

STONES

WEALDSTONE v TRURO CITY

ALAN O'BRIEN INTERVIEW

I was excited to come to Wealdstone..good crowds, lovely pitch.. it's like being back in the League again

ALAN O'BRIEN is not one to drop names into the conversation.

But in Wealdstone terms he can probably out-Glenn Little with some stand-out memories from his time playing with the 'big boys' at Newcastle in the Premier League, and internationally for the Republic of Ireland.

Our left-winger was happy to chat for an hour while driving north to Manchester last week, the sort of trip that is pretty much commonplace for a man who now buys and sells cars for a living.

"Yes, I'm used to spending a lot of time on the motorway now - not ideal if you've just got a back injury!" said the 32-year-old Dubliner. He laughed off my suggestion of a beady seat cover ("ideal for restoring circulation" according to the advertising blurb) that might hasten his return after the knock he received in the early stages against Whitehawk last week.

"Injuries seem to be part and parcel of my life as a footballer" he reflected. "I can't deny that that I've thought more than once in the last couple of years about hanging up my boots, but I just love the game so much. The craic, the training, the matches, even

the travelling... I still think I can affect games, get past people, get crosses into the box. I think I can play a decent part in getting Wealdstone into the National League.

"Bobby (Wilkinson) has been great for me, as much a friend as a manager. I was excited when he asked me over to play for Wealdstone - I came off the bench for Hungerford here last season and I really liked the place. The atmosphere is very good, the fans are really passionate and the pitch is lovely. It's a bit like playing for a League club again.

"And to be honest the squad here is impressive - technically as good as any I've seen since my days in the League. Bobby is right though: Sometimes you're going to have games that

are horrible to watch, because teams will come to spoil and upset our rhythm, so you have to be able to mix it up a bit. Find a way to win those games.

"He's the most passionate, most committed person I've ever met in football and his quest is to get that passion into the hearts of the players."

Alan has clearly not lost his own love of the game. So where did it all start and what is the story of his life in football?

"Wow, how far back do you want to go?! Well, it started for me at the age of 11 or 12... I didn't really play the game before that, I was more into Gaelic Football but then I was out having a kick-around with my mates in Dublin and somebody from Cabinteely FC asked to me to go and train with them. From

TIM PARKS on the man who's played on a bigger stage



STONES

WEALDSTONE v TRURO CITY ALAN O'BRIEN INTERVIEW

there it was on to St Josephs who are a youth football club with great links to the English game. A feeder club really.

"I played for the Republic at under 14s, under-15, under-16s and under-19s level, and Newcastle came in for me at the age of 16 when I moved away from my family in Dublin to live in the North East. A very young age to be away from home - it wasn't easy.

"After a couple of years of youth and reserve football I was sent out on loan to Carlisle United. I didn't want to go, I was only a boy but it helped me enormously - really toughened me up. I was in a men's environment and one where the results really mattered. I scored within ten minutes of my debut for Carlisle and that helped endear me to the fans but in truth I've not scored nearly as many goals as I should have done.. I've got a shocking record. Just five goals in all my appearances in the league and non-League!

"One great memory of nearly scoring was on my full international debut for the Republic of Ireland against Holland in August 2006. It was a friendly and I came off the bench in the second half against a fantastic Dutch side (van Persie, Huntelaar, Arjen Robben, van der Vaart etc etc) who were stuffing us 4-0. I got away on the left and hit a low shot that was saved by Edwin van der Saar, though Robbie Keane was in the middle complaining that I should have squared it. That would have been a notable addition to my goals tally. But we drew 0-0 while I was on the pitch!

"But yes, after I came back from that loan spell at Carlisle the Newcastle manager Graeme Souness put me straight into the first team squad. I thought he was a great manager, very straight and you were either good enough or you weren't. No messing about.

"I came off the bench a few



Alan in the colours of Newcastle, Hibernian (where he appeared as a Scottish Prem Panini sticker!), Swindon Town and Yeovil Town

times that first season (2005-6) in the Premier League but my only full 90 minutes was against West Ham the following season when we won 1-0. Alan Shearer got the winner close to the end".

