

Q & A session with Ray Lewington

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Q. How did you get the post of reserve-team manager/coach at Vicarage Road and did you ever envisage becoming manager?

A. The idea of becoming manager never entered into my head. I came in with the Luca Vialli experiment which looked very exciting. There was a lot of money to be invested. I think Graham (Taylor) left the club with £6m in the pot.

I expected them to be successful and I would be just a backroom boy. Yet you know this game and you should not really be taken by surprise. The opposite happened and it went very, very wrong.

I came to Vicarage Road through my friendship with Ray Wilkins. We had played together at Chelsea.

I was at Brentford and Ron Noades wanted me to leave, I was on too much money. It was three or four weeks from the end of the season so I was looking for a job. Ray knew my situation and told me that Luca Vialli was going to take over at Watford, he was going to be first-team coach and they wanted someone to manage the reserve team.

I was still the manager at Brentford but it looked an interesting proposition and I said I would join. We shook hands on it.

Q. Didn't West Ham come in for you almost immediately?

A. Yes, that was an odd one because they wanted me as first-team coach but they had not appointed a manager at that stage. I pointed out that I had just agreed to coach at another club, without naming Watford.

Well Trevor Booking rang me and asked me to come and just have a talk. He said it would do no harm and I thought there was no harm in that. I felt I had to give Trevor a chance to talk. They explained that the new manager would be told I was the coach and would have to work with me. I did not think that would work very well. But although they offered me far more than I was going to get at Watford, I explained I had shaken on the deal and would have to stick by it.

The point was Ray had got me the job when I needed a job. I was grateful for that and I was not going to go back on my word.

Glenn Roeder became the manager at West Ham, incidentally.

Q. What was Vialli like?

A. It was strange from my point of view. He was quite a secretive one. I was never privy to what the side might be. Ray (Wilkins) would sometimes whisper something to me but often Ray would not know what the side was until they met up on the Saturday.

So that was different. Also managers tend to have staff meetings and discuss things such as players, the opposition and tactics. They get a feel of our views and you get an idea of where they are going. People would bounce ideas and comments around.

Vialli was entirely different. Yet he was a really, really nice bloke. A smashing bloke.

The other thing about Luca was that he was really keen and his attention to every single detail was amazing. His attention to food and fitness was so focused. I have never come across a manager who is so dedicated and keen about football.

The tomatoes had to be a certain slice; the bananas had to be speckled. We had this fitness guy at Watford. Well that was a relatively new thing, certainly in the Championship. Now it is commonplace but the thing was that the fitness guy would tell Luca what he wanted the players to do, not Luca tell the players.

He was really, really keen about body fats and the thinking that was then coming into the game.

Monday to Friday he was very good. I learnt a lot from him but by observation, not from conversation. I was not in the loop and Ray told me Luca was not being discourteous. It was not a slight. He was just very secretive.

Q. Why did it all go wrong for Vialli?

A. He was a new coach and did not know the championship level too much. In the Premiership, and where Luca had played and coached, you don't get the type of football that championship teams play.

He did not know the terrain. It was new to him. The principles he laid down were very hard to apply in the Championship. The players were not good enough in the technical department to play the type of football he wanted them to play. He did not seem to appreciate that. He was very strong on the passing game, which was too slow for the division at that time.

Then there were the players he brought in. Let us say they weren't quite what was needed. We will draw a line under that.

Q. Did you all expect to be sacked when the Vialli "experiment" went wrong?

A. We had the little lead up to it. We knew that they wanted to sack him. He thought the rumours were true. He told us that. At the time it was due to costs as much as anything.

We were all aware it could happen any day. So I was prepared to start looking for another job but I along with Kevin Hitchcock and Terry Byrne were spared. I found that out when I got a phone call from Tim Shaw and was asked to go into the office.

I expected to be sacked. Instead he asked me if I would be caretaker manager just for the summer, keeping things ticking over. There would not be any transfer dealings. That was as far as it went.

He then asked me if I would be applying for the job. I told him I did not think I would get the job so there was no point in me applying. I told him that if they wanted me or wanted to talk to me, they knew where I was.

I gathered they were interviewing people. I did not go into the ground or have contact with the chairman or directors. I checked up at the training ground and the availability of pitches and such. I read a number of names who were in the frame.

Then Graham Simpson phoned and asked if I would apply. I said to him: If you are telling me I have a chance, I would be interested.

He said a number of people would back you, which surprised me. I never formally applied, I was invited. Then I read a poll in The Watford Observer. The fans cast their vote for their preference. I remember I got 1 per cent. I think my mum must have phoned in, in order for me to get that.

When it came to the first interview, it was strange. Graham Simpson walked in and asked me my thoughts. It was basically him telling me what the manager would have to put up with. I did not appreciate the scale of the cuts, then. I could see and understand cuts would have to be made and that no additions to the wage bill could be allowed.

Well, I explained that every club I have been at, I have worked on a tight budget. I have never had money to spend as such. I have never been appointed at a club with money. But I stressed I would want a good coach alongside me. As for players, I was told we would have to get on with what we have got. I was used to that so it didn't frighten me.

He didn't dress it up. He stressed: We want to stay in the championship.

I felt I would deliver that and not get relegated.

I then attended the second interview, and was told I was one of two or one of three in the running. I went along and it was more or less the same type of questioning. I felt I had a good chance.

I was asked where I felt I had a weakness and I said I did not think I would be too good with the Press. I was told that I would not have a problem, so they clearly had confidence Oli Phillips that he would not attempt to stitch me up.

We left it at that. Then I got a phone call asking me to come in and it would be good news. By then I had Steve Coppell coming in as coach. That did not happen. I wanted him and he was offered the job but he turned it down. The official reason was the terms.

So I went and saw Terry Burton who was in hospital having had a hip operation. I asked him if we would join me but he would not be available for some time. I said that was OK. I could do the pre-season and start of the season.

I had always coached but obviously being manager required additional duties.

Q. A question from Oli Phillips: I know for a fact, because a couple of directors told me the previous autumn, that of all the new staff under Vialli, you had impressed them the most and I was told that was a point of interest to keep in mind for the future. As one of them was key to bringing Vialli to the club, they were not talking about sacking him then, but when Vialli left, I knew your name would be in the frame with a couple of directors. Did you feel all of them were behind you?

A. That is interesting. In fact it is hard to tell what the directors thought in general but I remember one director gave me a book on management and always talked down to me. That was disappointing. Possibly he did not agree with my appointment. But then I was not a boardroom type of manager. My work was on the training ground and in the dressing-room.

I had no idea of the financial side. Every club I had worked for, did not have much money and so I was used to working on a shoestring. This was the first club at which I had been brought into the loop to let me know why I was working on a shoestring.

I remember Graham Simpson said straight away that he wanted me to be involved in everything in the club. So I was privy to the board meeting with the bank and what they were saying about future costs. The bottom line was what we had to get the wage bill down to.

