

WEALDSTONE v BOGNOR/POOLE
THE BIG INTERVIEW

STONES



Bobby Wilkinson: We WILL play beautiful football..but only when we've earned the right

BOBBY Wilkinson's hunger for success is addictive. Spend an hour with the man, discussing tactics, the way ahead for the club and his footballing ideology and you can't help but buy into his vision.

The day after our Bank Holiday draw with Hemel Hempstead at the Vale - his first home match in charge - I took the chance to try and understand how he intends to transform the Stones into the National League juggernaut that every supporter was wishing for at the start of the season.

Wasn't it just bad luck that, under Gordon Bartlett, we lost a game we dominated at St Albans; drew a game we should have won at Gloucester; lost at home to Havant & Waterlooville despite having 70% possession and 80% of the goal attempts; and were then denied two penalties while conceding a soft one in the defeat by Chelmsford?

TIM PARKS meets Stones' bright new manager

'The stats don't lie' he said bluntly. 'We've won 17 league games at home in the last three years - when I was at Hungerford we went whole seasons without losing at home. The fact is that you have to earn the right to play beautiful football. It has to be a bit ugly at times.'

'I work so hard to win games! It's all about reacting to who you're playing and knowing how to get the points... people labelled Hungerford a 'long ball side' and 'no frills' but we had some great flair players there - the difference is that you have

to earn that right to play the pretty football, you can't just go out and play pretty football and expect to win.

'When teams have played Wealdstone recently they set up to let you play football, but it's not hurting them, it's not turning their back four. I've seen the videos of the Stones games this season and we're always being caught on the break. Our record at home has been poor for a reason, and it will take a while to change the whole mentality around the team, around the club.'

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'I know how to win games and win leagues. That is my trade. I have to drill into the players, first off, that we don't lose. Fitness is a huge part of that and this squad is nowhere near fit enough... pre-season, high-intensity training is the start and it enables you to close teams down so quick, so hard that they cannot play against you.'

'In my first game in charge, at Eastbourne, we played a quick passing game as they were the right tactics but the fitness levels meant we couldn't keep that going for more than an hour.'

'You should be playing passes into the right areas and pressurising teams. You win your battles - on Saturday against Hemel we lost the first four tackles of the game! In a big local derby with a massive crowd willing us on, in my first home game and we lose our first four tackles!'

'Was the thinking around Jerome Okimo coming into midfield specifically to combat Hemel's power in the middle?' I asked him.

'Yes, exactly! I set us up with Jerome going head to head with their No.7 James Caloczi, who is a real danger in the air. We handled it well in the first 15 minutes, keeping it tight then becoming a bit more expansive in the next 15 and really, we should have been 1-0 or 2-0 up with the good chance that Abs Eisa missed, and then Shaq's header just over the bar. That would have settled us down, then we'd have kept it tight and seen the game out. Maybe even have seen a bit of pretty football because these boys can play, believe me!'

'But as it was, Hemel scored. I was restricted by not really having anyone on the bench who could change things, but we brought on Matty Whichelow and he did really well - a great freekick delivery as well that led to our

equaliser - and in the end that was a good result against a very decent Hemel team.'

'Of course I wanted to get the three points but things don't always go to plan. We failed to score the early chances and then conceded a goal that was clearly handball... but to come back the way we did showed real character.'

"I set us up to bully you last season" Bobby admits. "Stones were weak then, physically and mentally"

The style that Hungerford employed to beat the Stones 2-0 last season was a classic example of Bobby Wilkinson's pragmatic style, and he freely admits it.

'I set us up to bully you in that game last season' he says.

'Because the Stones were perceived as mentally weak?' I asked. 'No, just weak. It's something you have to apply all over the pitch. Take the Hemel game again, there was a drop ball and we passed it back to their keeper - who kicked it long and they nearly scored! I was so angry... you hit those into the corner for a throw and then press up to contain

them. It's basics. Just basics, but it has to be drilled into these players.'

So what were the circumstances surrounding your surprise departure from Hungerford so early into this season?' I asked Bobby. 'Was it all about the play-off disappointment last season or were you hoping for a move to a bigger club?'

'Yes, it was all about the play-off fiasco and as for leaving when I did... I was expecting to have a few weeks out of the game while being aware that a couple of clubs wanted to get me on board.'

