

the big interview BY TIM PARKS

IT'S GLEN LITTLE

I've never played in this league or been to any of these grounds before.. every game has been an adventure'



▲ Glen is cynically fouled (this time by the Brazilian Emerson) as Portsmouth came within 30 seconds of beating AC Milan five years ago

WHEN news filtered through that the Stones were negotiating to bring Glen Little to Grosvenor Vale there was a distinct buzz in the air around Ruislip.

Glen has played in the Premier League for Reading, Bolton and Portsmouth. He played in the Europa League against AC Milan only five years ago. And as a kid (for Northern Ireland side Glentoran) he played against Sparta Prague in the European Cup Winners Cup – and scored.

Yet his name provokes a flurry of head scratching. Your aver-

age Sky Sports-watching fan (and I've done the research in Wetherspoons) recalls him as 'that tall, gangly right winger who turns people inside out. Gets injured a lot'. Or 'didn't he score a couple of amazing goals for Burnley?'

Yet when you collar a dyed-in-the-wool Reading fan – or a Burnley fan – their eyes simply light up.

"Glen is my favourite all-time Royals player" said my pal Simon. "Could do amazing things with the ball. Played with us for four years.... Glen had bags of assists, a real crowd-pleaser".

"He's signed for us, for the season" I tell him. "What, for Wealdstone?" Simon splutters. "Blimey, you're in for a treat. Can't imagine he knows much about the Ryman League though".

Well, that's true.

"I must admit every game has been an adventure so far" said Glen when I caught up with him after the Hornchurch game last week. "I've never played in this league, against any of these teams, at any of these grounds so it's quite exciting really.

"Everything is an unknown quantity. But I do know that

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we've been the better team in every game so far and probably should have won all of them. Even last night, and I'm told Hornchurch are one of the better teams we'll face. But then we're top of the league and you can't really do any better than that.

So how did he come to sign for the mighty Stones?

"Well, basically my brother Paul knows Gordon Bartlett through junior football, and when Gordon found out I was free agent in the summer - released by Wrexham - he was on the phone suggesting I come over, train with the lads and maybe take it from there.

"I just love playing football, it doesn't matter what level it is, and I wasn't ready to retire. My last game for Wrexham was in the Conference play-off final against Newport County last May, when Newport scored twice in the last five minutes... so I might have been starting this season in League Two. Instead I'm playing in the Ryman League!

"But all respect to Gordon and the rest of the players here. When I came down you could see in training that they all love to knock the ball around, we've got some good strong defenders and a great mix of good young kids with mobility and energy, plus a few, er, more experienced players.

"Scotty McGleish is older than me! But really that's where the Dad's Army stuff ends, 'cos Mooro and Elliott Godfrey are only early thirties and the rest are pretty young.

"I think Gordon wants to use my experience to turn Wealdstone into winners.... He said to me 'We're the nearly team, we keep losing play-offs' and I replied 'Well my own record in play-offs isn't great!'

"My injury record has held me back over the last few years but I'm feeling fit and strong now, and Gordon says he'll manage my fitness by starting me in some games, bringing me off the bench or even giving me the odd rest... I'm not daft enough to think we're even close to winning anything yet, it's a long old season and we'll need everyone in the squad to play their part, but I'm really enjoying it and

looking forward to every game"

Glen has played pretty much all of the last three games before having to leave the field at Hornchurch with a hamstring 'tweak'.

"Yeah, that's an old injury and I have to look after it. I may miss the Kings Langley FA Cup game but will be back for the Thamesmead and Lewes games... if selected!" he said.

Obviously, the cathedral of football that is Grosvenor Vale compares favourably to some of the world stadia that Glen has graced in his 20-year career, but you can't help thinking that trips to Hornchurch, Thamesmead and Grays are possibly less than mouthwatering.

"Oh I don't know!" he laughs. "I'm living in Buckhurst Hill, in Essex, at the moment, so it's all

pretty convenient. And my brother lives in Watford so I know the Harrow and Ruislip areas. It's a bit handier than playing at Wrexham!" he concedes.

But Glen is clearly fond of his former clubs and talks long and eloquently about the apparent demise of both the 'Dragons' and Pompey.

"I was released by Wrexham because I was a sort of 'bonus' player" he says. "I was coming off the bench more often than not, trying to turn games around, and when things were go-



▲ Glen in action for Reading against Norwich City at Carrow Road

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ing well money was available to keep things afloat and bring in some very decent players.

