

Q & A session with Kevin Affleck

January 2009

Q. What are your initial impressions of Brendon Rodgers as a Manager, and of this new style that he is trying to introduce?

A. I have had no dealings with Rodgers but from what I can see, his pedigree is impressive and he comes across as a very affable, knowledgeable individual. However, I think his first managerial job is a very tough baptism. It's one thing working with the cream of Chelsea's youngsters and their out of favour first teamers in their luxury surroundings at their new training ground with no pressure in terms of results, and another proposition entirely attempting to cut your managerial teeth in the lower regions of the Championship with an unbalanced squad you have inherited. I feel for him slightly as I wonder if the job is as it was advertised in the brochure. I hope the fans give him time. I also understand he is very forthcoming and helpful with the local press. I think he appreciates and values its importance to the community.

Q. At what stage did you realise that Boothroyd was a one trick pony and can you give examples as to why he was so unpopular within the game?

A. I believe the defining day in Boothroyd's reign was the 3-0 home defeat to West Brom. Watford had made a trailblazing start to the season but The Baggies punctured that air of invincibility and showed the rest of the division how Watford could be beaten. Boothroyd had no answers, no plan B. In times of crisis he goes back to what he knows and that just compounded the problem.

Teams came to Vicarage Road, soaked up the predictable aerial threat, had the conviction and bravery to pass the ball and then hit on the counter attack. It became an all too depressingly familiar pattern and Vicarage Road became more of a bouncy castle than a fortress. I believe Watford played no better or worse in the second half of the season than during their first half of the season - it's just they didn't have players of the quality of King and Adam Johnson to rise above the mediocrity and produce a match-winning contribution.

Q. To your knowledge, was the choice of which players to bring in 100% AB's or were there influences from elsewhere?

A. Up until Henderson was sold, Boothroyd had complete autonomy on transfers. As I understand it, whatever he recommended, his wish was granted.

Q. Can you give details of the club's current financial situation?

A. I am no financial expert but qualified friends, and sources, who have studied the accounts are concerned by the club's financial position and predict sizeable cuts will have to be made, particularly on the field. The reported wages of some of the players is a source of concern. I worry how the club are going to generate money for next season without a cash injection or selling players. The wage bill needs to be cut significantly and Rodgers would appear to have inherited some high-earning players (Rasiak, Eustace, Bromby, Sadler, Hoskins, McAnuff) he is not particularly keen on.

Q. How has the difficult relationship between the WO and the club, and in particular the threatened legal action, affected you personally?

A. The two episodes of threatened legal action were not a pleasant experience, both professionally or personally. The fact that the first one was settled out of court while I was on holiday in July 2007, and that I was informed by a text from a friend, left a real sour taste and caused me to question my position at the paper. It is interesting to note that the club threatened to sue Steve Smmons over the same article but are yet to issue a writ. I expected there to be a backlash over the 'administration' story, as I was stunned when the information was leaked to me, but I - along with members of my family - was quite taken a back at the strength and level of criticism I personally received. I stand by the story and, as yet, the club are yet to issue a writ.

The relationship between the WO and WFC was uneasy long before I started covering the club but once the likeable and much-respected Iain Moody, who was often the peacemaker, was promoted from the media department to Football Operations Manager, the relationship broke down completely and the paper was viewed as a threat. The club's media department seemed determined to obstruct rather than facilitate - except when it came to championing Al Bangura's fight to remain in the country. On that occasion, it was access all areas.

Q. Did Graham Simpson expect to still be in charge for a while longer? And if not, why did he go ahead and appoint a manager?

A. I believe Simpson did expect to be in charge for a while longer as his media interviews, and his programme notes, prior to the EGM did not give any indication he was about to fall on his sword. He seemed very bullish right up until the morning of the EGM and I suspect he was trying to call the Russos' bluff. It turned about to be Simpson who blinked first. I am privy to the information discussed in the secrets talks before the EGM and the reason behind Simpson's shock resignation, but it was told to me in confidence and I am not prepared to jeopardize the trust and relationships I have built up.

Q. I'm sure this has been answered definitively, but as people on the list seem to keep raising it, can you set the record straight once and for all: Is there any possibility of Ellington coming back to Watford?

A. Ellington could technically return to Watford - should Nigel Clough decide not to take up the option to buy him. Although his return would add another reported £500k a year on the wage bill, Watford would be able to sell the player having already banked a £1m loan fee. However, how many takers in the current financial climate there would be for a player who has hardly set the world on fire over the last three years I'm not sure, and the concern is he has one year left to run on his WFC contract. One of the

worries for the new board will be the £1m they are understood to owe West Brom in September as the third and final installment on his £3.25m transfer.

