

STONES

WEALDSTONE v BRACKLEY TOWN THE BIG INTERVIEW: CHARLIE TOWNSEND

A record 514 games for Wealdstone..32 England caps.. why no-one deserves the title of 'WFC Legend' like Charlie Townsend



Charlie lifts the Middlesex Senior Cup half a century ago. This was about the last time we won it!



On the day the current crop of Stones stars sit on the brink of Wembley glory, **TIM PARKS** gets the lowdown on one of the greatest amateur footballers in England history

There is no doubt in Charlie Townsend's mind as to how he finally got his hands on an Amateur Cup Winner's medal in 1966.

"At the beginning of the 65-66 season I asked my fiancé Margaret if, when she went to church, she'd 'have a word' about me getting that medal" said Charlie. "She joked that if I gave her a coin for the collection plate, she would do so. So I gave her half a crown on a few occasions... and it worked because after 66 years of trying we won the cup!"

Charlie is just a few months short of his 80th birthday but is as sharp and clear-minded as when he was running the Stones midfield for an astonishing 12 years with his great pal Hughie Lindsay.

I finally managed to catch up with him at the Supporters Club's 60th anniversary dinner - and could only apologise

that I hadn't interviewed him for this programme earlier. With a record 514 appearances to his name, Charlie is a genuine Wealdstone legend who deserves a book about his exploits rather than a seven-page feature in the matchday magazine.

But the man himself is quiet and self-effacing. He was born in Bushey and lived there for 28

years before moving to North Harrow - where he's lived ever since.

He played the huge majority of his career in a blue Stones shirt and, of course, the white shirt of the England amateur side, winning 32 caps over a period of seven years. And he even represented Great Britain in Olympic qualification matches, being involved in the infamous Greek tragedy of 1964 when GB were outrageously denied a place at the Tokyo Olympics.

"That was one of the big disappointments of my career. Hughie (Lindsay) had been involved in the 1960 Olympic finals, when Great Britain were knocked out by a terrific Brazil side, and myself, Hughie and our Wealdstone centre-back Johnny Ashworth were all

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51 years of wedded bliss! Charlie and his wife Margaret

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in the GB side that came so close to qualifying for Tokyo.

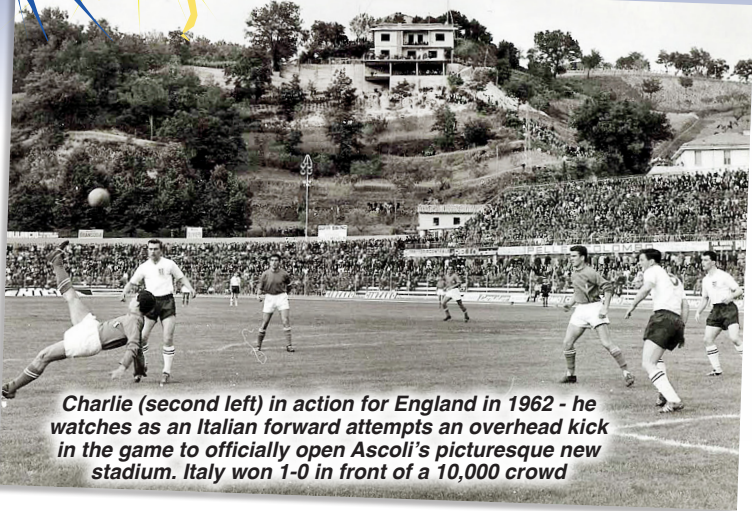
"We faced Greece in a play-off semi-final over two legs - we beat them 2-1 at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge in front of a big crowd, and then there were over 30,000 at the second leg in Athens. It was hostile. It was 1-1 with 15 minutes to go but then the referee gifted them two penalties ... we went on the attack but they caught us on the break and added two more to end up 5-3 winners on aggregate.

"But the real drama was the following week when it was discovered they had fielded SIX players who weren't even eligible to play!