"But their money problems are well chronicled – they are now pretty much a fans-run club, like Wealdstone – and when we failed to get promoted last season it brought things to a head. They couldn't afford a large squad, many of the best players left but it's still shocked me how badly they have started this season... at the moment it looks like they might even get relegated.

"How close we came last season! In the game at Wembley against Newport, Brett Ormerod had a great chance at 0-0 but missed it... the margins are so narrow in football, if that had gone in I'm convinced Wrexham would be back in the League.

"We had won the FA Trophy a couple of months earlier but I know Wrexham would have swapped that immediately for promotion. It was absolutely gutting... a terrible way to end the season".

To cheer him up, I mentioned to Glen a wonderful tribute I discovered on the Daily Mail website. It recalled Portsmouth's epic battle with AC Milan at Fratton Park in November 2008, when Pompey – featuring one G.Little – came within 30 seconds of beating the Italian giants.

Portsmouth – who had quali-

LINEUPS

Portsmouth		Milan	
1	David James (GK)	1	Dida (GK)
5	Glen Johnson	15	Gianluca Zambrotta
3	Younès Kaboul 62	19	Giuseppe Favali
15	Sylvain Distin (C)	24	Philippo Senderos
39	Nadir Belhadj	77	Luca Antonini 81
25	Glen Little 88	8	Gennaro Gattuso (C) 65
8	Papa Bouba Diop	5	Emerson
22	Richard Hughes 9	84	Mathieu Flamini
30	Armand Traoré	22	Kaká 74
9	Peter Crouch	9	Filippo Inzaghi 80+2
27	Nwankwo Kanu 73 81	76	Andriy Shevchenko 74
Substitutes			
21	Jamie Ashdown (GK)	16	Zeljko Kalac (GK)
7	Hermann Hreidarsson	4	Kakha Kaladze
16	Noé Pamarot	7	Pato 74
18	Arnold Mvuemba 69	10	Clarence Seedorf 65
28	Sean Davis 81	21	Andrea Pirlo
35	Marc Wilson	25	Daniele Bonera
		80	Ronaldinho 74 84

▲ Look at those names! Uefa.com lists the line-up at Fratton Park

fied for Europe by winning the FA Cup the previous season, when Glen was still a Reading player - had actually been 2-0 up at one stage in front of a delirious 20,000 crowd.

But despite the presence of legends like Ronaldinho and Filippo Inzaghi, and the extraordinary drama of Milan's late comeback to 2-2, the Mail journal offered one snapshot as his

abiding memory of that night.

"The sight of Glen twisting Kaka inside out, with the FIFA World Player of the Year dragging him back by the tail of his shirt, must take some beating.

"This was the essence of the match. Journeyman Little twisting inside from the right wing, then back out again with the ball under close control. In the end, Kaka hauled him to the floor,

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conceded the free-kick, smiled, shrugged and shook Little by the hand."

"Yes, that was amazing" Glen recalls. "I didn't think it was Kaka, I thought it was Mathieu Flamini, who'd hacked me a couple of times earlier. I jumped up to give him some back and was speechless to see it was Kaka!"

"What an experience the whole night was. I've played in front of bigger crowds but Fratton Park was really rocking, especially after the goals. We played so well that night but the game summed up Tony Adams career as a manager really... despite being a defender himself he couldn't seem to stop us leaking goals and we threw away so many games after leading.

"Harry Redknapp had signed me for Pompey on a Bosman transfer, from Reading, and when he left us for Tottenham we were seventh in the table with Spurs at the bottom. How things changed!

"It seems to me that you don't have to get a good manager, you just have to be a lucky one and Tony Adams had some awful luck.

"It's gone wrong for Pompey ever since with a succession a frauds as

owners... it's heartbreaking to see them where they are now but I'm sure they'll bounce back with their wonderful fans.

"I reckon fans-owned clubs are the way forward, a sort of co-operative. You'll always need someone pumping in serious money to survive in the Premier League but lower down it's the supporters who are the life blood. Pompey will get back to League One, maybe the Championship because of their fanbase."

What about the Stones' support? "It's brilliant!" Glen enthused. "I can't believe how

many follow us away from home, in particular. It makes all the difference.

"One a personal level fans seem to have been good to me all through my career... I've seen some players have a really hard time of it, supporters getting on their backs after just one mistake, but I guess I've just been lucky..."

I reckon it's more because Glen Little is the archetypal crowd pleaser.

And how pleased we'd be if the nearly-man of Premier-ship past can join forces with GB – the nearly man of the

Ryman League – to lead us into the promised land of the Conference South....