Q. Are the Russos to be trusted?

A. In my numerous dealings with the Russos, I have been struck by their passion for the club, evidenced by their contribution towards helping to buy back the Vic, paying to purchase Marlon King and, perhaps most importantly, precipitating the downfall of Simpson and Ashton. I have built up an excellent relationship with both Jimmy and Vince and very much regard them both as friends.

Q. Of our current players, who strikes you as really caring about the club?

A. That is a difficult one to answer as it's hard to gauge the thoughts of the dressing room from a distance. You would hope all the players care about the club who pay their wages and are behind the manager. Tommy Smith and Richard Lee, two impressive and likeable individuals, probably care more than most as they have both come through the ranks.

Q. Why wasn't Matthew Spring given a chance in the Premiership?

A. That is probably a question best answered by Boothroyd but my understanding is that Spring was told he wasn't going to play much in the Premiership and was told he could go. Spring will probably argue that he wasn't given a fair crack of the whip and he could justifiably look at the way Phil Brown has kept faith with Iain Ashbee at Hull. Spring also caught my eye when Luton played Liverpool at Anfield in an FA Cup replay. Like Ashbee, Spring was a key figure in the promotion-winning season but the midfield area was virtually by-passed by Boothroyd in the Premiership season and the manager opted for the work-rate and energy of Damien Francis rather than the craft of Spring. During the Premiership season Watford badly missed the goal threat Spring provided from midfield.

Q. When did you first become suspicious of the old regime's ways of working / conduct and was there any one event which caused you to start being suspicious?

A. I guess the first event that gave me cause for concern was when Richard Walker resigned in the March of the promotion-winning season to the Premiership. I have known Richard for a number of years and we have become good friends, regularly chewing the fat over WFC, Sunday League football and admiring the talents of Chaz and Dave. In fact, I almost joined him and Andrew French - another friend of mine - in the Watford press office during the Violla era. Working in at the club must have been a dream job for Rich and I know he had developed an excellent relationship with Boothroyd after a rocky start and was well liked by the players. Watford were on the threshold of promotion at that point and, from the outside at least, the good times looked set to return to Vicarage Road. So something must have been bubbling behind the scenes for Rich, a Hornet to the core, to relinquish his post and turn his back on the magic of the Premiership with only the offer of some temporary work on the table.

I took over the job of covering Watford that summer and although I had received a few words of wisdom and sound bites from various ex-employees, colleagues and ex players I was determined to go into the

job with a clean slate and judge everybody as I found them.

I'll discuss my relationship with Boothroyd at length in another answer but I started to get the impression that all was not well at boardroom level when Simpson reacted so animatedly and furiously to an interview I did with Jimmy Russo, the then deputy chairman, prior to the away game at St James' Park. The interview about Watford's plans for the January transfer window was anything but controversial; in fact Jimmy spoke sensibly about how Watford would 'not be pushing the boat out as we don't want to end up doing a Leeds'. The reason I interviewed Jimmy was because Simpson and Ashton were, not for the first time, unavailable while Boothroyd was throwing one of his hissy fits and deciding not to speak to me.

How wise Jimmy's sentiments about cutting their cloth accordingly were. Simpson reacted furiously, gave Jimmy a roasting and tasked the then media officer Iain Moody to give me a ticking off. In my opinion, Moody, ever the professional, could not see what the fuss was about but was simply just following orders. That interview turned out to be a huge source of contention in the boardroom and relations between Simpson / Ashton and the Russos deteriorated rapidly thereafter.

Another alarm bell rang when Ashton was given an executive seat on the board and then one of his first tasks was to vote the Russos off the board in March. Given that the Russos had been instrumental in helping the club out of the mire, I felt this was an appalling way for them to be treated.

I had seen the brothers at the away game at Sheffield United on the Saturday and they certainly did not convey the impression that they were about to be voted off the following Monday. From the moment they were removed from the board the contact between myself and the Russos increased and the more and more they began to trust me, the more and more they confided in me. Jimmy used to ring me after game to see how the team got on and we would speak at least two times a week. I became privy to a lot of the goings on at boardroom level and was given a fascinating insight into the way messrs Boothroyd, Ashton and Simpson were operating and running the club. Although wary that I only had one side of the story I was starting to become increasingly suspicious and worried at how the club was being run.

