

Q & A session with Nigel Gibbs

February / March 2009

Q. Now that the previous regime at the club has gone and it looks like they are trying to get the club back to how it used to be, would you ever consider returning to 'your' club in some capacity in the future?

A. At the moment I am really happy working under a brilliant manager in Steve Coppell. You can never predict the future in football, but of course I would consider returning to Watford in some capacity in the future. T

I would never have considered it under the last regime under any circumstances. I do however look forward to watching Watford recover from wherever I may be.

Q. Do you think your legendary stamina was developed by playing on the sloping pitches at Marshalswick School. In your opinion are such facilities really any way to try to improve skills for young players?

A. I was talking to someone the other day about developing players and the facilities question came up. If you have a choice of improving the standard of pitches and training pitches we must. This helps develop better techniques of players under good coaches and this in turn would raise the standard of young players up and down the country.

There is a case for players playing/training on poor pitches to keep them grounded and keep them mentally focused so they never lose they desire and drive to become professional players which I am in favour of as well. You just have to make sure you get the balance right.

I had a good time at Marshalswick school playing my football but my stamina and fitness came from my dad and Tom Walley driving me on the at training 2 nights a week!!

Monday was the physical night at Vicarage Road. We did half lap runs, 12 minute runs and also running up and down terraces with people on your back.

Carrying Steve Terry on your back was not easy!

Q. I was once told that you were a target for George Graham at Arsenal but Basset wouldn't sell you and so the Gunners went after Lee Dixon instead. Is there any truth to this?

A. Yes there was an occasion when Arsenal enquired about me under Steve Harrison's reign but the club turned it down. It was very different in those days. I didn't have an agent then (and never did), so I didn't know about the enquiry till some time later. The manager chose not to tell me and that was the end of it. There was no real football grapevine as there is today where you would know everything that is going on. I'm sure there were other times as well but again I have no knowledge of these.

Q. A year after a public assurance from Simpson that he would mark your service to the club in some permanent way, he offered to go away and "check his comments" about such an assurance. When it was proven that he had indeed made the comment, he refused to ever be drawn on the subject again. How did the whole issue make you feel given your service to the club which included an unprecedented 2 testimonial seasons?

A. The last regime never spoke to me from the day I left. Even when Reading played them over the last 2 seasons they seemed to avoid me but match day staff / office staff that remained made a point of speaking.

I would have loved to have my time at Watford marked in some way but I was lead to believe most memorabilia before 2005 was taken down or removed by the last regime so there was little chance of anything happening!!

Disappointing as it was, the most important thing for me were the fans who had supported me over the 23 years, supported my testimonials and still talk to me now about my time at Watford.

Q. Some people still seem very upset with the way in which Aidy Boothroyd dispensed with your services back in 2005 & how he (or the club's media dept) tried to bury the news away - and they've continued to hold this against both AB & WFC in general to this day. I realize that it was an incredibly shabby way to treat somebody who had been with WFC for as long as you had, but are you still as upset & angry about it now as a lot of other people appear to be?

A. I felt my dismissal from Watford after 23 years of service was very, very poorly handled. In football once you go into managing or coaching there will be a time you get sacked or leave. There are ways of doing things and this wasn't done with any class, dignity or any thought.

The timing was the worst for any coach / manager a couple of days before pre season when nearly all clubs have employed their staff for the season. Especially as Boothroyd and I had just completed a residential course for the Pro licence together days before. He was carrying on as normal but there were very obvious signs for a long time that I was on my way.

Watford has, and always will be, my club and that of all my family but it hurt us all in a big way. We really appreciate the fans who spoke up for me when I couldn't.

Q. I played for Old Centralians Cricket Club in a (cricket) match against a WFC side that you skippered back in 1997ish. It was a great evening and one that I still remember vividly - do Reading ever do anything like that in their local community, or do you think that sort of thing was unique to WFC and helped to foster their place in the local community?

A. Football has changed so much but I am at a club which does a lot for the local community and charities very similar to how Watford was when I was there.

All players love competition in any sport but it is increasingly difficult to arrange these type of events due to busy schedules and the worry of injury.

Q. You are a very rare breed in that you stuck with one club for your entire playing career. During your time at Watford, how many opportunities were you given to leave for another club and what was it that made you stick around?

A. I played in the Premier league, Europe, captained the club, and had International caps, all at Watford so I didn't do too badly by staying at one club.