"The Olympic committee kicked them out, leaving us free to face Czechoslovakia in the playoff final. But the timescale was now too tight, after Greece's appeal, to fit in our matches so the Czechs were allowed a walkover to reach the finals. So frustrating!"

Disappointment figures highly in Charlie's Wealdstone career. It was the disappointment of losing 4-1 to unfancied Alvechurch in the Amateur Cup last 16 - only a year before we went to Wembley and won the trophy - that led the tigerish midfielder to ask his wife for divine guidance.

"I was getting desperate" admits Charlie. "That match at Alvechurch was awful. We were favourites but Alvechurch had some very good players. We actually had a penalty at 0-0 and I should have taken the kick, but I just didn't fancy it on that heavy pitch. Bernie Bremer, our brilliant winger, stepped up and blasted it over the bar! I knew then it wasn't



Charlie (second left) in action for England in 1962 - he watches as an Italian forward attempts an overhead kick in the game to officially open Ascoli's picturesque new stadium. Italy won 1-0 in front of a 10,000 crowd

going to be our day, and their centre forward John Mason scored four times. The crowd was enormous in a tiny ground, right on top of the pitch, about 7,000 I think and we struggled the whole afternoon.

"But then we faced them in the semi-final the next season, at Stamford Bridge, and after we had scored what was a lucky goal - Brian Allen's cross flew straight in - and then survived a missed penalty, me and Hughie decided to just knock the ball around and keep possession. We had been guilty in the past of chasing the game when we didn't need to, but this time we were composed and it paid off. We were in the final!"

A couple of years ago in an interview, Stones full-back Mickey Doyle reckoned that Hendon's early goal in the Cup Final that year actually had the effect of relaxing the team. Did Charlie agree?

"It's hard to say. I know that we played some good stuff that afternoon though. We got right back at them and a big factor was an injury to their right-half Dave Shacklock - there were no substitutes in those days so he was really just a passenger out on the wing. It gave us a man advantage and in the end we scored the goals we deserved to win 3-1. That was a wonderful feeling."

Charlie was a carpenter the whole of his working life, beginning as an apprentice with the firm of Field & Hemley in Bushey village. He then served his national service, and worked for several local building companies before joining Guinness, based in Park Royal, in 1970 thanks to a suggestion from Wealdstone team mate Matt Farrell. "I joined the company's

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Stones players in the Wembley snow two days before the '66 final

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MEMBERS OF THE PARTY	
OFFICIALS:	
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Backs:	J. Martin (Wimbledon) Captain M. Neale (Enfield) D. Gambin (Sutton United)
Half Backs:	A. D'Arcy (Enfield) R. K. Law (Wimbledon) L. PICKING J. Ashworth (Wealdstone) E. Powell (Sutton United)
Forwards:	R. Figg (Barnet) R. Townsend (Wealdstone) K. Gray (Leytonstone) L. Worley (Wycombe Wanderers) A. Harding (Barnet) H. M. Lindsay (Wealdstone) P. Hodges (Wycombe Wanderers)

Charlie has kept the itineraries from his England tours... this one is from his second Italy trip to Liguria in 1964

maintenance team as a carpenter, and stayed there for 24 years until we were offered early retirement. Then I worked for myself, plus a few days a week maintenance at Nower Hill High School in Pinner, where my wife was also working.

"The fact that I was able to get time off work in my 20s meant I was available to play representative football - but it was often hectic. I couldn't drive but the wonderful Dick Kelly, a committee man at Wealdstone, put himself out to give me lifts everywhere, even up to Bisham Abbey for England training.

"Although it was a great honour to be selected, playing in these games often meant losing quite a lot of money as you weren't recompensed for loss of earnings.

"For example, in 1965 I was delighted to be one of two amateurs chosen to play for a Football Association XI that travelled to the Channel Islands to mark the Jersey FA's jubilee

year. I left home at Bushey on the Monday and caught the Green Line down to Marble Arch and then walked to Lancaster Gate, to the FA. We had lunch, then got taken to the airport, flew to Jersey, stayed overnight, played on Wednesday then travelled back on Thursday and was back at work for Friday. So I missed four days' work. The FA gave me three shillings for the bus fare and one meal allowance but playing for England and the FA were unforgettable experiences."

