

## 5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

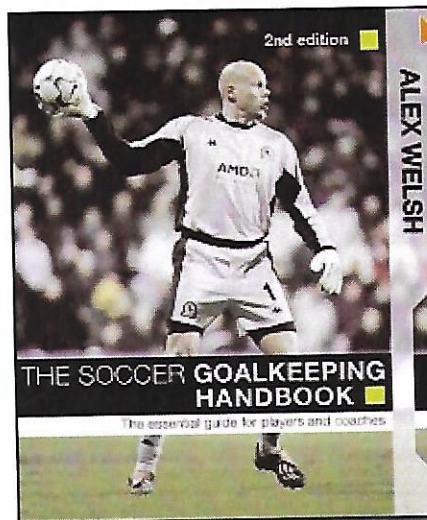
# Five minutes of your time, please – with Alex Welsh

**Alex, You joined Wealdstone for the start of the 1987-88 season but your career started in the professional game; What were the steps en route to Wealdstone and why did you join?**

As a kid I was on Middleborough's books but then at 17 joined Peterborough United as a professional but things didn't work out and I trained to become a teacher and played for Gateshead in the Northern Premier League. As my first teaching job was in Borehamwood, I played in the Isthmian and Southern League so that I could referee my school match on a Saturday morning and play in the afternoon.

When Colin Meldrum asked me to come to Wealdstone it was a no brainer. Wealdstone was a proper football club with a great supporter base. During pre-season I settled in quickly and we had our first league game away to Cheltenham Town where we drew 1-1. I really enjoyed the first three months of the season but then came the managerial changes.

**It was at very best a period**



**of transition for the club and despite some good players in the side the season was a struggle, ending in relegation. That cannot have been what you expected when you joined...any particular memories of that time?**

It was more a period of turmoil rather than transition and due to a variety of circumstances we had four managers before Christmas – Colin, Terry Burton, Arnie Reed and Tony Jennings. We had some good players but a small squad and as results suffered so did our confidence.

My abiding memory was the silly rule we had where you could not be offside from free kicks. It was an absolute nightmare for keepers as everyone just crowded the penalty area and the ball was lumped in and it was everyman for himself. It rendered any kind of accepted defensive organization useless. Needless to say FIFA did not follow up on this stupid idea and it was dropped without trace.

In the end we were relegated and I really felt for the supporters who were brilliant throughout the season.

**Where did your playing career take you after The Stones?**

Once I left The Stones Gordon Bartlett signed me at Hounslow and it was a great experience. Gordon and Leo had a smashing group of players and we had a really good season, exceeding all expectations. However, Gordon left at the end of the season and I had spells at Borehamwood and Stevenage Borough. I then became player/coach at Leyton Wingate interspersed with

## 5 Minutes of your time

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several games for Arsenal Reserves under the late Georgie Armstrong.

I still follow Wealdstone's results, partly as an ex player, also as a friend of Gordon and Leo and in recent years also to check on Sean Thomas' progress. I coached Sean for 5 years when he was at Arsenal.

Given the club's nomadic existence over the last 20 odd years I really feel for the supporters that the club has not found the permanent home they deserve, but hopefully The Vale will become that.

**I've read through the list of qualifications (UEFA A Coaching Licence and UEFA**

**A Goalkeeping Coaching Licence holder, Lead FA Tutor, FA Coaching Diploma holder etc.) and the positions you've held in the game (1st Team Goalkeeping coach at Wimbledon, Brentford and Leyton Orient, coach at Arsenal FC Academy since 1993, coached England Youth (Under 19) players and England Women's goalkeepers.) – when did Coaching become an ambition for you and how did you get your first coaching role?**

Whilst you cannot beat playing the game, coaching is the next best thing. I've always loved it and obtained my UEFA A Li-

cence (or Full Badge as it was known then) in 1985.

Whilst I was at The Stones I was also goalkeeping coach at Arsenal Centre of Excellence where I was hugely influenced by Bob Wilson who is without doubt the best goalkeeping coach I have ever seen.

Two interesting things happened to my coaching career whilst I was at Wealdstone. One Wednesday evening whilst I was warming up Andy Haxton before a Capital League game against Brentford, Steve Perryman (whom I had met on my UEFA A course) asked me to coach the goalies at Brentford working with the likes of Tony

## 5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Parks. Our second manager Terry Burton (an absolutely superb coach) invited me to Wimbledon a year later and I had three great years coaching Hans Segers and Neil Sullivan. I also worked with Perry Suckling of Crystal Palace and Paul Heald of Leyton Orient around about the same time. I am delighted that all of these top goalies (with the exception of Sully who's still playing for Doncaster Rovers) are now outstanding coaches in their own right.