'I should really have gone at the end of the season after the farce of the extra seats stopped us from taking part in the play offs... I will never forgive the club for what they did.'

'They basically didn't have belief in our ability to get into a play-off position. When I first came to that club I was told that we'd never attract decent crowds, never get into the Southern League Prem, never get into the National League - well my attitude to that is to prove people wrong and I did that. But I was badly let down.'

'I was ready for a step up to a higher level and Torquay United were in touch. And then Peter Marsden. Peter is a great chairman and his vision for this football club matches mine - Wealdstone are the biggest non-League club in the country, in my opinion, a massive club with so much potential. And you've achieved so much in the past.'

But it's all about getting on with the job in hand now: there is so much that needs doing. I've got to change the whole ethos of the club - to install a mindset that says 'We don't lose'.



Bobby (centre) with his backroom team: From left, Ian Hobbs, Stacy Wood, Mike Percival and Jamie Leacock

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Smiles on faces: Coaches Jamie Leacock and Mike Percival lead a lively pre-match warm-up

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“I really want to get a ‘family’ feel here ..my wife and kids will be at games and we’re all in it together”

‘At Eastbourne I got the impression that the players didn’t think we could win. We played well but there wasn’t the clinical desire.

‘At Hungerford last year we lost 5-0 at St Albans on November 1st, and we told the players that would never happen again - we then went unbeaten for 19 games to get into a play-off position and never relinquished it.

‘Yes, Wealdstone had a good unbeaten run in March and April this year but the season was cooling off then, the pressure was off. Going unbeaten at the turn of the year is what I call a great unbeaten run, when there is

everything to play for and you have to be in the right frame of mind every game.

‘The season is not a sprint so I say this: Judge us on the last day of the season and you might well be saying, well Bobby it wasn’t pretty to begin with but things have got better week by week, the crowds have doubled, the place is buzzing and we’re in a play-off position.

‘I’m not going to make any rash predictions but what I can promise is an awful lot of hard work, on and off the pitch to take each game as it comes and do our utmost to win every one of them. And then see where that takes us.’

Stop Press: Bobby in the aftermath of WSM

WEALDSTONE suffered their first defeat under the new boss at Weston Super-Mare on Tuesday night: a shocking 5-1 reverse. This is what the manager told Stones TV’s Chris Woods...

“There was no heart, no passion and I’d like to apologise to the fans who travelled three hours down here on a Tuesday night, took a day off work to watch that surrender.

“I’d like to not pay the players this week because they didn’t deserve paying after that.. on Saturday yes, they were excellent but in the

space of three days to then produce that is baffling. We gave up... six, seven players maybe actually gave up in the second half and that’s a disgrace. I hold my hands up to mistakes too: I took off Jerome Okimo to bring on attacking players and that unbalanced the middle - we’ll be working even harder in the next few days to get it right. The FA Cup draw v Faversham doesn’t interest me now... All that interests me now is getting two wins this weekend - we’d better bloody be trying to get two wins anyway!”

● Bobby is employed full time by Wealdstone. He lives just outside Reading, Berkshire with his wife of 18 years Natasha and their three children Jessica (10), Lucas (9) and three year old Logan.

‘Most games they’ll all be there, along with my mum and dad - I want a family feel to Wealdstone, a sense that we’re all in it together.’ says Bobby.

● Will he be able to bring in a few new faces to augment the squad? ‘Yes I’m looking at that right now - we need a centre-back, a centre-forward and maybe a wide player. There is a bit of wriggle room - and I’ve not gone cold on Mustafa Teryaki - if we can get him in I’d like to see what he can do. To be honest I don’t know the whole situation around him. Other than that it’s complicated!’

● Bobby has brought his own back-room team over from Hungerford. They are his No.2 Jamie Leacock, who he’s known for seven years since becoming his first signing at Hungerford - where he was also Bobby’s team captain. Coach Mike Percival Mike has worked with Bobby for two years while Ian Hobbs (goalkeeping coaching) has been an ally for seven years. Physio Stacey ‘is excellent’ according to Bobby - she has her own practice and had worked at Hungerford for five years.

‘We are a family really’ says Bobby. ‘It’s all about loyalty and getting the right people around you. We make a great team’.