Charlie had the thrill of being managed by Alf Ramsey for that game - just a year before he steered England to World Cup glory at Wembley.

"He was very quiet, very humble and thanked us for travelling. We didn't receive any coaching as such, but then teams weren't really tactically aware in those days."

So were the top amateur

teams of that era actually just a collection of individuals?

"Well, when I first came to Wealdstone the training simply involved coaches barking at you 'Run! Run! Run!' I think the idea was to make us hungry for the ball, but all it did was make us knackered. We played a 4-2-4 system at Wealdstone in the 60s with me and Hughie in the middle and when we went to play for England they adopted the same line-up. We had licence to play as we saw fit.

"But it used to be a running joke at Wealdstone because we'd kick off and I'd shout across to Micky Doyle (our full-back) 'This is the last time I'll be within earshot of you Mick!'

"We'd just attack, attack, attack. It was a great side to play in".

That conversation brought us inevitably to the 6-5 FA Cup win over Southern League professionals Stevenage in 1965,

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England line-up for their game v a Ligurian XI (in a change strip of all red) in the 1964 tour, which they won 4-2 with Charlie second from right in the front row. Left: He leaps to challenge the France keeper in a game England lost 3-4

when Wealdstone were 5-3 down with five minutes to play. Hughie Lindsay cracked in the winner from a freekick 35 yards from goal.

"Yes, that's up there in my top three memories but the best thing I've heard about it was from Ray Corner (long-time Stones fan) who was sponsoring a home game a couple of weeks ago. Apparently it was the first Stones game he'd ever seen and he said 'if it's always like this, I'm coming every week', and he pretty much has" laughed Charlie.

A couple more bad memories though: Firstly the 2-0 Amateur Cup semi-final defeat to Chesham United at Craven Cottage in 1968.

"Oh, that was desperate" recalled Charlie. "We were so much the favourites after winning the cup two years before but we just didn't perform. Unbelievable really. What made it worse was that I was working on a block of flats in Bushey Heath with the Chesham goalkeeper, Denis Wells, and had a chat with him the day before the game

- and then sheepishly went into work on the Monday and avoided his eye. I felt awful.

"But almost worse was the following year when we reached the quarter-finals and had to travel up to Tyneside to play North Shields who were a tough, tough side. Another big, noisy crowd on a filthy wet, cold and muddy day, but we were surviving and it was a real injustice when they were awarded a

'Our keeper Andy Williams was sent off for arguing and I didn't volunteer to take over in goal.. but the next thing you knew I was pulling on the green jersey, sopping wet and caked in mud, to face a penalty...'

penalty.

Our keeper, Andy Williams, kept protesting to the referee and should have stopped when he was booked - but he carried on and was sent off. So we had to find a goalie. Bernie Bremer

was our stand-in keeper but he'd already been substituted, injured, and I certainly didn't put my hand up to play in goal but the next thing you knew, the green shirt is being handed to me!

"Well I'm just 5ft 7ins and Andy's shirt seemed enormous - and sopping wet and caked with mud. It took an age to get it on, and the sleeves rolled up, and all the time our manager Dave Underwood (who had been a goalkeeper at Watford) was standing behind the goal and coaching me. 'Stand a foot to the right of the middle of the goal' he was saying, 'and then dive to the big side'.

"Well he hadn't even stopped saying this when their guy took the penalty and skied it over the bar!"

Sadly, Charlie's story had another disappointing ending when the Geordies bundled in the only goal of the game from a contentious corner in the last few minutes. "Dave Bromley was pushed over when the ball

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was in the air, and he fell into me and I couldn't get near it. A bloke called Brian Joyce stuck in the loose ball and our Wembley dream was over again".