Steve Simmons, the club's former FD and a diehard Watford fan, clearly shared the same concerns and courageously wrote an open letter to the Supporters Trust and the Watford Observer, expressing his concern at the make up of the refined board and the the removal of the Russos. He appeared to have no obvious axe to grind and given that he had had first-hand experience of working with Ashton and Simpson, he probably knew he was leaving himself open to legal action, yet he still felt strongly and compelled enough to stick his neck on the line. Any legal battle that the club entered into was funded by shareholder's money.

Steve's legal fees came out of his own pocket. How many fans feel that strongly about something that they would risk their livelihood to make their point? Would Simpson and Ashton have waged so many wars if they had to pay for their own legal fees? I admired Steve enormously for this and from the wreckage of a legal battle, we developed a good friendship.

His fears about the remuneration committee were confirmed when the publication of the club's annual accounts that year revealed that payments to directors had quadrupled at a time when the club found itself overdrawn. I found that quite staggering and backed up what Simmons had been implying.

During the summer Boothroyd had also been rewarded with an improved deal despite the club being relegated. Would the Russos have allowed a manager to be rewarded for failure? A rotten smell was starting to emanate from Vicarage Road and it was not resembling the family club I grew up supporting.

Also during the Premiership season Chris Cummins was axed just two weeks before Ashley Young was sold and when I discovered he had a clause in his contract that entitled him to a percentage of the deal, something clearly stank about his departure. Indeed, Harry Forrester was so upset by the departure of his mentor that he rejected the offer of a scholarship and signed for Aston Villa.

With the help of club sources and recently sacked employees I was starting to see through the club spin and an altogether different picture to the one the club was painting was starting to emerge. I remembered conversations with Oli during the Ray Lewington era when the likes of Hyde, Vernazza and Helguson were sold because of the wages they were earning. The club was just about managing to keep its head above water then so how, I reasoned, were the club going to sustain itself with the kind of contracts they were freely dishing out now? With the likes of Matt Jackson and Chris Powell earning 10k a week, the rate at which the club was burning cash was alarming and frightening.

In my opinion, Simpson was placing too much faith in Ashton and Boothroyd, and the club was taking a reckless gamble on making an immediate return to the Premiership. No expense seemed to be spared in the quest for promotion. Take for example the overnight stay at The Grove for the home game against Queens Park Rangers.

As the wheels started to buckle and then come off the promotion bid I interviewed Simpson and asked if there was a plan B should they fail. It seemed to me they were running the club on a boom or bust scenario. Like Ashton's utterances about the plans for the East Stand, I was unconvinced by Simpson's response and at that stage had become aware that the club was being touted for sale. When I questioned Simpson about exclusive rock-solid information I had received regarding interest from a Ukrainian and Thai consortium interested in taking the club over Simpson flatly denied it and I don't think he thought the newspaper had the gumption to run the story. The WO ran the story and 24 hours later a statement appeared on the club's website, with Simpson admitting there was interest after all. That, for me, typified the way Simpson operated and the huge lack of transparency.

Simpson seemed unconcerned by the deteriorating level of performance on the pitch, continued to back Boothroyd implicitly despite Watford fading badly as the finishing line approached. Remarkably, Ashton and Simpson did not look like they had a care in the world as they laughed and joked together in the dug out while Boothroyd held an hour-long inquest in the changing rooms following the defeat at home to already relegated Scunthorpe. I felt that 1-0 defeat was the nadir of the season and yet here was the club's chairman and chief executive basking in the sun. It reminded me of an anecdote Oli regularly told about Haig Oundjian, who stood at Edgeley Park staring into space when it had finally dawned on him that the Vialli venture had been a fiasco. That, in my opinion, should have been how Simpson and Ashton should have been reacting yet the contrast could not have been starker.

They eventually got bored of waiting for Boothroyd. By the time the manager had finished, Simpson and Ashton had reached the Rous Stand. Boothroyd shouted across and they gave him the thumbs up. I couldn't believe my eyes. Following equally turgid displays against Hull (away) Barnsley and Crystal Palace - to name just three - Watford had now won just one of their last 13 games and Boothroyd should have been hauled in to explain yet another dire performance, not given the thumbs up. I started to wonder if a deal to sell the club was already in place as I could not find any other explanation for their sunny outlook.

The only time Simpson and Ashton looked worried was at half-time against Blackpool on the final day of the season. Watford were 1-0 down and results elsewhere meant they were going to finish outside the play-offs. They looked ashen faced. They were sat right behind me in the press box and their celebration at the final whistle smacked of relief.