I hold the record number of starts in the clubs history and am also the longest serving player in the clubs history which I am again very, very proud of and that is so important to me.

Yes I would have loved to have played in the premiership every season but it wasn't to be. As previously discussed I didn't have an agent so didn't get to find out if clubs enquired about me. I didn't once ask for a transfer and there was only one time the club didn't want me to re-sign or stay. Arsenal did enquire but I was only told about it a few seasons later.

I was given a free transfer by Graham Taylor when I had missed most of the season with injury but eventually re-signed 3 months into the season (Kenny Jackett was manager). I had offers to go elsewhere during pre season but wanted to be fully fit before going anywhere new, even though my knee felt really good.

So I decided to stay and train pre season to firstly get fit and secondly to earn a contract somewhere. I had a good pre season played well and was offered a week to contract by Watford on £400 a week with also an appearance bonus if I played!! Not big money at all. After 2 months I had played every game and wanted a more permanent deal but the club was unwillingly to give me one which was really harsh at the time.

Gillingham came in and offered me a 18 month contract on 3 times what I was getting so had to make a difficult decision. I turned it down but still Watford stalled until at least 3 to 4 months into the season when I said I was going to leave and then I got a more permanent deal but still on less money than Gillingham had offered me!!

I signed and played every games that season my knee felt great. It turned out to be a brave, good decision as we eventually got back into the Premiership a few seasons later.

Graham Taylor was the General Manager that season and he was the one I was dealing with. Never easy!!

Q. What is it about Graham Taylor that made people want to play for him and why do you think that so many of his former players have gone on to successful coaching careers?

A. Graham Taylor is a fantastic motivator, brilliant tactician and knew how to get the best out of you. He instilled in us really good discipline from an early age and the importance of working hard to be the best you could be. Team spirit and the team were very important to him and to us players.

He knew how to win football matches and instilled that into us as players. He had a great knack of putting together winning teams either by buying in players at the right time or promoting them up from within the clubs reserves or youth set up.

He certainly has helped me in my coaching career as I have used a lot of his principles in my philosophy of coaching. I'm sure that other players who are now managers or coaches and played under him, will be using their experiences under Graham in their jobs too.

Q. You have a successful career as a football coach, despite the interventions of certain individuals at our club. What are your future ambitions? Do you aspire to the "top job"?

A. I am very pleased with the way my coaching career has developed. I have gained my UEFA Pro Licence which enables me to manage in the Premiership and have gained great experience under two excellent managers in Ray Lewington and Steve Coppell.

My first year as a coach was a brilliant introduction into this side of football. We won the Premier Reserve league, the only club not in the Premiership to win it but also saw the emergence of Ashley Young, Lee Cook, Lloyd Doyley and Hameur Bouazza to name but a few.

I owe Ray Lewington so much for giving me the job in the first place and also his help and guidance during that year. Ray Lewington did a fantastic job at Watford under the worst circumstances in the club's recent history. He doesn't get the credit he deserves while others were happy to take it even though Ray was the main reason the club stayed afloat. I know, I was on the inside so to speak. He was also sacked in a very disgraceful way especially when I was told "we do things the right way at Watford".

I am at Reading now and enjoying my role with the reserves. We also won the Premier reserve league in my first season there and were 2nd behind Aston Villa last year.

We have had a few young players progress to the first team this season which makes it very satisfying.

I would like to become a manager one day but short term I would like to work as a first team coach again before stepping into management.

However sometimes opportunities come along when you least expect them, and jobs in football are few and far between, so I would never put a time scale on it.

Q. Are you currently prevented from talking about the circumstances surrounding your exit from Watford? If so, would you speak out if this were not the case? If not, what were the circumstances surrounding your exit from Watford?

A. I signed a confidentiality agreement with Watford when I left the club as did most of the other people who were sacked. This stops me saying a lot of things that I would have like to have said. The Club said I was "very well looked after" which I felt implied I received a massive sum of money. In fact I was on a

fairly low Assistant Manager's wage and was simply paid the remainder of my contract over the next 12 months.

I had been at Watford FC for 23 years and neither the Chairman, nor any Director nor any employee contacted me to thank me for my service over those years.

I decide not to lower myself and give them any of my time in response to a lot of things that were said. I knew what went on and I could sleep well at night.

The actual events of the exit were answered to a previous question but I will share it with you again.