Charlie was 31 then, and it was his last chance of repeating his Amateur Cup Final heroics of '66. He describes himself as 'the workhorse' alongside the flamboyant, sharp-shooting Lindsay but Charlie had a fantastic range of passing and was regarded as the best user of the ball in the amateur game throughout the 1960s.

His link-up play with strikers Bobby Childs and Jim Cooley, and passes to wingers Brian Allen and Bernie Bremer were a feature of that Final against Hendon - despite the Wembley pitch being very heavy, having been covered in unseasonal snow just two days before kick-off.

That defeat at North Shields in March 1969 was a deciding factor in Charlie deciding to sever his connection with the club. "I needed a new challenge - I'd been at Wealdstone since 1957, and the former Wealdstone coach Vince Burgess had gone to Hitchin Town and asked me to come over. I played there for a season but came back to the Stones in the last amateur season (1970-71) playing every game. But I was never going to turn pro.

"Instead I signed for Hayes, who had stepped into Wealdstone's place in the Isthmian League and after a couple of years Bob Gibbs, the manager



Charlie is measured for his Cup Final suit in 1966. "We got our England suits from Simpsons in Piccadilly but the Amateur Cup Final suits came from the Co-Op!"

there, asked me to become a coach. I also did a bit of scouting and watching future opposition (which was rare for a club at that level) and in 1972 Hayes had an FA Cup run which saw us beat Bristol Rovers 1-0 in the First Round Proper and then get drawn against Reading in Round Two. The club flew me up to watch Reading at Bolton a week before the cup tie, and I met Football League chairman Alan Hardaker in the boardroom who couldn't believe little Hayes would sent a scout all that way.

"But even better, on the flight back from Manchester there was George Best and Barbara Castle (the Labour Home secretary) sitting just across from me!"

Charlie's dossier helped Hayes draw 0-0 at Elm Park, but they lost the home replay 1-0.

He also helped discover some raw talent, watching Cyrille Regis at Molesey before his

move to Hayes, and nurturing the potential of another striker - Robin Friday - before Hayes sold him to Reading on the back of his performance in those FA Cup ties. "Friday became a real cult hero at Reading but he just burnt out too quickly" said Charlie.

So was amateur football in your day slower than the current game, or more skillful?

"Well, I watched Wealdstone through the 70s and 80s - I came back to help run the reserves in the early 70s - and the players were definitely more aggressive in the semi-pro game. It would have been interesting to compete with players

like Willie Watson, Paul Bowgett and Vinnie Jones. The Wealdstone side that won the double in '85 was technically very good but also very physical.

"That's the conversation I always have with Hughie, when we meet up to watch a game. Would we have been good enough? I think the players from every successive era believe they are the best and certainly they are fitter now, but if we'd been around these days I suppose we'd have adapted."

So what is he up to these days, on the cusp of his 80th birthday? Charlie and Margaret have raised daughters Jane and Sarah from the family home in North Harrow and they have three grandchildren.

He stays active with aquarobics classes at his local sports centre and says: "I've been a member now for 18 years. I

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Portrait

No. 1—“Charlie” Townsend

by F. N. S. Creek

This is the first article which we hope to publish about players and others who have served the game over a long period.

ALTHOUGH HE WAS christened Rodney Townsend, the England Amateur International with 32 amateur caps prefers to be known by the affectionate nickname of Charlie, a pseudonym which thousands of his admirers have bestowed on him during the past decade. “Charlie” undoubtedly has a more familiar sound than “Rodney”, and it certainly seems appropriate for the subject of this article. Today, even in the programmes of important matches, he is listed as Charlie Townsend, and, to be quite honest, I had never heard his genuine Christian name until I began to write the story of his football life.

Charlie was born in 1938, and he learned his early football at Bushey Manor School, when he played for the First XI, and then for Watford Juniors. At the age of 19 he joined his first senior club, Wealdstone, and, as I saw for myself in those five Amateur Cup-ties with Hertford Town a few months ago, he is still playing for them. Such loyalty is unfortunately all too rare nowadays, but it is typical of Charlie and his cheerful attitude to the game.