Q. I remember the Sheffield United game which we won 2-1 just after the pay deferral. It was so special, partly because a load of us went there direct from Nigel Gibbs's testimonial dinner. Like us, you drank a lot of water throughout that game. Was that not just the best way to prepare for a game?!

A. That all blew up with the players having to take a cut. Tim Shaw and Graham Simpson came to the training ground and told me we needed to show the bank that we are serious. He wanted all staff to take a cut of 12½ per cent.

That first meeting, I don't think anyone knew what to say. They asked if there were any questions but the players were lost for questions. They had to get together and decide. I spoke to them afterwards and told them we would postpone training for a few hours and they would have to get together and involve the PFA.

From our point of view - the coaches etc. we knew we had to do it. We had to set the example. There wasn't really a decision to make. The big thing was what were the players going to do?

Two or three did not think they could do it. I had to talk from the club point of view. I told the players if the club went into administration we won't get paid anyway. The PFA were quite against it. The players went against their union advice in accepting that.

That opened up the full story and we were getting figures: what we were losing and what we would have to do. The wage bill was around £10m and we had to reduce it in three years to £2.3 million.

From where we were at that time, we had to reduce it in three years which effectively was an 80%t reduction. The scale of it was just amazing. It would take some doing.

It was not a case of getting rid of a few and getting some cheaper ones in. The instruction was to get rid, without replacing them. It was a massive job from a planning point of view.

As for Sheffield United, the first game after the cuts were accepted, that was probably as close as the players and supporters could ever get. It was a fantastic day, not just the fighting spirit but the quality of the win. I think everyone thought our morale would be down but in fact it was exactly the opposite. One of those truly uplifting days in football.

Of course the deferral rankled with some players. Many knew they were earning good money for the division they were in but as some had been brought in at the new, realistic wage level, which every one of them would have to have in the long run, it was very hard for the newcomers to lose an eighth of their wages whereas the big money boys could take it.

Because the cut was made across the board, it meant a lot more in financial terms to the likes of Sean Dyche.

The players took it well and their misgivings did not surface until the cup run to the semi-final. We had been told that all unbudgeted money would be used to pay the players back. Well, we had the cup run and the players were disappointed the club was slow in paying them back. They had earned that money.

As for the water, I used to drink it all the time. I was either drinking or shouting from the touchline. I don't do that now at Fulham. I sit and watch and Ray (Hodgson) does the shouting.

But, yes, I used to drink gallons of it. It was a nervous thing. I was amazed how many I used to get through. I would put them behind the advertising hoardings when they were finished and I once counted them after a game. There were seven or eight. I used to keep having to go to the loo after the game and even at half time.

Q. Was it frustrating, knowing you were short of cash for players, and knowing that a lot of money had been frittered away on less than adequate, overpaid recruits by the previous manager?

A. I must stress I went into the job knowing what the job entailed. I knew things were to be tight but, when faced with the practicalities, it was hard. I think it hit home when we mentioned players we might get for salaries such as £100,000 a year and being told we couldn't sign players for that amount when players were still on our wage bill earning seven times that.

If they, the board, had given that scenario to most managers they would have shied away from the job. I had only known tight budgets as a manager. But it was frustrating, mixing and matching. There was an element of reward in for instance the change for Marcus Gayle. We found another position for him. He was one of the high earners and because of that and his dip in form over the previous year, no one would come in and take him off our hands. Remember, I was instructed to shed the high earners from the wage bill. That was one of my jobs.

Well, I had to find a role for Marcus and we switched him to the heart of the defence. It worked OK and he was voted Player of the Season. He thoroughly enjoyed it and he probably looks back and feels he got a few more years out of his career.

One of the good things about that period was that we used the loan system well. Terry Byrne, the director of football from Luca's days, was a big factor in that. We loaned players who went on to have very good careers: good players who gained their first break with us. The loan system helped us.

Q. You finished 13th the first season. Was that a surprise? Did you think you would be involved in a scrap with relegation?

A. I wouldn't have been surprised if we had been involved in a relegation scrap, because we could not add to the squad. Added to which, we knew we had to get rid of anyone who was on decent money. So, as I prepared for the campaign, I thought players would go and not be replaced. That was stated at the interview. So my expectations were not great.

Being in the championship at the end of the season was the sole aim. Fortunately we had a decent bunch of players and we kept them. Once I knew that, I didn't think we would be in the bottom three or four, but to be in the top four at the start and early in the season, was a surprise.

We trailed off after a bright start. I don't really know why. I don't think the cut in the money business had any direct affect on the results. We had a few people not happy with it, but that was as far as it went. We had a fairly strong squad of 14 or 15 players but after that, we did not have much strength in depth.

The start to the season undoubtedly helped us.

Q. Looking back to the FA Cup semi-final against Southampton, do you now wish you had played Tommy Smith instead of Michael Chopra and if so, do you think the game would have panned out differently?

A. No, you look back and mull over things but I have no regrets with that one. I thought Tom was a smashing player, but he probably resents me for that decision. I always wanted to get more out of Tom. He did not score enough. Outside the penalty area he was terrific but it was a source of disappointment that when it came to the muck and nettles in the box, he wasn't really in there to score goals, which he had the ability to do. He did not get in where the muck and bullets were.

I had talked to him about this during the season and the situation did not improve. That is why I brought Michael Chopra in on loan. He scored a hat-trick in that strange game at Burnley building up to the semi-final.

I knew that the chances against a Premiership team were going to be at a premium, and I had to ask myself who would score if we could only have two or three chances? The answer was Michael Chopra because he was prepared to get in there. He had goalscorer written all over him and when you look at what Chopra has done since then, he is still a goalscorer. Yet in other aspects of the game, holding the ball up, taking on defenders, he was inferior to Tommy. But we needed someone to get on the end of the scraps.

So I have no regrets over that decision. People can always theorise about what if, but Tommy did not play. I was happy we put out the team with the best chance and, despite the defeat, I did not change my mind. You have regrets in football, but that decision was not one of mine.

Q. As a coach, how do you go about changing a team's style of play? Is it just about practice in training, and trying to drum into them to play a 10 yard pass to feet, rather than a 50 yard lump up field, or is it more technical?

A. You have to set out the way you play. I have always been a short-ball man. That is my belief but if you have to change the system from for instance, long ball to short ball, you have to work at it.

Such a change is difficult to ask players to do. You have to bring in three players who are used to playing that way and take it from there. That way you can integrate the new style of play but you most certainly have to work very hard at it.

It is difficult to ask players to do. Some people fall between two stools in the attempt.

Now at Watford, I started off with the short-ball philosophy. The players had tried that the previous season. But in the end, I probably played longer ball football at Watford than anywhere else in my career.

The players actually came to me in the second season, because of the pitch, which was a great problem with inconsistent bounce etc. They explained that they really preferred to hit long early, get it to midfield and play it from there. They believed we had to play that way.

Watford was the longest style I played. Heidar was a great target man and that really helped with the transition..