I felt my dismissal from Watford after 23 years of service was very, very poorly handled. In football once you go into managing or coaching there will be a time you get sacked or leave. There are ways of doing things and this wasn't done with any class, dignity or any thought. The timing was the worst for any coach / manager, a couple of days before pre season when nearly all clubs have employed their staff for the season.

Boothroyd and I had just completed a residential course for the Pro licence together days before. He was carrying on as normal but there were very obvious signs for a long time that I was on my way. Watford has, and always will be my club and that of all my family but it hurt us all in a big way. We really appreciate the fans who spoke up for me when I couldn't.

Q. How was your relationship with Graham Simpson and also with Aidy Boothroyd?

A. At the time I was with Watford, it was only a professional relationship with both of them but I have no relationship with either of them now - nor do I want one.

When Boothroyd came in, I supported him and helped him keep the club up that season but once we were safe he and the rest of the staff began to ignore me and not include me in meetings. A sign of things to come was when the rest of the group of 4 and their wives were invited to the end of season dinner and to stay at the Grove. I was only given one ticket. I found out when Keith Burkinshaw asked me if my wife was going, and I told him no, so he gave me his wife's invitation as she couldn't make it.

I am also led to believe that they had an after concert party with Elton. I never got an invite. No class by the people in charge.

Q. Has Lloyd Doyley approached you for goalscoring advice?

A. Lloyd Doyley doesn't need any help from me on the goal scoring front as I believe a fullback's job is to defend first, create second!

I watched him play at left back recently and he played really well. A very underrated player who will always give you a 100%.

Q. In your 20-odd years as a player what were the greatest changes that you saw in training techniques and in the life of a footballer in general?

A. The greatest changes in the life of a footballer are the wages and the media and TV coverage. The coverage is 7 days a week 24 hours a day since the introduction of the Premier League and Sky as its major investor.

As a professional player everything gets arranged for you these days. You are very well looked after and supported, so all you have to concentrate on is training and playing.

As for the training techniques, it certainly has more emphasis on the sports science part of the game i.e. the diets of players, the more specific fitness programmes of individuals and the recovery after the games as well. The actual football part of the training has also improved as clubs have employed more and better qualified coaches. The bulk of the training remains the same though but you are always looking for ways to improve your players.

With the introduction of Pro Zone analysis you can see all the teams systems of play, their set pieces and their key player movements which can help you in your preparation before games

Q. Brendan Rodgers has said you are a friend of his and that you recommended that he take the Watford job. What can you tell us about him and what qualities does he have that will make him a success at Vicarage Road?

A. I don't actually know Brendan that well. He was in charge of the Chelsea reserves when I took the Reading Reserve team against them. He had left Reading when I joined and several of the staff know him quite well and speak highly of him as a person and that he is a good coach. I've spoken to him on a couple of times at other games but that is all.

Q. Brendan said he was great friend of Gibby and his advice was instrumental in accepting the job. As this was before the departure of those who cannot be mentioned on a family show, did he know they were going?

I had heard the rumours that Boothroyd might be going, but when you have only won 12 or so games in 12 months, it doesn't look good for any manager. After he was sacked there were lots of names mentioned as well as Brendan's. I knew he had been interviewed for the job and was invited back for a 2nd interview but that was all. I never spoke to him but sent him a good luck message when he was appointed.

Q. Is Simon Church one to watch for the future?

Yes Simon Church is definitely one to watch for the future. He has found it hard to break in at Reading as we have 4 established strikers ahead of him at the moment. He has played for Wales U 21 and scored against England in both games. He is currently on loan at Orient to gain some league experience which we hope will stand him in good stead for next season.

Q. I would hope that you would consider a return to WFC in a professional capacity should the circumstances be right. Would you have considered such a return under the old board regime?

I would never have considered it under the last regime under any circumstances for many reasons.

Q. It has been reported that you are friendly with Brendan Rodgers, and advised him to take the position at WFC. Would you welcome the chance to work directly with BR at some point in the future?

At the moment I am really happy working under a brilliant manager in Steve Coppell. You can never predict the future in football but of course I would consider returning to Watford in some capacity in the future. As for working with Brendan I would consider it, and never rule anything out in the future if the situation ever arose.

Q. Is there anyone (current or in the past) who you would jump at the chance to work with at a management / coaching level?

I am working with a brilliant manager at the moment and would be hard pressed to work with someone better. I would definitely work with Ray Lewington again. if the chance arose. To work under Sr Alex Ferguson and Wenger would be a brilliant experience for any coach with the success they have had over so many years.