(I Googled this game and it was in fact Alan Shearer's record-equalling 200th goal for Newcastle in front of a 50,000+ crowd. He broke Jackie Milburn's Toon goalscoring record in the next game)

Alan has an even better memory of his actual debut for Newcastle however. He was expecting to make his bow at left-back for the club at Old Trafford, marking Cristiano Ronaldo!

"Thankfully it didn't happen,

but we had a lot of injuries and I was down to wear the No.3 shirt against probably the best player in the world at that time. But commonsense won the day - Souey decided that to make my debut, out of position, at Old Trafford would have been a bit much. He drafted in David Edgar, a centre back, to play there and he did really well to keep Ronaldo quiet for the 90 minutes. Probably more than I would have done!"

In the summer of 2007, with Glenn Roeder now in charge at Newcastle, Alan was the subject of a bid by Hibernian (reportedly costing them £300,000 compensation). Roeder, with a small squad, didn't want him to go but

STONES

WEALDSTONE v TRURO CITY ALAN O'BRIEN INTERVIEW

wingers Damien Duff and Alberto Luque were ahead of him in the St James' Park pecking order and Alan just wanted to be playing matches.

"Was it a mistake to leave Newcastle? No, not a mistake as it was financially a good move for me and I knew I would be in the starting XI. But I was progressing at Newcastle and as it turned out Duff got injured that next season, which would have given me a chance to break through.

"But Hibs were a good club and to play at Parkhead against Celtic, and at Ibrox against Rangers are the sort of games you never forget."

Alan had started his first full game for the Republic only a few months earlier - and it turned out to be his last.

"Yeah, it was a real shame as I had played four times as substitute the previous season, coming on in European Championship qualifiers against Germany (lost 0-1 to a Podolski goal), Cyprus (lost 5-2) and the Czech Republic (drew 1-1 with a Kevin Kilbane equaliser) as well as the Holland game.

"Then we had a friendly in Boston, Massachusetts against Bolivia at the Foxborough Stadium. I was in the starting XI and Shane Long headed us in front from my left-wing cross (it's there on YouTube) after just 12 minutes.. it ended 1-1 and Bolivia used it as a warm-up for their Copa America match against Brazil the following week.

"So not a bad result. But it was my last involvement with the national team and possibly my move to Hibs at that time didn't help".

Alan suffered a bad knee injury in his first season at Easter Road, but played pretty much the whole of the 2008-9 season. He then asked to be released early from his contract to sign for Danny Wilson at League One Swindon Town - only for another aggravat-



Lookalike corner

HERE'S proof that our winger Alan O'Brien has been leading a secret double life as Belgian international centre forward Laurent Depoitre (above). When allegedly unavailable through injury, O'Brien has been zooming up the M1 and stepping into his customised platform boots, adding four inches to his height and turning out for Huddersfield in the Premier League.

"I suppose it had to come out sooner or later" said the Irishman, who admits he has struggled speaking Flemish in his other life. "Apart from the money there have been some benefits" said O'Brien. Have you met Depoitre's girlfriend Shana (above right)?"

ing injury, this time a hamstring, saw him make just 30 appearances in his two years at the County Ground.

Then it was off to League Two Yeovil - and then Gateshead in the Conference National. Not the most convenient of moves? I asked.

"Definitely not - especially as my ex-girlfriend had just had a baby girl and I was spending most of the week travelling from Swindon up to the North East! "Gateshead had made me a decent offer but it wasn't ideal. Before long I was back in Wiltshire and joining Bobby at Hungerford.

"I was there for five years and we had some good times, including three promotions. Then I signed for Chippenham last summer, just because I fancied a change. And now Wealdstone... Bobby is very persuasive!"

How have you found it adjusting to being part-time after so many years in the pro game? I

asked him.

"Well, I can't deny it's tough. I work with Gordon Greer, who plays for Kilmarnock and was my captain at Swindon, in our own business selling new and used cars. I was working for Mercedes and managed to sell lots of cars to friends in the game, just passing on Mercedes' number, and Gordon and I just thought: Why don't we work in the same business for ourselves?"

"It's going well. We can get our customers better deals than the dealerships and it's also a lot of fun. I live in Swindon, but I've got friends in London and my family in Dublin so I organise my time around training, and matches, and seeing my daughter who's now five. I pick her up from school on Fridays and I also have Sundays with her, which is great.

"Injuries are a pain, but I won't give up football just yet. Not while I've still got the passion".