from a range of backgrounds who all share a commitment to protect the environment.

The committee includes a number of former athletes who can provide insight into how we can build the Olympic facilities in an environmentally friendly way, while ensuring that they are best-in-class. We're not satisfied with merely replicating what has been done at past Games. We want to raise the bar higher still.

How do you find time for all of this?

My priority for now is football and that will remain the case until I retire from the game. The key to prioritizing my day is being well organized. If you are able to avoid everything that is unnecessary during the day you can manage to get a lot done. On a typical day, I train in the morning, take work calls and meetings throughout the afternoon and often into the evening.

And what about relaxation?

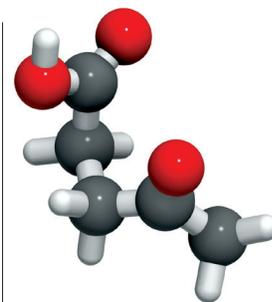
It's important, no question. When I do find time I like to spend it with my friends or catching up with the news, a movie or watching documentaries on TV. I love to watch nature documentaries. I've loved David Attenborough documentaries all my life and it's part of the reason I do what I do with GFBiochemicals. He has always been a great inspiration to me.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

One thing I can say for sure: I will have retired from football! Hopefully by then I will also be married with a family.

On the business side, I hope that GFBiochemicals will be one of the leading players in the bio-economy. We have achieved a great deal since we created the company nine years ago and I'm excited about what the future holds, both for the company and the wider industry.

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STUART DONNELLY specializes in advising companies in the energy and resource sectors. **SIMON MAINE** focuses on energy, industrials, and public affairs. Both are Directors, based in Brunswick's London office.



LEVULINIC ACID can help reduce the impact consumer products have on the environment by serving as a clean substitute for petroleum-based chemicals. GFBiochemicals describes the acid as “an important bio-based building block for a decarbonized world.” Many products – resins, coatings, food and flavor additives, pharmaceuticals and polymers – rely on petroleum-based chemicals. GFBiochemicals is hoping they'll use the more environmentally friendly levulinic acid instead.

Above is a model of a levulinic acid molecule: the red balls represent oxygen; carbon is dark gray. Hydrogen molecules are hidden, but would be attached to each white connector.