He started senior football as a centre-forward, but he had not the height to compete with tall centre-halves for the high balls. His responsibilities as leader, too, somewhat cramped his

style and, after a couple of seasons, he converted to wing-half, where his terrier-like determination to chase every ball was more usefully employed. His early training as a forward has stood him in good stead, however, for during his career he has successfully played not only as an orthodox wing-half but also as the link man in 4-2-4 formations and in both middle and front lines of 4-3-3. Occasionally, too, he has been a pure defender.



I happened to be the England Amateur Team Manager when we first decided to take what was then considered to be the revolutionary step of adopting 4-2-4. I remember that it did not take long to coach the rear four in their duties in this new formation, but it was no easy task to explain and then put into practice the duties of the two link-men. Luckily for me, we had available Charlie Townsend and Hugh Lindsay, two young but, in those days six years ago, experienced Internationals. The change-over was made when we were at Whitley Bay for

the Amateur International Tournament in 1963. It was a rare and opportune occasion, because we had the whole England team there for ten days, together with Scotland, West Germany, Italy, France, the Republic of Ireland, Switzerland and Holland. It did not take long for

Lindsay and Townsend to couple up as an ideal mid-field pair. Lindsay provided skill and shrewdness, while Charlie gave a non-stop performance of energy and vigour. Mentally and physically, each was the perfect foil to the other, and I am delighted now to have the opportunity to say how grateful I was to them for playing the key rôle in many England teams. As one member of the Amateur Selection Committee said: “If Lindsay and Townsend were off form, we lost; if they were on form, we won.”

His International Record

In the course of his career, Charlie has so far collected 32 caps for England. The list of these Internationals shows something of his travels—six against Scotland, five against Wales, four each against Northern Ireland, France, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland, and one each against Italy, West Germany, Iceland, Austria and New Zealand. He took part in the preliminary rounds of the Olympic Soccer Tournaments in 1964 and 1968, and he won an Amateur Cup medal in 1966 when Wealdstone beat Hendon by 3-1 at Wembley. In addition, he has played in F.A. and Isthmian League representative matches on numerous occasions.

Yet the above list of his honours and awards gives no indication of Charlie's happy and light-hearted behaviour on tour abroad. It is easy to be cheerful when a match has been won, but it is quite a different matter when things have gone wrong. I well remember a tour to Italy, the Netherlands and Germany in 1962, when the organisation in Italy was, to say the least, unsatisfactory. A three-hour wait at Rome Airport was followed by a hair-raising six-hour journey through the Apennines in an antique bus. At the end of that nightmare trip, our party was lodged in a very inferior hotel where our first meal—breakfast—was, by English standards, ruined by the cooking. This grim situation was saved when Charlie led some of the players into the kitchen, and, to the interest and amusement of the hotel staff, proceeded to demonstrate exactly how we liked our eggs and bacon to be cooked. Nobody, even the Italian chef, could object to Charlie's light-hearted fun and banter, invaluable assets in all emergencies.

A Reliable Player

It speaks volumes for his style of play that he has never succumbed to tricks or gimmicks; he has never been an expert dribbler or a deadily accurate shot or a spectacularly long throw-in from touch or a brilliant swerver or side-stepper. Yet he has reached the top ranks of amateur football through his reliability; not for him the brilliant exhibition one week and the complete flop the next. His various team managers have always been able to bank on this dependability; they have known that Charlie will always give of his best.

Apart from the thrills of his first England cap and his Amateur Cup-winners' medal, Charlie rates highly his selection to represent The Football Association against the Jersey F.A. in 1965. On that occasion he was one of two amateurs who, together with nine top-class professionals, formed the side under Sir Alfred Ramsey's guidance. Today, at the age of 30, it is to be hoped that this whole-hearted player will enjoy several more years of active soccer. I, for one, sincerely hope that when his playing days are over he will continue to serve the game he loves. Men like Charlie Townsend are few and far between.