Q. We mainly remember you as a right back, but you sometimes played on the left. Were you equally happy there?

I was a capable left back and did play there quite often as well as playing at centre half and also in Midfield. Right back was my preferred position but as long as I was in the team I didn't really worry about playing out of position.

Q. You missed about two years mid-career through injury. Did you think at any time that your career was finished?

Yes, in that period I was very concerned that my career was over and in fact one physio advised me to finish. After being out for so long you do wonder whether you can regain your fitness physically to cope with the rigours of training and playing day in and day out. I never lost my hunger and belief that I would be ok and as it turned out I played on for another 5 years which included 1 year in the Premiership.

Q. Of the goalkeepers you knew, who was the best to play in front of- Tony Coton , Kevin Miller or David James

Very difficult to make a decision but have gone for Tony Coton for his all round game. David James was a young GK at the time but you could see that he was potentially an international GK. Kevin Miller was also a great shot stopper, communicator and had a good distribution. I was very fortunate to play in front of so many good goal keepers in my time at Watford. In fact several of them were sold on for very big money and I claim to of helped them to go on to bigger and better things by giving them so much work to do in games!!

Q. The number of points won at home compared to away by the majority of clubs is considerable. I know the home fans can make a difference to players, but are there other reasons such as the

properties of the pitch (area, surface, bounce, slope, length of grass etc.) Do clubs take advantage of these things and do players try harder when playing at home?

I don't think players try harder at home but they certainly have a different mentality. The familiar surroundings of your home ground certainly helps home players as well as home support. The onus is on the home team to attack and to try to win. Certainly in recent times, away teams have come to shut up shop and are happy with a point. More teams are only playing with 1 up front so they defend deep and can frustrate and counter attack against the home team. All players want to impress and please home fans as it is where most of their supporters will see them. This, as we know, can be a hindrance as well as great help, depending on the club and its fans.

Q. I recall Gibbsy being released by Watford towards the end of his career and staying on for pre-season training and winning a new contract. Can he tell us what that period of his career was like, and whether it affected any relationships with the players or coaching staff?

Yes, I was given a free transfer at the end of the 1995/96 season by Graham Taylor. It was a very difficult time for me and my family. My friends and family were great for me as it wasn't a good time to be injured with my contract expiring that summer.

I had real problems with my knee in that season and was really unsure that I would be able to play again. Eventually after resting my knee for a period of 3 months through the summer, having acupuncture and trying to really build the muscles up around the knee, I felt good enough to give it one more go at playing again.

Kenny Jackett was really good to me in this period and he was the one who invited me to train at Watford for pre season which I did although I had several offers to train elsewhere. There were no contract offers anywhere but lots of offers to train with clubs to prove my fitness but all at my own expense and no guarantees of a contract at the end of it. So I decided to stay at Watford and eventually was offered a contract by Graham Taylor after 3 months of the season and continued playing for the next 5 years.

Q. You worked under Graham Taylor, Dave Bassett, Steve Harrison, Colin Lee, Steve Perryman, Glenn Roeder, Luca Vialli and Ray Lewington. Who was the best and worst at spotting players, at coaching, at tactical work, at honesty, at communicating with players, at motivation and why. If you feel unwise to be too critical, can you compare some of them?

I learnt from all the managers and coaches you mentioned and to compare them would take too long! Every manager and coach has their own ways of doing things. No manager/coach should try and be something they are not, but be true to themselves by managing or coaching in their own style.

The list of managers you listed all made an impression on me, some more than others, but I definitely learnt from them all. The three below however did make big impacts in my career for different reasons.

Graham Taylor was the manager of the Football Club running it from top to bottom and being very successful at it. He was a genius and had all the attributes you mention above. These days not many managers actually manage the club possibly Sir Alex does at Man Utd., but there aren't many others.

Steve Perryman made a big impression on me the way he handled players and motivated them. He knew the game very well and got the best out of players. I was disappointed when he left the club for

Spurs purely from a selfish point of view. He made me Club Captain and involved me by asking my view on things which was great for me and gave me an insight on his way of doing things.

Luca Vialli was very interesting to work under and for a brief time work for. He was a really hard working guy who lived and breathed his job. He was very well organised and very well prepared in everything he did from the training, fitness, and tactics to scouting the opposition. He took every defeat or bad performance personally and never blamed anyone else. It was shame he wasn't successful as I had a lot of time for Luca and with better back up from people around him could have been successful. He unfortunately bought some really bad players who eventually let him down on the pitch. He was blamed for the struggle financially but he never dealt with the contracts of players or transfer fees. He didn't know the division and after being so successful at Chelsea, he found it hard to get the right players in.