Q. Was this embarrassing for you, to have the players request a change of playing policy?

A. I like players to tell me what they think. All the people I played for, I was encouraged to play that way and act that way. I was encouraged to express a viewpoint. They argued that the pitch was not helping the cause.

Had it been a couple of strong characters trying to bulldoze their point of view, I would not have agreed to it, but it was a majority decision, so I said "OK fine. Let's play one pass less. Then we will play." I was not embarrassed by that. It is the way I work. I always told the players that I will always listen to you, might act on it and might say no.

Q. Who was your best signing whilst manager? Which was your worst?

A. It is very hard because the question requires a black and white answer. I will try and explain. We had a left back, with no one coming up through the ranks. Only 12 per cent of footballers are left footed but we had to get a left back into the club with no money.

Obviously I had to look to the lower divisions and Paul Mayo was brought to my attention. I watched him and noted he was a captain and had everything we were looking for. So the Russos paid for him and we brought him to Vicarage Road and had to sling him into the team.

In an ideal world we needed to work on him and gradually introduce him. But we had sold Paul Robinson and we had to replace him as quickly as possible at a very low cost.

He was not my worst signing in the true sense, I would hate him to read that think that but we had to sling him in and he was not ready for it. That was the bottom line.

As for my best signing, well there weren't many signings made during that spell because of the financial restrictions. But I would pick Jay Demeritt, considering we bought him on a free transfer for the cost of a pre-season friendly with Northwood. Bryn Gunnarson was another good player. I remember he was a

free transfer. Sean Dyche was a free, They were good soldiers, good, strong characters to come in to a club that was fighting for survival..

Gunnarson was underrated. I was very surprised. Heidar Helguson phoned me up and he told me Forest were letting him go, for nothing. It was a real surprise because he was and is a good player.

You can pick their game apart but you can do that with everyone. Jay went on to do wonderful things, particularly when you think where he came from.

Q. What about Paul Devlin?

A. We had lost Jimmy Davis and Elton had contacted me and offered to get me a player to replace the role Jimmy was going to adopt. That was Elton being very generous. I don't know the final fee, but I know Elton paid it to bring Paul Devlin to the club.

Paul was a good player, and one of the few we bought for money, albeit Elton's money. Paul was bright and bubbly attacking but defensively he could disappoint. I think in one of his first games he scored and gave a penalty away. That was Dev.

It is funny how things work out. When I was considering getting Dev at Watford, a few said he could be a bit of a problem, but I actually found Paul one of the best blokes to work with. I clicked with him. He would chirp back, but in a nice way. I felt at ease in dealing with him and we had a good relationship..

After I got the heave-ho at Watford, Paul spoke to me more times than any other player. He phoned me often to see how I was getting on.

Q. You mentioned Jimmy Davis, one of the loan signings you made but who was killed in a car crash on the eve of the season, falling asleep at the wheel.

A. Undoubtedly that was the saddest thing to have happened in my career. He was injured, after a brilliant pre- season during which we were playing 4-3-3 and things were looking good.

Of course you think about these things afterwards, but I gave him the OK to go home on the Friday, because he was injured. He asked if he could go but I told him he had to be at the game at Vicarage Road the next day. He was part of the squad.

Had I told him to have the weekend off, he would not have travelled back. But I would have told everyone the same thing. Be at the ground on Saturday. That is the way of things in football.

He was part of the squad and had very quickly become a popular bloke in the dressing-room

He was a bit of an extrovert. He had made such an impact in six weeks since joining us for pre-season. Terry Byrne would insist at the first real get-together, that any new players would have to sing a song. Some players did so very reluctantly but Jimmy had no hesitation. He got up there and sung and wouldn't stop at one song,. Eventually Terry went up and threw him over his shoulder and took him out. That was the only way to stop him singing.

Q. What was the affect on the team?

A. Long term, I don't know. I remember Paul Robinson absolutely breaking his heart. He was absolutely shattered. Danny Webber was his best mate and we told him first. He was in tears. We were all crying. You think the players are hardened. But that was a big blow. He had made an impact as a person in six weeks.

Then I heard that Ray Harford, who was my mentor, had died that day as well. It was a double whammy for me.

Q. You said that the players were responsible for you adopting more of a long-ball approach?

A. No, it was not as simple as that. I always encouraged the players to make their contributions but I did always say, you have got to respect the fact that I might think about your suggestions and say no. The fact was we had started to talk about the possibility among the coaching staff because our pitch was really a problem. So the fact the players came to see me, only firmed up the viewpoint.

It all fitted together so we went a little more direct.

Q. Off the field, did it get harder as you moved to the third season?

A. It did get harder, of that there is no doubt. On reflection, I thought the chairman (Graham Simpson) changed.

For the first two seasons he kept to the script. He stood by me and always said he would stick with me and I was always involved in the financial side. I was in touch with the chairman all the time on the day-to-day running of the club.

He also said repeatedly, and in public, that he would never sack me. He said that at the Fans' Forums, and I told him it was a stupid thing to say because you never know. But he insisted he would never sack me.

So, in that respect, I did not see the axe coming. I just did not see it, but things were changing within the club and I should have realized that. I suppose the chairman and I were a partnership for two seasons but then he and the new chief executive, Mark Ashton, became a partnership.

I remember noticing the chairman started using terminology that he had not used before and it sounded strange as he did not always use it properly but obviously he was listening to someone else. He was being fed.

Then there was the fact we had to keep bringing the playing budget down year on year but as you got closer to that £2.3m target, it was getting increasingly harder to do. In fact there was no way you could do it, yet despite the cuts they expected the results to stay the same with fewer players and fewer on decent money.

I don't know where they got that idea from.

Q. Did you miss the football director, Terry Byrne, when he left to become David Beckham's personal assistant?

A. Yes, Terry was a good buffer between me and the rest of the directors. He took care of things not team-related. He also did very well pushing to get players in on loan. Once he got his teeth into things, he would follow them through to the end.

He was good for me and I missed him on a day-to-day basis, when he went to join David Beckham, but for Terry that was an opportunity too good to miss. He stayed in touch, not only with me but the players as well. We still keep in touch even now.

It was the same with Terry Burton, who joined as coach. I remembered from my days as player-manager at Fulham, that I found it quite hard, trying to do everything. So I wanted someone in whom I could trust and who was a good coach.

Terry was the man but his wages were set. He was underpaid and while I tried to get them improved, the chairman would not do anything about it. So when Cardiff came in, we could not stand in his way. We had always agreed when he first joined us that if he received a better offer, then we would let him go. If people don't really want to be there, if they are not 100 per cent because they know they could be earning a lot more elsewhere, then it is only right to stand aside and let them go.

Q. How did you get on with the Russo brothers?

A. I quite liked Jimmy when he first came in. He said what he thought and was straight forward. I like to take people at face value. However, the chairman did tell me Jimmy was not a fan of mine and I realised as the brothers had just come in, they were involved in a club for the first time and wanted to change things.

But the chairman assured me, "we are with you". That was reassuring because the chairman was still in charge of the club.