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Charlie's wife, Margaret, passed on this wonderful tribute from the Football Association magazine. Written by Norman Creak who was manager of the England Amateur team at the time (and himself widely respected throughout the game), it is testimony to the regard in which the Wealdstone wing-half was held.

“Men like Charlie Townsend are few and far between”.

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used to go to the gym five days a week but now it's just two or three times. You have to try to stay in a bit of shape".

It's over 60 years now since the midfielder signed for the Stones from Watford, where he had been a centre-forward in the Juniors. "Len Goulden was the Watford first team manager but he got the sack in 1957 and came over to manage Wealdstone, partly I think because he also ran a cafe in Wealdstone. I played the first five games and scored two goals and then was dropped - then Edgar Francis moved me to inside right in the reserve team - I got back into the first team at inside right and the following season moved to right half.

"The team was picked by a committee of ten in those days, no-one had the final say but when I was picked for Middlesex my career took off. I wore the No.4 shirt for the vast majority of my dozen years at Wealdstone, with a few at left-half (No.6) and some further forward at inside-right."

He wore that same shirt at Wembley in '66 but, surprisingly enough, it wasn't the best pitch he's ever played on.

"I've played abroad for England and some of those pitches - in Genoa, and Germany particularly, were excellent. Wembley was very heavy after the snow and you can see why so many players



A very young Charlie trots onto the Lower Mead pitch in one of his early appearances. "That's my army haircut" he jokes

got cramp playing on it. I was too slow to get that!

"On the amateur circuit there were some grounds, like Sutton with its running track, where the crowd needed binoculars to see the game. And others like Lower Mead where it was very atmospheric with the stands behind the goals - particularly for the Christmas games with Hendon. One year we had 6,000 at Lower Mead on Christmas morning and 4,000 for the return at Hendon on Boxing day - people would look forward to those games but there would

always be a Christmas Eve event at the social club so you might get home in the early hours knowing you had to be reporting at ten o'clock the next morning. At least I had Dick Kelly to drive me..."

Did the slope at Lower Mead make a difference to the opposition? "No I actually never noticed it; we seemed to score as many attacking the Elmslie End as going 'downhill'. It certainly wasn't as pronounced as Barnet's Underhill. My favourite though was Arsenal, where we played a few times in the London Challenge Cup and in the London Senior Cup final. They actually had underfloor heating in the Highbury changing rooms!"

I told Charlie we'd sort him out a 'stadium tour' when he next comes to the Vale. He saw the Dartford game a couple of weeks ago and should be here today for the big Trophy match. "I played at Ruislip Manor 50 years ago when it was very soft and muddy but the pitch is definitely better than it was then. I had a walk on it when the club staged the Anniversary Dinner of the Amateur Cup Final and we all lined up on the halfway line. That was a lovely do and it was great to see all the old faces again - whether it's here or at Lower Mead, Wealdstone holds a place in my heart and it always will."

