

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Five minutes of your time, please – with Andy Hedge

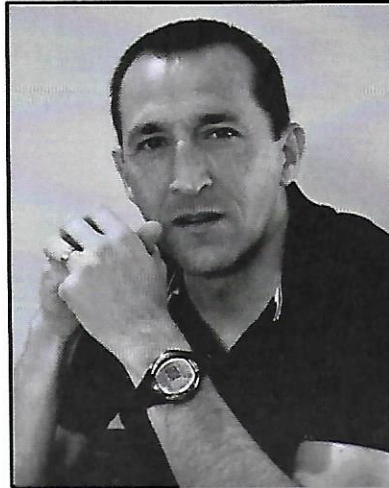
Five Minutes Of Your Time is a series of interviews with people from different areas and eras within the game. This one features Andy Hedge, former Wealdstone player and now New Zealand U20's Assistant Manager...

Andy, You joined Wealdstone as the club was about to lose their ground and move into a new home at Vicarage Road. What was your background and what was it like playing at Watford?

I grew up in North Harrow and played most of my Junior football for Belmont United and used to go and watch Wealdstone play with my school mates. I've always had a strong connection with the club, my Grandad was a 'Postie' that would stand behind the goal at the Cinema end and I even went to the '85 Trophy Final at Wembley!

My 'Senior' career started at Rayners Lane (my dad, Richard was Assistant to Manager Don Durkin) at about 18 and broke into the first team pretty quickly. I got a taste of playing 'in the big time' when we beat Wembley in the FA Cup - I scored the only goal – and I've still got the Harrow Observer back page!!

After 2 seasons with 'The Lane', a good cricket friend and Stones fan, Dom Whyley, told me that



the Stones would be starting a reserves the following year, so, not being content to stay with Rayners Lane I asked him to introduce me to the Manager, Alan Gain, which he did in the car park at Lower Mead. Alan told me when and where the Reserves would start their pre-season (90/91) and welcomed me to go down - and so began my time with the Stones.

Roy Davies was the manager and we won the Suburban League title playing a full-season at Lower Mead, if only for the Reserves. Great memories of that old ground - I remember all the players diving in the bath after a game and often coming out muddier than when you got in!

Then disaster struck with the well-documented events that almost finished the club. I remember that Brian Hall came in towards the end of that last season and then the rumours began to fly around the dressing room that there would be no reserve side the following year. Thankfully Brian spoke to me and told me that he would be interested in seeing me at pre-season training.

I don't remember when/how I found out about the Watford move, but I still vividly remem-

ber both my first team debut for the club, at Halesowen, and my home debut at Vicarage Road. I should have scored in both!

As players, we loved playing at Vicarage Road. Unfortunately so did the opposition... It was like a Cup Final for every team that visited. We certainly felt a lot more 'professional' in that environment - massive changing room, gym, proper physio rooms, individual baths as well as showers, sheer luxury!

Other than the opposition treating the place like Wembley, the other difficult factor was, although we generally got good crowds, even 2,000 fans in a 30,000 capacity stadium never generated an atmosphere like we had at Lower

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Mead.

A couple of years later and Stones moved to groundshare at Yeading. Managers, Grounds and a lot of money had gone by then – how did that impact on the players?

Yeah, it was very much a case of back to reality. I remember that year being really tough financially for the club and that the supporters were fantastic. The Fund-raising walk across London to Fisher Athletic was incredible. I think young John Shanahan scored a screamer to win that game. It epitomised the Stones fans - they did everything they could to keep the club going. It didn't go un-noticed by the players and was very much appreciated by us and the staff. The players took wage cuts (some more than others!) and the 'nice-to-haves' went out the window - so it was a pretty tough time. The drop out of the Beazer Homes league was tough because we wanted to play at the highest level they could.