Jimmy did question various things, such as the style of play and why we conceded goals from corners: things like that. He wanted to know if we were putting in enough work on this or that.

Of course, you can work seven days a week on defending corners and you can still concede goals from that area.

They also asked if they could come up to the training ground and watch us train. I did not mind that. I was happy to see them. However, the other directors had not come up to watch us train, so I think the players were a little wary when the Russos suddenly appeared.

People feared the worst, knowing they wanted to have an impact but I did not feel threatened by them.

Q. How has it been going back to Fulham as coach, a place where once you were manager?

A. Very easy. I was very grateful to Chris Coleman, who was the manager at Craven Cottage, and he offered me the job. When you get the sack it is not always easy to get back in. I was approached with regard to the posts as manager at Oxford, Millwall and Gillingham. I did an interview with all three and didn't get or take any of the jobs.

I was very grateful after two or three months unemployed when Chris, who I had coached when he was a player at Crystal Palace, invited me on board at Fulham without a title. He asked me to take a look and I had a look, helped out where I was needed. He thought the reserve and youth team managers might have benefit of what I had to offer. They were in the first year in their posts

I did assessments on the opposition and helped out with the training and coaching. It was very much a general job but it got me back into football. It was terrific and led to me becoming a first team coach at a Premier side.

Q. Players in today's game are fitter than ever before. How do coaches carry out fitness and conditioning training and are there any particular drills that are done?

A. There are no particular drills. Lets us get that clear from the start.

I am amazed how the fitness side of the game has progressed. Our boys are tested for body fat and weight and they are urine-tested all the time to make sure they are living well. Everything is recorded. They record every day how players train. It is a satellite system attached to their shirts and, as they train, details are fed back into the computer. It measures their performance. We can find out how hard they have worked - judging by heart rate- how far they have run, how much they have sprinted. All this is fed back and a week- by-week measurement is calculated and this, along with what they should be doing, is posted up on the board.

If anyone drops below the required rate, the sports scientist gets them on one-to-one. I wish I had had that as a player: checking mobility, effectiveness. If you are not particularly good at one thing there are ways of improving it.

Their training is measured and it is not organised off the cuff. There are certain amounts of football, gymnasium work. It is a complete structured programme. Their blood is tested as well. Whatever is needed is done for them.

We also have a three-man, full-time video team. We can focus in on any match and any player in the world. The boy at Liverpool is playing well, but not in the team: can we have a look at him? They produce a tape or disc, edit it and you can see him and watch him in action.

The video section is fantastic. We have three people working on video section full time. It is another world - even the training is videoed.

I did ask Graham Simpson when I was at Watford, if we could have our training videoed and he obviously said no, because of the budget. Terry Burton's son did some basic video work. It was primitive and we could not do week in and week out.

Now, at Fulham, I can go in and ask for a video of our set pieces and all will be brought up within an hour. We are over spoilt but it is a great back-up tool.

Q. How frustrating was it to see the budget Boothroyd got the season after you had left and kept us up spending virtually nothing?

A. Well if I am totally honest the biggest disappointment was that: what happened budget-wise the following year. The chairman did not lie to me when I took the job. I was grateful for the offer of the job

and took it. We were in trouble and were going to be for a few years, and we knew we would have to struggle along, which was why I was surprised I was sacked.

In fact, towards the end of my final season there, the chairman said one day that we either had to sell Heidar Helguson, close the academy or let go the training ground.

So the following season, after I was sacked, they started signing a few players which I knew full well meant that the budget was being increased. That was frustrating because I was never given the chance to have any money. But you could see from outside, particularly in wages, the budget had been moved quite considerably.

I didn't mind what was thrown at me when I was manager and I played the game according to their rules 100 per cent but others did not. Then, seeing how much was spent subsequently, I felt a little bit let down but by then I had gone. That was the thing that rankles.

What makes it worse is that in the final years, they were on about dropping the budget even more. We have not bottomed out yet, they said. I am not sure how they could then start spending the money they did on agents, fees and wages.

Q. Did Elton John sympathise with your situation at Watford?

A. He would phone pretty well every week. He has done that for years, no matter who is the manager.

I remember when Elton was concerned about the budget. At that time he would only speak to me. He did not want to talk to the board or the chairman So I would talk to Elton when he rang and the chairman would always ask what was being said. Well, when Jimmy was killed in the car crash, Elton stumped up the money for Paul Devlin. That was a very generous and helpful gesture.

As we went on, I knew we needed new players. This was way before I got the sack. I could see if we kept losing players and diluting the team, we would really struggle.

I talked to Elton. Well, when Elton heard that the budget was to be cut even further, he volunteered to help. He would not talk to the chairman but after some discussion, he came up with the idea of a concert to raise money for new players. Elton told me: "I need the chairman to know this is purely for players."

It never worked out like that. The ticket money was earmarked for paying off the lease and instead, I was told the budget would be cut still further. At the concert, Elton spoke about the money being raised for new players and the club apologised and said this was not possible. However, they did increase the budget for Adrian Boothroyd that summer, after the concert.

So the whole business rankled with me because it was because of the playing budget cuts that Elton volunteered the concert, only for the chairman to earmark the money for other things and cut the budget still further.

We were supposed to fly out to see Elton on March 23 2005. I had been invited out and the chairman was coming with me, for his first-ever meeting with Elton. Graham Simpson asked me to ask Elton if we could take Mark Ashton along "So Elton can see the energy of the man."

So we were supposed to gone on March 23 and I got sacked on March 22. That was the worst thing.

Elton had repeated to me: I won't do the concert unless the money is used for the team.

We had the money from the ticket sales but I never saw any of it. Had we been able to buy players then, it would have given us half a chance.

No one knew about the planned flight to the States to see Elton. The Russos did not know. I was told to keep it very quiet.

Q. Would you have signed the likes of Marlon King? Or was your transfer policy too limited?

A. I thought, despite his reputation, that was a great signing for Watford. But you know the money he was on and you know his fee was half a million. People like that were not on my radar. I was not allowed to consider players like Marlon King.

Firstly it had to be a free transfer and I could not consider someone on that sort of wage. We had to tell scouts not to keep coming with names we could not consider. We had to get lower division players perhaps we could work with and improve.

Limited? That is a weak word. My transfer policy was all but non-existent let alone limited.

Firstly, we did not pay agents anything. Every deal in football nowadays, there is an agent's fee. Even a free transfer there is a fee, which range from the ridiculous to the ridiculous. The club had had a bad experience with agents, and said we can't pay them.

That was established when we took the job. It didn't bother me as I did not think there would be any players coming in. As far as I knew we did not pay an agent's fee and I told agents they were wasting their time.

However, to my surprise, I found out that policy had changed when Mark Ashton arrived.

I think it was Chambers from West Brom. That was when Mark Ashton was concerned. The chairman came in and asked if we would be interested in Chambers. Well, yes of course I would be interested in such a player but he was on too much and cost too much as far as I was concerned. Graham Simpson said he thought there was a way round it. I did not realise we had bought him. I was very surprised at that.