I had several offers to go full time but turned them down as I didn't want to leave my job with the London Playing Fields Foundation. Instead I spent about 20 years working with the Arsenal Academy goalkeepers and for a decade with Emma Byrne the Arsenal Ladies keeper. In 2010 Arsenal made my role full-time and I had to leave. Within a couple of weeks Tony Parks, Head Goalkeeping Coach at Spurs, asked me to join Tottenham Hotspur as Academy Goalkeeping Coach and I've been there ever since. I work alongside Perry Suckling and Pat Jennings and it's great fun.

In 1988 the FA appointed me as FA County Coaching Representative for the London FA and I spent the next twelve



:Alex (Right)

years organising an annual programme of coach education courses: and since 2006 I have been Chairman of the London Football Coaches Association. In addition to coaching players I really enjoy educating up and coming coaches either through FA courses or demonstrations. The future health of the game depends on a well motivated and highly motivated coaching workforce so it's important that the education and development of our young coaches is the best it can be.

**You've also written books on goalkeeping and produced instructional DVD's on the game as well as working with the FA to develop numerous coaching courses. How easy do you find it to take what you do as a hands on coach and publish that in various forms for others?**

As a coach and a teacher of the game you are driven to help others fulfill their potential.

You do this by informing, influencing, inspiring and eventually improving them so the books and DVD's are just a way of reaching a wider audience. As a coach you draw upon your own playing experience and your powers of observation to ensure that what you are teaching is relevant, realistic and appropriate for those players you are working with. Helping others to improve is never a chore, it's more of a privilege.

**Have you ever thought of taking the step into Club Management?**

I was offered the opportunity to manage at non league but it quickly becomes all consuming despite it being part-time so I turned it down.

**We met in your capacity as CEO of the London Playing Fields Foundation when you were part of the bidding process surrounding the PEPF project. There is no doubt a solution other than the one eventually progressed by the London Borough of Harrow would have been more advantageous to Wealdstone FC, but it was not to be. Looking back, do you think the process was as open as it should have been? Would you / the LPFF have done anything different with the benefit of hindsight?**

## 5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Prior to 1956 the LPFF used to own Prince Edwards and managed it briefly on behalf of LB Camden in the 1990's so we knew the site very well. We were therefore disappointed not to win the bid as we had presented what we thought was a very strong case. As I knew how much money Wealdstone FC had raised to get the project underway, it was our ambition, had we won the bid, to provide a proper long term home for the club. Sadly it wasn't to be.

### **What are the main role's of the LPFF today, and what is your role in that?**

I am Chief Executive of London Playing Playing Fields Foundation, one of the country's oldest sporting charities, which was founded by visionary Victorians in 1890 who were very concerned at the loss of green space. They also appreciated the health and social benefits of getting more people to play sport and this mission to protect, provide and promote playing fields in the capital is just as relevant to-day as it was 122 years ago. We believe that once a playing field is lost, it is lost forever and that the best form of protection is full use. My role is to enhance the charity's strategic protection role and to ensure that it remains financial viable which is a real challenge given that playing fields are inherently loss making.



### **Do you get the opportunity (or the time!!) to watch games outside of the coaching roles? Do you find yourself studying the goalkeeper and thinking 'if only he'd done this and not that...'**

I always study the goalkeepers to gauge how they deal with certain situations. As a coach it is absolutely critical that you are a student of the game because it is changing all the time and you have to adapt your approach accordingly. If you don't keep up with the game you are letting your players down.

### **Do you pay much attention to the top level of the game? Is there much that can be learned from that level and applied day to day?**

As a coach of elite young players my job is to prepare them for a career in the game so I pay very careful attention to what is happening at Premier League and Champions League level. Young players can learn so much from watching the top performers in action and I often discuss with my players situations that may have appeared on TV or at White Hart

Lane that week.

### **Finally, given a magic wand would you change the way Coaching is structured in the UK – through Youth Systems right up to the top of the game? Also, is there one change that you think would make a difference in the short term?**

Coaching is the golden thread that runs from grass roots to professional level and it should be The FA's gift to the game.

Some critics would argue that instead of a structure that is simple and accessible we have one that is complicated and expensive. If the system was working we would have more technically gifted players at the top end and fewer younger players dropping out of the grass roots game at sixteen years of age. However, the FA and the Premier League are aware of these issues and we are about to see some improvements with the opening of the FA's National Coaching Centre at St George's Park and the launch of the Elite Player Performance Plan for Academies.

So ask me again in 10 years time!

Five Minutes of Your Time is one of a number of articles produced for the blog at [www.2ndyellow.com](http://www.2ndyellow.com) where there is a regular column on Wealdstone.