Probably the clearest memory I've got is scoring in my last game for the club down in Weymouth. For some strange reason the Manager at the time, Fred Callaghan, played me upfront! He wasn't present at the last game and Steve Frangou, his Assistant took me aside before the game and said "Not sure why the gaffer wants to play you up top...just do the best you can.." I scored the goal of my life. Not sure if any supporters



remember exactly what happened, but I'm sure I picked it up on halfway whilst getting battered from behind by their centre back. I turned, nutmeged him, played a '1-2' with whoever was on the right wing and then just smashed it home from probably 25-30 yards. I've never hit something so true. It dipped over the keeper into the far top corner. I went ballistic and ended up diving into the 500 strong traveling Stones fans who had been fantastic all game. I'd love to find a video copy of that to show my boys!

So 1993-94 at Wealdstone, to circa 2001-02 and onwards, New Zealand – what were the steps in between? Was NZ always a planned destination or did it come out of the blue?

I'd stayed in touch with Tony Kelly who had joined Hayes by that point and so I went down there in the pre-season of 94/95. Although I scored on my debut, I struggled to

gain a regular first team spot. The club won promotion from the Ryman Prem to the Conference and there were a lot of good players around but I wanted to test myself and stayed on for another season though again I only managed a handful of appearances. Towards the end of that season (96/97) I got a 'tug' from Colin Payne at Chertsey and went on loan and then signed on for the following year (97/98). The travel was a nightmare... working in London, tube home to Harrow and then a drive round the M25 to training...as you can imagine I was often late!

Another mate at the time was playing for Yeading and said that I'd fit in well there, so the 98/99 season I signed with them and stayed until I left the UK.

In 2001, I managed to convince my girlfriend (now wife) to spend a few months traveling around Australia. My brother had moved to Sydney 2 years prior and had been

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having a great time. So off we trotted. Whilst there I met up again with an ex-team mate from Yeading, a Kiwi Keeper named James Bannatyne. He encouraged me to get across to New Zealand where he said he could get me a game and maybe some coaching. So we threw the dice... It was Wellington or Watford, so not a difficult choice (no offense of course!).

A definite case of right place, right time. Miramar Rangers, the top Wellington club, were short of a Left Back/Left sided Centre back and I fitted straight in. I also managed to land a full-time coaching job with the Wellington FA, coaching school kids during the day and training at night. My perfect life!

After 3 years coaching in schools, I got offered a job with the NZFA as a Development Coach, running Coaching Courses and working with the better Youth Players around the country (u14's to u23's). Over the course of the last 6 or 7 years I've been working with the better players around the country at National Camps and occasionally taking teams overseas on tours; dreadful places like the Gold Coast in Australia, the USA, Fiji and the like... (certainly beats an away trip to Halesowen any day!).

The highlight (so far) was the Assistant Coach role for the u20's and the World Cup last year in Colombia. An amazing experience. Everyday was an eye opener and for our lads, who are very basic,



to be playing in front of 35,000 screaming fans was almost surreal. The results that we achieved too were pretty special; 1-1 with Cameroon and Uruguay and a narrow 1-0 loss to eventual runners-up, Portugal. It's almost unheard of for NZ to get any points at this level!

The 'day job' is still in football but I'm doing a lot less on the grass now. I'm managing a team of Development Officers who work very closely with Junior Clubs. The structure is very similar to the UK; National Body, then several regional bodies all delivering national strategies.

I'll grant you three wishes;

One – you can change something about yourself and your game;

Confidence, or lack of, was always my downfall as a player. Knowing what I know now as a Coach, I just wish I had someone to help through some patchy periods as a player. It wasn't really the culture

though, back then...especially with Brian Hall!

Two – you can change one thing that happened in your career;

It sounds silly to say but, when I played I never really thought about improving as a player; I just played and loved playing. I never really focused on becoming better. That's what now drives me to Coach - to make sure that players under my tutelage fulfill their potential.

Three you can change one rule to improve the game as a whole....

The 10 second count down from the Euro's was classic! Just like the Yanks do it... bring that in at 'The Vale' and surely the crowds will flock in!

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Five Minutes of Your Time is one of a number of articles produced for the blog at www.2ndyellow.com where there is a regular column on Wealdstone & the full version of this Interview is available.