Towards the end of my period at Watford, I was called to a meeting with Simpson at a local hotel. He was involved in charity work and defender Darren Moore and his agent were there. Darren apparently did work for this charity but I was asked if I wanted to sign him.

This was the only time I felt the writing was on the wall. It was all set up behind my back. Darren was the sort of player I had been unable to consider because of wages, fees etc. So I said Mr Chairman, if we can afford to get someone in who earns that sort of money, then I would prefer it to be my choice. I turned the deal down.

Q. Fulham and doing very well at the moment. What is Roy Hodgson like to work for? Did you know him before he came to Fulham? You seem to have a fairly modest budget judged be some in the Prem League, what is your secret?

A. There is no secret, just hard repetition. I like working with Roy, who I knew from the days when he was good friends with Dario Gradi, who was on the coaching staff at Chelsea. Roy was a Surrey coach.

Ironically, he took me on my prelim badge and passed me at 18. The good thing about Chelsea was that we had Dario and Dave Sexton was manager, who was one of the real early coaches, rather than the people who kept the boys happy, playing five a side every day. Sexton was really into working the team.

I owe a lot to Dario because he encouraged me to take my coaching badge quite early. Anyway, through Dario, I got to know Roy.

Roy is terrific to work for and a real gentleman. He has a hard side the public don't see. We actually coach every day. We don't have a day when they just work out. We have a meeting in the morning, focus on the requirements and then we do team coaching. He believes in team coaching as opposed to individual coaching.

He does repetition week in and week out; team shape. It was not popular with players but they got used to it. I wish I did it more when I was at Watford. You are always learning in this game. Terry Burton/Nigel Gibbs and I balanced the coaching but Roy says 'no balance, we are doing team coaching every day.

Q. When you were sacked, were you surprised?

A. I had no inkling. Oli Phillips phoned me on the Sunday night tipping me off it was likely to happen and I did not know. I felt the chairman was being influenced by Mark but I did not think that would be a threat. He did not want to be involved as much and instructed me to talk to him through Mark, but I felt confident in talking to the chairman, because I felt he was reasonably honest.

No one ever mentioned the possibility of my being sacked. The crowd never got on my back. They booed a few performances. We had slipped into that bottom bit but it never crossed my mind that we would be relegated. We had that bad week, which was not helped by a few injuries, but we only needed a few points.

Graham Simpson phoned me in the morning. It was before 7.30 because my alarm goes at 7.30 and his call woke us up. I had not said to Ann anything. The phone rang at 7.10. He said: 'I need to speak about a few things. I got over there to his house musing to myself, I think I am going to get the sack.

It was very brief. He said it was the hardest thing he had to do. I said listen chairman do what you have to do. He handed me an envelope and I prepared to leave. He said he wanted to give me reasons and I replied, I don't want to hear your reasons because I won't agree with any of them.

He wanted to fluff it a little bit. Mark Ashton was there with him.

I told them I would like to go to the training ground and say goodbye. However they said they did not want me to go there or have any contact with the players. That I thought was unnecessary and ridiculous.

The players phoned that night and we met in a pub not far from London Colney. I thanked them. There was plenty of gallows' humour. It was a good night. We had two or three pints and said our farewells.

Q. Did you feel your sacking was unjust?

A. Considering the restraints that were placed on me, yes I did feel it was unjust. Had I been given even a modest budget and had the same results, I might have felt it was fair. But then does any manager in football feel his sacking is justified?

Graham Simpson always contended in public that he would never sack me. I told him it was a ridiculous thing to say and that one day he will sack me. I told him I know that will happen and when it does I will take it on the chin.

I just did not think I deserved it in the financial circumstances but I wasn't going to wallow in pity but just get on with it.

Q. After you left Vicarage Road, the club denied Heidar Helguson was for sale but eventually sold him.

A. I was told it was either 'H' (Helguson), the academy or the training ground. We had to make further savings. The training ground is brilliant for a club of our stature. I did not want to lose the academy either. The other alternative was 'H' who I once told: 'You are first name on the team sheet but there is going to be a time when if someone comes in they will let you go'.

He said, 'I don't want to go. If you put a new contract up in front of me, I will sign'.

He could have got a lot more money elsewhere. People like H come along every 30 years. I was instrumental in getting him to Fulham and I don't think he was given the best chance, although he was very popular with fans. He is one of the best players I have ever worked with, in terms of character and application. His worth to the team is terrific. He has his weaknesses and technical faults, but you know if the ball was played into the box from any direction, he would have a go at getting on the end of it.

But yes, I was told that I had to sell Helguson.

Q. Danny Webber hit an amazing number of goals in an impressive run during your final season and then faded.

A. Yes, he was top scorer during my final season at Watford.. We started off really well and Danny was flying. We drew 0-0 at Gillingham in the most one-sided 0-0 we have had. But in one attack I think Chambers put over the cross and Danny collided with the post. He dislocated his shoulder. He had Premier League quality when approaching the penalty area. He had a great touch outside the box but for a boy who was outwardly quite forward he lacked that inner confidence. He seemed to grasp that confidence that year but the injury hit him hard.

Q. Would you have done anything different in either of the 2 games against Liverpool? Should we have gone for it more during the home leg? Don't get me wrong, those two semi's were fantastic and a superb achievement given the circumstances. Thanks for the memories!

A. I think if you asked Roy Hodgson, he would back me 100%. The English way is to go out there and take what is coming. We knew an early goal against us would kill it. We planned to keep it tight and then get into the second half, we would have a real good go at it.

If you just throw caution to the winds they will just pick you off. I think Premiership sides can do that to you. We even feel that at Fulham.

We felt we had a real good chance at home, but we were up against a team that can pick you off and counter-attack very quickly and very well. I felt if we could get second half momentum up kicking towards our supporters. We don't know what would have happened had we gone gung ho from the start. We were playing against quality.

We were as cautious away as we were at home. Of course people will say we should have gone gung ho from the start but I think we would have made the tie very difficult.

We played the same tactics in the away tie and we gave a good account of ourselves and at no time were we under the cosh.

They scored a scruffy goal at Anfield - Coxy got something on the ball on the line but was unable to stop it going into the net. But that was with them coming on to us. I don't have any regrets about the approach to those ties, even though we failed to reach the final.

Q. I remember seeing you in the sponsors bar for Alec Chamberlain's testimonial a short time after you had been sacked and thought at the time what an honourable thing that was to have done given the circumstances of your departure and how relatively recent it was. You obviously hold the club in high regard so would you come back at any point? What are your best/worst memories of your time at the club? Do you hold any grudges or is it all water under the bridge now?

A. Firstly it is water under the bridge. You expect the sack in football, whether it is right or wrong. You expect that. The crowd were always terrific and always with me. Yes I remember once when I took off Pennant and the fans had a good go at me and then there was a time when we lost 5-2 at home to Palace and had a man sent off. A fan in the opposite stand kept shouting across at me.