Glen Little: the career

Glen was born in Wimbledon in 1975 and joined Crystal Palace as a nine-year-old, playing for all their youth teams and signing as a professional... but he was never given the chance of first team football under manager Steve Coppell, who should have known a thing or two about right wingers.

Instead, Glen was loaned out to Derry City and then signed by Northern Ireland club Glentoran as a 21-year-old. The tall, idiosyncratic wide man quickly gained cult status with the home fans and



▲ Glorious sight.. Glen in full flight for Portsmouth during his memorable year at Fratton Park

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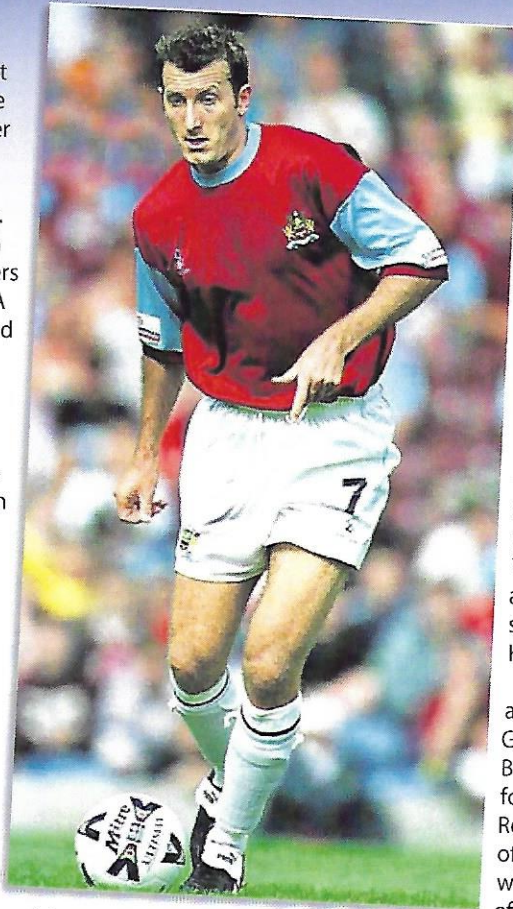
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scored twenty-six goals in 75 games in his first two seasons – including the only goal, an absolute belter of a 25-yarder after a mazy run – to win the 1996 Irish Cup Final against Glenavon.

That victory put Glenavon in the European Cup-Winners Cup (forerunner of the UEFA Cup and Europa League) and Glen had the experience of facing Sparta Prague over two legs. He scored in the home leg - Glentoran conceding in injury time to lose 2-1 - but missed the game in Prague which finished 8-0 to Sparta.

Burnley, who have a rich association with clubs in the Province, snapped Glen up for £100,000 and his mercurial skills were eventually recognised by player/manager Chris Waddle. I say 'eventually' because Waddle selected himself for the right-wing slot right up until Christmas of Glen's first season, until it became obvious that the Clarets were crying out for younger legs. Their assistant manager Glenn Roeder eventually fended off fans' calls for the reinstatement of Little that 'Glen Little is not fit to lace the boots of Chris Waddle'.

Now, that might have been true if we were talking about the Chris Waddle of World Cup 1990, but the shambling winger was a shadow of his former self. He eventually stood aside for the young, twinkle-toed South



▲ A young Mr Little in his Burnley glory days

Londoner and Glen set about keeping Burnley in Division Two.

ie hearts important –

Glen was simply brilliant for the next three years as the Clarets won promotion and then fell agonisingly short of stepping up to the Premier League. A virtuoso performance knocked Tottenham out of the League Cup and it was around this time (2002) that Ternant turned down

a reported £5m bid for Glen.

Both club and player would live to regret that decision. A few months later, with the collapse of ITV Digital and the impact on Championship clubs, the Turf Moor club had to ship out some of their bigger earners on loan and thus (after short spell at Reading) Glen found himself finally playing in the Premier League for Bolton Wanderers. His debut, against Wolves, saw him set up an equaliser for Kevin Davies.

Burnley saw no fee at all, in the end, as Glen left Turf Moor on a Bosman transfer to sign for Championship side Reading in the summer of 2004. His talents were widely regarded as one of the main reasons

behind Reading's record-breaking 106-point Championship lifting 2005–06 season, with Little scoring five goals and setting up fourteen, more than any other player in the league.

Glen started the 2006–07 season on the sidelines due to injury but returned to the starting line-up in the autumn, making 24 top flight appearances over the next couple of years, and a total of 96 for the Royals.

Then came the call from Harry to join Portsmouth....