Ray Lewington in my opinion is one of the best motivators of players I know. He had a way to get the players so confident in their own ability and also their team mates that they felt great going out to play every week. He also knew the division and worked under the lowest budget but still managed to be so successful in his time. Tactically good and one of the most honest people I know. The players loved him even the ones who weren't in the team which is no mean feat! He produced miracles to keep the club afloat by cutting his playing budget constantly yet was still able to get to two Semi Finals along the way and keep the team in the division. I won't forgive or forget the way he was treated when they sacked him.

Q. If you are free one Saturday would you come along to the bar in the Rookery, as I'm sure one or two may want to buy you a beer?

It's very kind of you to offer to buy me a beer in the Rookery Bar. Unfortunately, I don't drink so it would have to be a Coke! I will surprise you one day and pop in!

Q. Who were the best players you played with and who were the best you coached?

The best player I played with at Watford was John Barnes. He was by far the best player to play for Watford in my time and I believe in their history. He was a genius who had everything. Pace, skill, awareness, vision and work rate you. You name it, and he had it! I was also lucky enough to play with Paul Gascoigne for England U21s and again he was a genius.

The best player I coached was Ashley Young and feel very proud of what he has gone on to achieve. My first year as Reserve coach was Ashley's first year as a professional and we spent a lot of time on the training pitch together. He was part of the reserve team who won the Premier Reserve League, that season which was a great achievement as we were the only non Premiership club to win the league. The next season Ray gave him his debut and he was then in the first team squad all the time, eventually becoming a regular in the team.

Q. Were there any players you worked with (playing or coaching) that surprised you by how much/little they went on to achieve?

There are always players that surprise you and go on to play at a higher level than you thought they would, but it can also work that players don't progress as you thought they would. It can be their fault, but it can be sometimes they don't get the opportunity. Here are 2 examples I will leave you to decide the reasons!

I believe that Craig Ramage should have played at a higher level as he had unbelievable talent. Tim Sherwood was sold at a young age and the opportunity opened up for him to eventually play for England.

Q. Vialli gave you your final appearance (albeit at left-back) and also initially brought you onto the staff. But what was that year like at the Vic?

I spoke about Luca in an earlier answer so won't add much more other than it was an interesting year for several reasons personally and also for the club.

Q. Nigel, in 1986 I won the Junior Hornets Obstacle Course race on Vic Road. It is still one of my proudest moments in life! I also bunked off school one day to watch WFC play Northchurch at cricket one summer. They are for me great memories. Did those kinds of events appeal to you and the playing staff at the time? To what extent did GT lay down the law on attendance at such events and looking back are there any funny or classic stories you can recall from such community facing events?

I enjoyed these events especially as I was a keen cricketer but not all the players enjoyed them. Graham Taylor felt it was a massive part of the club's identity to involve the community and it was compulsory for all players to attend whether they wanted to or not! I can't remember any really funny things that happened but whenever we played any other games or sports it became very competitive and we always wanted to win!!

Q. Who was the toughest winger you ever played against?

The winger who gave me a torrid 45 minutes once was Peter Beagrie when he played for Stoke. I did a little bit better in the 2nd half after a rolicking from the boss!!

Q. I also play right back from time to time for WIFC. What would your top 3 tips be?

1. Be a defender first!
2. Stop your winger getting any crosses in.
3. Supply your forwards and wingers.
4. Support your fellow defenders

Q. A number of players who were fans' favourites for Watford under Graham Taylor have gone on to become respected coaches. Besides yourself, John Ward, Kenny Jackett and Luther are immediate examples. Occasionally, Watford fans speak, misty-eyed, about GT's dynasty and how they would like to see people like these in charge at the club. Is there a GT 'dynasty'? Is it realistic to dream about one or more of these in the top job? Would it be good for the club? Could you ever see yourself managing Watford?

I think when you work for a very successful manager and want to become a coach or manager yourself; you will obviously take a lot of his ideas, philosophies and principles with you. I'm sure that if the job came up in the future, I'm certain that the names you mentioned would love to be considered for the role as it is the club close to all their hearts. Only time would tell if they would be good for the club but I'm sure that they would give everything to make it a successful tenure. I'm very happy at Reading FC at the moment but in football you can never predict the future.

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