I think Fulham and Watford are similar. It is not a hostile atmosphere. They get behind the team, but they appreciate the problems, and expectation levels are not sky high. I have really good memories of Watford and really enjoyed it. I thought Tim Shaw was terrific to work with. I also had the best relationship I have ever enjoyed with a local newspaper. Oli Phillips and I got on really well. Of course I was criticized but I always had the opportunity to put my point of view. Generally it was a lovely experience and I would not have swapped the experience of being at Watford.

Would I go back? I have a very good job. If I was going to go back as a number one, I would go back to Watford. But I have decent people here at Fulham and a decent set up and the feeling is that the club is on the rise.

The best moments for me at Watford were the game at Sheffield United after the boys had taken a cut in wages and the club from the outside looked like it is heading for a collapse. That day was about fans and players. That was really good. The quarter final against Burnley in the FA Cup was brilliant.

The low points were in the final year, when we had lots of injuries. Ironically I have Performance of the Week vases that were given to me during my career and three of them were that year, not long before I got the sack, but then leading up to the sack, we had a very fragile squad because of the injuries. It was a worry but I never considered relegation likely.

Q. What were the extremes of inconvenience during your time at Watford?

A. Well the budget was inconvenient but I knew that when I took the job. The first couple of years, we were allowed just five overnight stops and the chairman pushed it to six. That was not too much of a problem. The access onto the M1 is easier from Watford than for instance south of the river.

The biggest problem for me was Paul Jones, the keeper on loan from Wolves. Alec Chamberlain was injured and obviously we needed an experienced keeper, particularly as we were going into the semi-final with Liverpool.

I had a problem leading up to it. They thought in terms of putting in the kid and not signing Paul and then not extending his loan for the second leg. They relented at the last minute but it was a strange thing to do with such big games and a chance to make even more money.

Later I heard something that made me wonder about that whole scenario. I have been told on good authority that it was decided some time back that I would get the sack and the only thing that would change that plan was if we reached the final.

Q. Ron Noades - is he as hard to work for/with as it appears? Did he really buy Brentford so he could make himself manager?

A. Ron bought the club with a view to becoming manager. He was a tough man to work for. The one thing with Ron is that you knew exactly where you were. Looking back on relationships with chairmen that I have had and worked for, Ron was 100 per cent truthful.

I look back on the times I worked with Ron and remember he was always straight down the line, he said what he had to say whether you liked it or not. You could never accuse him of talking behind your back. He was always up front.

I was at Palace when Terry Venables came in and offered me the job as first team coach. I had been out injured and Terry offered me the job I had under the previous manager. But he said Terry Fenwick was coming in to help on the coaching side and I knew, as they were good pals, he would be the first team coach in all but name.

Ron was going to Brentford as owner and manager. I went in as first team coach. That was one of the best years I had in football. I was in total control Monday to Friday but Ron picked the team. He saw the other side of football. He was black and white man but when he was manager he had to make decisions and realized there was a lot more about the job than he had ever considered. He was always fair and always straight.

Q. At the time of your dismissal from Watford, it was rumoured that Adrian Bothroyd had already been lined up to succeed you and indeed it has been reported since that that was the case. Did you get any sense of that from anyone either inside or outside the club?

A. I didn't have one inkling. Football is an industry of rumours. I always call it one big village. I could phone up someone about something happening. When someone is going to get the sack but no one ever phoned me to say I was getting in trouble. I did not have even a one per cent doubt.

My sacking was different. We played three games and did not get a point. The crowd was not happy but there were not the protests or calls for my head. Since I got sacked, someone actually told me that unless we won the semi-final with Liverpool, I was going to be sacked. That comes from someone in the know and puts an interesting light on the reluctance to let me have an on-loan keeper for the Liverpool semi-finals. They wanted me to go with a youth player. Obviously when a manager comes in, it is usually pre-planned. You can safely say he knew he was coming in.

Q. How does Ray explain the decline in form after Terry Burton left (including the unsettling of Neal Ardley)?

A. There was nothing I could do about Terry leaving, such was his low wage and the much bigger offer he received from Cardiff. Morally I could not have stopped him and he was always a very good bloke to work with. Obviously when recommending players, he would reflect on players he had worked with at former clubs and Terry recommended Neal, who was playing really well that season.

You have to take into consideration we had also cut Neal's wages right back. His wages were halved. I don't think he needed to get away to motivate him. He was a good professional and despite a low wage, he was giving it everything.

That was the other problem (because of the budget) - keeping people. If you are offering them no real money, you can't blame them for looking elsewhere.

I bumped into Neal a couple of weeks ago. He is academy manager at Cardiff and doing a good job. While at Watford, we did have a little bit of a row. I bought him off and he made a big show of not wanting to be substituted.

But he came up afterwards and apologized and explained it was in the heat of the moment. Neal didn't have pace. He did not need pace to cross. He manoeuvred the ball. He played in front of midfield four and he was a clever footballer. He would have been a top class player with pace.

Yes, I think the results went down. When Terry left we still had a lot to do in reducing the wage bill. If you dilute the team and get rid of stronger players and get weaker ones, you cannot expect the same results. Yet they did and sacked me because I was unable to produce them. People say they understand but that understanding does not last long.

The loss of Ardley was a blow but we were always likely to keep losing players with the budget and low wages we had.

I think it is a little bit insulting to Nigel Gibbs suggesting it was down to Terry's departure. Although he lacked Terry's experience, he did a really good job. The manager dictates the coaching. Terry was experienced, and would know what I wanted when I listed the coaching requirements. But I would have to explain a little bit more to Nigel. But the coaching was what I wanted in both cases. That was down to me.

The only thing that was cut was the budget.

Q. When Watford were in need of a left-back following Paul Robinson's departure, there were some rumours that you were going to bring in son Dean from (then) Wimbledon. Could you give us an idea if

that was the case and generally how do you see Dean's career both as a father and a football professional?

A. Dean was never a consideration. He was just getting into the side at that time. Ironically enough, earlier in the season this year, the chief scout at Fulham said that he thought the best left back outside the Premier League was Dean.

I did not know about this. Premiership clubs operate in an entirely different way. The manager, chief scout and the chief executive discuss the possibilities between them. The chief scout recommended Dean as an understudy at Fulham. I knew nothing about this and when I was told of the discussion I said straight away to the manager that I had nothing to do with that.

But, if I had signed him at Watford it would have been a big pressure on Dean. The manager's son has so much pressure on him. The players can't talk about the manager in the dressing room and if he has a bad game, they point out he will not be dropped because he is the manager's son. I know parents tend to feel this way but I actually think Dean is a very talented boy who can hopefully play in a higher division. Going to club where I am employed is not for him - that's my opinion.

Q. "The highlights of your career as Watford manager would, I imagine, include the cup runs. In January 2005 you took Fulham to a replay in the FA Cup third round which dovetailed with the two legs of the League Cup semi final against Liverpool. I seem to recall that you were disappointed about not attempting to be a little more gung-ho against a jaded Mersey crew in the second, home, leg. I attended the away replay against Fulham and it seemed pretty clear to me that they were there for the taking but Watford had decided not to prioritise the match, with the Liverpool one coming up the following week and Wigan in the league that weekend. Is this true and, if so, how reduced (or shattered) was the squad at the time?