By this stage the club had sacked so many people, left so many disgruntled that I did not need the assistance of Ashton, Simpson or Boothroyd to do my job or rely on them for copy. My phone was always ringing with good information from past and present employees of the club about what was going on and people were only too happy to help me in my quest to paint an accurate picture of what was actually going on at Vicarage Road. My fears - which were fuelled by conversations with financial experts - about the state of the club's finances following the failed attempt at promotion, were confirmed when I received information about a senior management meeting that had taken place where the word administration was mentioned when discussing the level of cut backs that would be required to cushion the blow of missing out on promotion.

Q. Did Aidy lose the confidence of the players? Some of our performances in 2007/08 and the body language of several players made me think that all was not well in our squad at that time.

A. None of the players, even off the record, would dare admit at the time that they had lost faith in the manager but there were certainly a few rumblings of discontent, even in the Premiership. I know quite a few were taken aback by the way Boothroyd tore into Jordan Stewart during half-time of the QPR game at Loftus Road early in the 2007/08 season.

One described it to me as 'Bang out of order'. Stewart was a popular figure in the dressing room and such a public dressing down by the manager no doubt sent a ripple of fear through the squad. Although I was never a fan of Stewart, I think his performances tailed off dramatically thereafter and he, more than anyone, had his head turned by the huge amount - around 20k a week - Marlon King was offered in the summer to stay. It did not help that King let everybody know about his salary increase. Stewart wanted a piece of the cake King was getting and his own contract saga affected him and, given his standing in the dressing room, the team as the season wore on. The sudden jettisoning of the captain, Gavin Mahon, midway through the season also did little for dressing room morale. Although he had his detractors, Nathan Ellington still showed glimpses of the talent that shot him to stardom when he was at Wigan yet, I believe, Watford did not play to his strengths and paid way over the odds for him. I remember Frank Skinner did a stand-up performance at the Coliseum shortly after Ellington had signed and said 'If I knew you were going to pay that much to get him I would have driven him there myself'.

Ellington also became sick and tired of being substituted and felt he was often made the scapegoat for a poor team performance. Boothroyd was very clever at deflecting attention from himself. I know the final straw for Ellington came when he was substituted against Norwich at home. Indeed, his agent, Tony Finnigan, called me during the game to furiously rant, 'That's it - he's out of here. I'm taking him to Derby.'

For me, some of the performances in 2007/08, particularly in the second half of the season, reflected the fact that when it came to the crunch, the players were no longer prepared to dig deep for Boothroyd as they did in 2005/06. Why? I believe it's because most of the players had, at one time or another, been put in the deep freeze by Boothroyd and that stuck in their minds. To illustrate my point let's go through the team. Richard Lee? He was told he was fourth choice behind Loach, Foster and Chamberlain at the start of the Premiership season.

Shittu? He was dropped for no apparent reason just before Christmas last season and the pair never really saw eye to eye.

Jobi McAnuff? He had been signed in the summer by Boothroyd but then found himself warming the bench after Boothroyd brought in Adam Johnson.

Henderson? He was deemed surplus to requirements in the summer only for Boothroyd to have a change of heart once deals for DJ Campbell and Helguson fell through.

Jay DeMerit? He was not quite sure if he was coming or going. He was made captain after Mahon left, was shunted to right-back once Leigh Bromby arrived, found himself on the bench and then had to give the captaincy to John Eustace. He was even left out of the squad altogether for the crunch final-day clash at Blackpool.

Tommy Smith? He was dropped during the Premiership season after failing to adapt to Boothroyd's methods.

Lee Williamson? He was not considered tactically disciplined enough by the manager and was often left out despite being the team's best ball player.

Mat Sadler? He was signed amid a fanfare in January but within two months found himself on the bench and then out of the squad altogether as Boothroyd went back to Jordan Stewart before jettisoning him just before the play-offs after he virtually sealed his fate with a few choice words in the dressing room inquest following the defeat at home to Scunthorpe.

I could cite further examples but I hope you get the point I'm trying to make.

Q. Will Gareth Williams ever play for Watford again?

A. When I last spoke to a source at the club I know Williams' career was sadly very much in the balance. He was, I believe, due to have a sixth operation this month and is contemplating the prospect of calling it a day should it not be successful. From memory the problem Williams has is that he produces an abnormal amount of scar tissue so each time he goes under the surgeon's knife it just compounds the problem. I have to say the articulate and affable Williams was a delight to interview.

Q. How much did the Santiago Aloï deal cost us? And, erm, why?

A. I believe Aloï cost around 28k for the year he was at Vicarage Road. He was spotted playing in River Plate Reserves by former chief scout Mark Stow and Watford agreed to take him on loan for a year with an option to buy him. They did not take up the option and, I guess, he falls into the same bracket as Sietes.

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