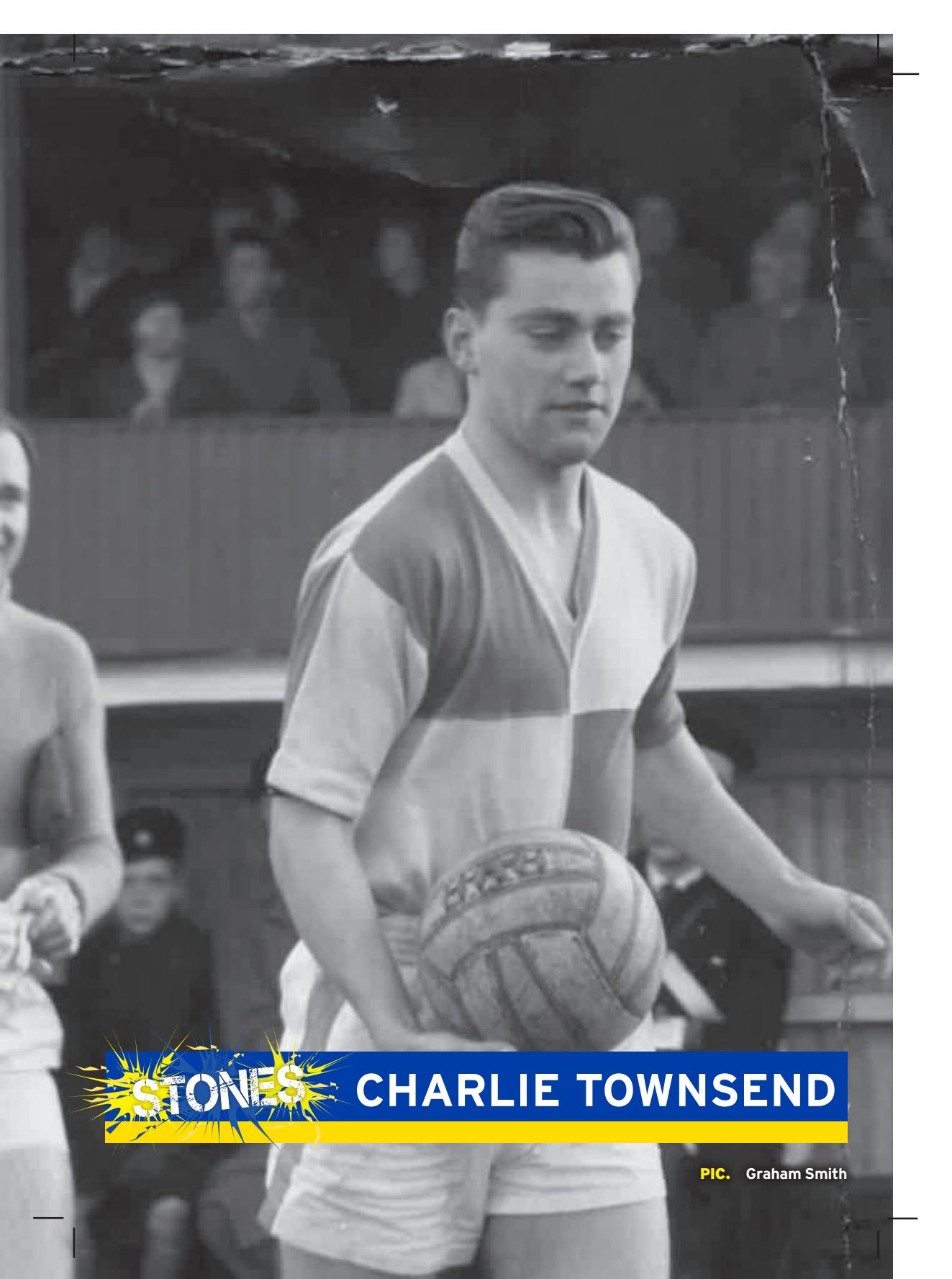
Charlie's wife of 51 years, Margaret, was watching Wealdstone long before the midfielder ever appeared in the blue and white! Her dad, Stan Savage, and her three brothers were football-mad, and started to watch their local side after moving down from Northumberland to Stanmore after the war.

"I first came to games at Lower Mead from the age of 12" she said, "but I first met Charlie when he was playing with one of my brothers in a Sunday League Cup Final at Finchley FC in 1963. He was very quiet but he asked me along to the Wealdstone FC dinner that season - and I could see all the players peering

down the table at us and grinning. On the way out Vinnie Burgess (the Wealdstone coach) joked that I must be his sister as he'd never invited anyone before!"

Margaret was extraordinarily devoted both to Charlie and the Stones, watching every single game he played or the club, in an era when WAGS were just something a dog's tail did.

"Not many wives and girlfriends watched the games" she reflected, "but it was wonderful watching Charlie play. I enjoyed every one. He talks down his ability but he really was hugely respected in that amateur era."



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CHARLIE TOWNSEND

PIC. Graham Smith