A. As I remember it, we had the Fulham replay, the league leaders Wigan and then the Liverpool first leg. That was a heavy schedule for a club without too much strength in depth so we tried to adjust the team for three games. The other two were important, but the Liverpool game presented a chance to reach the Final and, given the well-documented financial side of things, it was also important. There was no priority, but we wanted to even it out as giving it the best chance going to Liverpool. Fulham were a Premiership side, and I didn't think they were there for taking at Craven Cottage. We did well with a 2-2 draw at Wigan. We put young lads in who did us proud and I think Wigan equalised late on. They were the leaders at the time. We also did well at Liverpool but we just happened to lose at Fulham. I never thought Fulham were there for the taking. We gave a good account at our place but they were still the better side. They had the edge on ability. We played a strong side, wanted to win it but we didn't.

Q. On a wider point, given that it is such an inexact science, it seems to me that the question of prioritising games seems to end in tears more often than not; so do you think it is a good idea?"

A. I agree, you can prioritise but it rarely works out. We at Fulham, have got a massive game against Juventus on Thursday, and being pretty safe in the League, it could be argued that we should have put out a weak side at Manchester United and saved players for the Europa game. We put a strong side against Man United, but we could have lost the services of some through injury. Then again people would ask why didn't you just leave them out? The fact is you have to try and be competitive, but it is a difficult balancing act.

Q. Did you expect Ashley Young to go on to Premiership stardom? What was your take on Chris Cummins involvement? One of the first changes that Adrian Boothroyd made was to give Ashley a regular first team place. Are you surprised at Ashley's subsequent success and transfer value? In hindsight, do you think he should have stepped up to the starting line-up sooner?

A. David Dodds, the youth team boss, he always said he thought Ash would play for England and said that when Ash was at an early age. He was Academy Director and had that conviction, whereas I did not think he would get to those heights. I thought he was a very talented young player. Nigel Gibbs who ran the reserves and they won the league that year, certainly felt the player had the talent. I didn't want him to become another McNamee built up to ridiculous heights only for him to get knocked down.

Ash is one of the few kids that I ever worked with who is genuinely two footed and has lovely balance. The other thing, when we did sign him pro, there was no agent involved. The parents came in, we did the best we could as a cash-strapped club. I can honestly say if an agent had been involved he would not have obtained any more.

I can remember Macker. The crowd loved McNamee and there was no doubt that he was very exciting., The crowd did not see in the dressing room, the flak flying around. He was criticized for not coming back and marking the full-back and such things which are part and parcel of the game. I didn't want the same with Ash. I didn't want to over-use him. We tried to limit his appearances but we had Devlin injured and we had to put him in. As it transpired, it made him grow up very quickly. With Macker, he got linked in with agents but in other ways he and Ash were completely different. McNamee played for Vialli. I thought he was a talented boy, but he had problems with his asthma and restricted him more than people realized. The expectation was too much on him. He is at Norwich now, working at his career but remember he was talked about in Premier terms. He received too much praise early on. I did not want that to happen to Ash.

I thought at one stage the young lad was suffering in my final season. Again, you just can't just shove a young player in. He did turn out to be a really, really good player but I stick with the generally accepted policy that if you think he has a really good chance, give him a few games. Let him get a little taste get a taste, and then take him out before the player loses form and gets depressed.

For instance, look at Chris Smalling, transferred to Manchester United for £10m and only played six games for us (Fulham). We felt we needed to protect him: put him in and bring him out.

With Ash, he would probably become an ever-present the season I never got because that would have been the season he emerged, and in fact did emerge. But I recall Ash was painfully thin, and not a big lad. We didn't want him to get mauled. We had to get him to fill out and build up his body strength. I don't regret the policy with Ashley, who made 40 appearances that season, although just over half of them were from the bench. I remember that I was concerned because, with Devlin injured and Ardley linked with Cardiff, we were forced to use Ash more than I would have liked. As it was, it helped him grow up and my successor reaped the benefit. You can't measure these things but I think, what we did with him, was good for Ashley.

After I left, as I understand it there was a problem with Chris Cummins being due the money that was contracted to him for bringing Ash to the club. The first -team manager looks after the first team. I never understand how managers get loads of praise for bringing a player through. They spot a talent and utilize it to the best they can, but the people who bring the player to the club and then develop them and nurture them through the ranks, deserve the praise and the recognition. People like Chris, Dave Dodds and Nigel Gibbs deserve the praise for developing Ash. If Chris got a pay off that he deserved then

that is great. The people who are responsible for getting a player into a club should be rewarded as that was a fantastic achievement, especially for a club like Watford.

Q. Did you realise straight away that Mark Ashton was wrong for the club?

A. My first impression of Mark was that he was a charming bloke. He seemed to be what the club needed. As it turned out that was not the case: it was a different story. But then again, I did not deal with him that much but I would say that other people were telling me that he was not good for the club. It was people behind the scenes who were finding it hard to work with Mark.

I was getting feedback. Initially, I took no notice as it did not affect me and I had no first-hand experience of that. I began to see the change when Mark would phone me before every game and talk about the team. Then he would ask why I was making a change or what was my thinking with regard to the choice of substitutes.

After the match, he would ask other questions and when the chairman came to discuss the game and the team, he would ask similar questions. When I filled him in, he would say: "That's what Mark thought."

I could see what was going on. I was told Mark had been a professional and, somewhat later, the chairman told me I should listen to Mark as he knew what he was talking about. The chairman was stepping back from the day-to-day business and wanted me to deal with the chief executive. I was very happy dealing one-to-one with the chairman.

The relationship of Mark Ashton and Aidy was the key. He was comfortable with Boothroyd, I was more the chairman's man. No way would I have allowed Mark to influence me. It suited the situation at the time to bring in someone who could work with Mark.

Q. When you were at Fulham, Marlon King was linked with the club but the deal fell through.

A. That was another thing. He was mentioned by the chief scout. The set up is very different. The chief scout, the chairman, the manager and chief executive work out all the deals. It was a possibility. Since leaving, I had never been to Watford or seen them play away from home until last Tuesday, when I went to the Swansea match. Our paths had never crossed so I had nothing to do with the interest in King.

However, I recall there was a medical problem but we were also amazed at how much money he was on at Watford. Those two factors finished it for us.

Q. A few months after you left, Watford were involved in one of those on-field flare-ups at Coventry. New manager Adrian Boothroyd commented afterwards that a year ago, the players would have run away.

A. I remember that comment. It was one thing I would always defend because you could never say any of my sides were soft. He implied they were because he was manager making out he had instilled the aggression which I had not. I gather that was what he was trying to say.

Except that it was nonsense. He implied people like Neal Ardley, Sean Dyche, Paul Devlin and Heidar Helguson were willing to be a soft touch on the pitch, capable of running away from confrontations, and he was totally wrong. He insulted those players and he insulted me.

