

It didn't take long to unearth Matt Day's guilty secret. No, not a furtive addiction to watching Bake Off, or a superstition involving Superman underpants or being the last to leave the changing room.

Whisper it quietly, but Matt is a Manchester United fan.

'Why?' I had to ask him when we had a chat earlier this week. 'Why on earth would you follow Man U when you live in Basingstoke and were brought up in Andover?'

He laughed and said: 'Well, I suppose it is down to my dad who grew up in the 60s watching that great United side with Best, Law and Charlton. He sort of passed it on to me. And then, ten years ago, I found myself playing against them for Oxford United!'

What? How come? I knew our new signing from Hungerford - who came across to the Vale two weeks ago with new boss Bobby Wilkinson - had started his career as a youth at Portsmouth, but surely Oxford were in the Conference National then?

'Yeah, the story is that after spending ten years at Pompey and signing my YTS forms with them, I didn't get close to playing in the first team. Lots in the reserves, but Portsmouth were then in the Premier League and the nearest I got was a game at Bolton when I was in the squad to travel... and then Steve Stone declared himself fit!

'So I was off to Oxford United at the age of 19 when Jim Smith - who had been at Pompey - took over as manager at the Kassam, along with two of his assistants Andy Awford and Sean North. Jim Smith is a great man, he believed in me and I had two years at Oxford as a virtual ever-present. The first year we reached the Conference National play-offs but lost to Exeter City over two legs... we beat them 1-0 away and were leading 1-0 at home with ten minutes remain-

## 'There's a real passion here to succeed... and that's why I'm buzzing to join at the Bobby Stones



### TIM PARKS gets the lowdown on our new centreback

ing when Exeter scored twice to force extra time.

'It went to penalties and our goalkeeper, Billy Turley, missed the decisive kick. Absolutely heartbreaking. But I've got some great memories of Oxford including one Boxing Day when we had the record non-League attendance of over 11,000 for a

game against Woking. Though it was a dreadful 0-0 draw!

'As for that Man Utd game... a dream for me. It was a pre-season friendly just after the 2006 World Cup, when Ronaldo had got all that stick for apparently winking after getting Wayne Rooney sent off in the England- Portugal game.

## WEALDSTONE v FAVERSHAM 10-MINUTE INTERVIEW

# STONES

Rooney's first appearance after that was in this friendly - organised I think by Jim Smith and Alex Ferguson who are best mates - and we had even more in the Kassam for that one, over 13,000.

"To this day I can still name the United line-up: Ben Foster in goal, Phil Bardsley and Gabriel Heinze the full backs, John O'Shea and Silvestre in the middle; Ronaldo on one wing and Keiran Richardson on the other; Darren Fletcher and Dave Jones in central mid and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Louis Saha up front. We lost 4-1 and Rooney got two of the goals... unbelievable to play against those guys. Especially when you're a fan!"

Matt's third year at Oxford was curtailed when Smith was sacked as manager, the Oxford chairman demanding promotion back to the Football League, and he moved into part-time football with a short spell at Eastleigh. "Yes, I fell out of love with football a little bit, I wasn't getting much game time and when Hungerford asked me to sign it made a lot of sense. I was living in Newbury, just down the road, and just wanted to play. I also wanted to concentrate a bit on my job (Matt's a self-employed plumber and pipe-fitter).

"We were in the Southern League Division One, and when Bobby (Wilkinson) took over we started to go places. We were organised, kept a lot of clean sheets and got promoted twice through the play-offs to make it to the Conference South. We showed fantastic character to get promoted - we were always up against bigger clubs but won through.

"That first promotion year, 2011-12, we lost twice to Merthyr in the league and they thought they were going to stroll through the play-off final - they'd even booked their end of season celebration in Magaluf. That was a great incentive for us and we beat them 3-1 after extra time. Then we played Leamington in the Southern Prem play-off

final 18 months ago, went 1-0 down but came back to win 2-1. And our first season in the Vanarama South last year, we were relegation favourites but finished sixth. All based on Bobby's organisation, a team ethic ... and a lot of ability too."

At first glance, Matt (pictured right at Oxford) is a solid, no-frills defender but inside that stocky frame is a central midfielder bursting to get out.

Eagle-eyed fans will have spotted (particularly at East Thurrock on his Stones debut) his trademark 50-yard diagonal balls and a fierce shot at goal.

"Yeah, I played further forward as a teenager at Portsmouth and had a range of passing, and the ability to win the ball in the air that had me earmarked to be a centre half before too long... and to be fair, when I was put in there I really enjoyed it. I've been a No.5 ever since"

"I've noticed you've scored a few goals in your career" I asked him. "Is that mainly getting on the end of dead balls and freekicks?"

"No, not really. They've been mainly long-rangers. I got one at



Crawley in the Conference from 35 yards that's still on YouTube... a 91st minute winner!"

Matt was also an England C team (non-League) international while at Oxford Utd, and scored on his first appearance in Bosnia - another 30-yard belter that wasn't enough to avoid a 4-2 defeat.

The Bosnia side - with several senior players who had been omitted from the full international side the previous day - proved too strong for Paul Fairclough's team. Matt had also been named to play in Helsinki against Finland for the England C's 2-0 win that year, but had to pull out with a knee injury.

And just to underline his credentials, Matt was named in the Non-League Paper's Southern League Team of the Year in 2016 for his displays at centre back for promotion-winning Hungerford.

Not a bad CV then. At the age of 30, is he finally ready to put some silverware on his mantelpiece with Wealdstone?

"That would be nice!" he laughed. "Well, I've come here because the Stones have ambition. When Bobby left Hungerford it was a surprise to everyone, and yes I was hoping he'd want me to come over here to join him as we'd had those six great years together and I was his captain. I'm buzzing to be honest.

"This is a great club, the Chairman is terrific, the fans are terrific, and we're all committed to achieving things for Wealdstone. I didn't know much about the club before last season except that there is a real passion here to succeed. The fans demand it, and now Bobby's here demanding it too."

## Matt day factfile

**Matt Day is 30 years old, and lives in Basingstoke with his wife Rachel. They bought a house there only a few months ago after previously living in Newbury. He has never played in the Football League (or Premier League) while at Portsmouth but appeared 79 times for Oxford United in the National League, scoring six times, and six times for Eastleigh in the Conference South. His time at Portsmouth, incidentally, pre-dates Stones legend Glenn Little who signed for Harry Redknapp's Prem side just as Matt was leaving.**