He is as a young manager trying to make his way and I will forgive him but I think with a few years under his belt he probably regrets that remark. It was stupid and very wide of the mark.

Q. What are your views on the way Nigel Gibbs's departure was handled

A. I really do feel sorry for Nigel. He did absolutely nothing wrong during the time he was there. He was a victim of circumstances. When I was sacked he was all but ignored while still employed by the club. I did not realize he was on the same summer coaching course as Boothroyd. Nothing was mentioned then. He then came back to Watford and was sacked. So to sack someone some three months later, the day before pre-season is not very nice. Not at all nice.

I heard that they thought I would employ him and so, by not sacking him, they would save money if he left the club to join me. I was never in the position to bring anyone in. They thought I would have got another manager's job. They were looking to save and in a sense they were right: I would have employed him. But to keep a long-standing club servant kicking around in the wings and then sack him when all the clubs have their staff preparing for the new season, was bad.

Q. Do you think that Nigel would make a good manager?

A. I think he will make a good manager. He is a modest man. He has not got an ego and sometimes people forget that you can be a modest man, a number two and when you get a number one position, you grow into the role. People tend to write you off if you are a number two. I don't agree with that. I think Nigel can make that step up. However, Nigel has a good job at a good club that is under-achieving.

Q. Did the chairman, Graham Simpson, cause Neil Cox to resign as captain? What was the trouble behind the scenes?

A. The most popular view is that Neil Cox annoyed the chairman by representing the players' viewpoint and not the club's during the negotiations for taking a 12 per cent wage-cut. However, senior players Alec Chamberlain and Sean Dyche were involved in those talks and so I don't think Coxy can be singled out.

The fact is the PFA, the footballers' union, advised against taking the cuts. The players went against their union, so there should have been no case for animosity directed at any of the players over that incident.

They behaved brilliantly and the whole saga was a credit to them.

The Russos did not like Neil as captain. That they made very plain, but they made it very awkward that they then told Sean Dyche that he should be captain. It gave me so many problems because that sort of loose talk does not help. The chairman and the Russos did not think a lot of Coxy.

I don't know why the chairman did not like him. However, one game, Neal Ardley was skipper and the chairman phoned him the next day and told him he had done a great job as captain and was much better than Coxy. As it happened, Coxy was round at Ard's house at the time. That is the reason Coxy would not continue as captain. Both the players came to me and told me what had happened.

For the record, I asked the chairman and he denied it. The two players involved swore it was true when I checked back.

So you will have to make your own choice as to what actually happened in that instance. I know I have made my choice.

Q. Would you consider a return to a first team manager's job?

A. It is one I would consider but I have an unbelievably good job, working for good people at a good club and having unbelievable success. If I found myself out of a job then yes, I would be looking for a managerial post. If you have been in football all your life, you just enjoy being in football.

The involvement factor is the same as a manager but clearly the responsibility factor increases. I have always had the jobs where there is no money and limited assets you can work with. There are certain levels that you go in at. If you are a name or a fashionable ex-player then you could get a job where there is financial backing. I will be invited in at a level where there is a problem to put right and work with limited assets. But nothing would put me off.

Q. If you could have done anything different during your time at Watford, what would it be?

A. One of my big regrets is one which I could not do too much about. I have a group of old friends who meet up for dinner, as a group, once a year. We meet individually on other occasions. Well a member of the group, a good friend of mine, was talking to me about the Watford situation and said he wanted to buy some players for me. He was willing to back my judgment. He is very, very wealthy. We thought we could buy people at Wimbledon who were then struggling badly.

He was interested: would there be a possibility of buying a couple of players and then receiving a good percentage of the sell-on profit?

I pinpointed two players: Jobi McAnuff and Reo Coker - I wish I had really pushed it. The two boys would have been quite good for us and Watford would have made some money out of Reo. The two would have cost a total of £400,000 and neither player was on more than £30,000 a year.

To give you an idea, I had one former Wimbledon player at Watford who had earned more than 20 times what they were on and was now being paid the sort of salary the club were budgeting for, which was around £70,000.

I went to the chairman, Graham Simpson, who listened and then said my friend had to pay their wages as well as the fees. Well, of course that would not work. My friend thought he was laying out enough on what was a gamble and Watford were going to get the benefit of the players while they were at the club and a percentage of the profit.

I wish I had pushed it. I put up an argument but Simpson was adamant. I was fairly certain both boys would be reasonable players.

Watford missed out on a tidy profit there.

Q. Considering the quality of referees we have seen at the Vic and suffered from on away visits, what would you see (as a professional in the game) as the pro and cons of employing ex players as match officials?

A. The big problem that ex-players have got, they finish playing at 32-33, and then to go through the ranks of referees, they have to get to the top before they are made to retire at the age of 48.

Unless, as a player, you are involved from the off and doing amateur matches during the career, it is very difficult for players to serve the normal life span as a professional and then serve the normal life span as a referee. I don't know too many players that would really relish that.

But I do feel we need goal-line technology. I am 100 per cent against stopping and starting the game for other reasons. There are no two fouls the same. The refs don't get it 100 per cent right: players don't, managers don't. Can you imagine an appeal for a penalty, the referee does not think it is one, the ball is still in play and then as the defending or offending team is attacking, play is stopped to review the claim?

Yes I know that France qualified with a blatant hand ball in the World Cup. I have to say it is very surprising it wasn't picked up. You have to put it down to a bad decision on a bad night.

The one thing I would back, without doubt, is goal-line technology and it would not take too much to set it up.

We, at Fulham, have had the system of the linesman patrolling the box, in the Europa League. They stand behind the goal and are allowed to come onto the pitch to get a better view. In our very first match where we had that, the referee sent off first one and then another player in his place before they got the right one the third time. That goes against what I am saying but I think the idea of a penalty area linesman behind the goal is worth considering.

Q. Ray, in your last season with us, up until January everything seemed ok we reached the semi -final of the Carling cup where we played very well in the first leg at Anfield and we were going ok in the league. What went wrong after Liverpool knocked us out in the 2nd leg? Was it down to the affect of the cup run?

A. You never know if the defeat had an effect. I can only repeat the point I have already made. It sounds like excuses but really they are the reasons. We did have injuries and, with a club like ours, having reduced the number and strength of the squad, trying to get to this magical figure £2.3m budget, we were stretched. We were weak in numbers, and weak in the strength in depth. We lost players to injuries because we played more games as a result of the cup run.

We had a poor second half to the season after flying in the first half. It was just the amount of games we played but I think we would have finished the season as an average season. I got sacked before it finished so it was deemed a poor season. It wasn't great but it was fair enough given the limitations.

I never thought we would go down. We lost Ardley, our centre backs to injuries and it all sounds like excuses but they are facts.

People reduced the budget and then were surprised when the results deteriorated. That changed with my successor and demonstrated that with a few additions and investment, we had the basis of a good squad.

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