

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

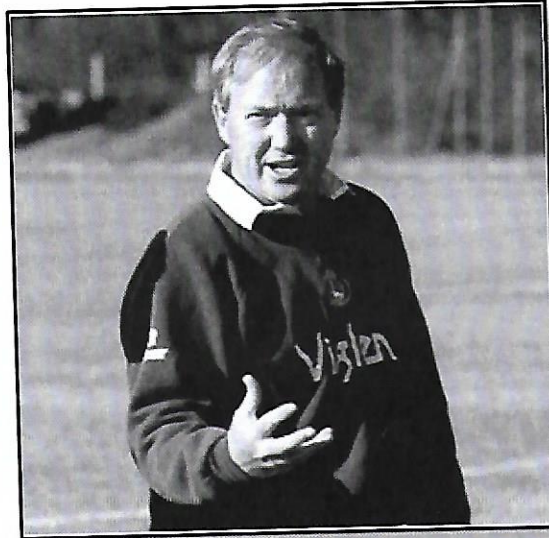
Five minutes of your time, please - with Les Reed

Five Minutes of Your Time is a series of interviews with people from different areas and eras within the game. This one features Les Reed, former player and coach at Wealdstone, a Coach at International level and a Manager, now a Director at Southampton FC...

Les, you were on the books of three pro clubs as a player I believe without making a first team appearance, followed by a non-league career before you got into the coaching side of the game...

I had a very enjoyable time in non league football and due to circumstances non-league gave me an early start in coaching and managing.

As a schoolboy I trained regularly with West Ham but eventually went to school in North London and began training with Arsenal after school, playing for Islington and London Schoolboys. It didn't work out for me there and I was not offered an apprenticeship so I played at school on Saturday and Epping Town Youth on Sunday. Eventually



I played for the first team in the old Metropolitan League which at that time included Arsenal, West Ham, and Spurs Millwall etc.

I moved around in Non-league (as you do) via Leyton FC, Leytonstone, Stevenage eventually ending up at Walthamstow Avenue. By this time I had decided to train to teach Physical Education and had my place booked at Loughborough University. Then, Peter Carey; our manager came to me after training one night and said Cambridge United had asked if I could play in the midweek league for them. He

thought it would be a good experience for me, I was still just 19. I signed a non-contract registration and played for a season but we got relegated from the old 3rd Division to the 4th as Watford came up - Graham Taylor's first season there. Little did I know that he would ask me to go there a year later after seeing me play for the University.

I played for Watford whilst I was at University,

always on the verge of the first team but a victim of back to back promotions and trying to compete with Ross Jenkins who scored 50 goals in that first season! I moved to Wycombe Wanderers and started taking my coaching badges having followed Graham's advice. He probably got me thinking about coaching and we are still good friends.

I finished University and began combining teaching with football; Player-Coach roles at Finchley, Woodford Town and Leyton Wingate. I was asked to do a coaching demonstration at Bisham Abbey while I was at Leyton. We had got to the semi final of the Vase that

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

year and runners up in the old Athenian League. I had got my Full Badge some years earlier and started working part time for the FA running courses with Eddie McCluskey, then manager of Conference Champions Enfield Town. Eddie warned me that Brian Hall was looking for a new coach but he would like me to go to Enfield. He wanted me to pack up playing and focus on coaching so I turned him down. After the demo Brian approached me and said 'I hear you might be going to Enfield' I told him I would but I still wanted to play, he said I could come to Wealdstone as Player-Coach so I jumped at it. He kept his word I did play one game - in the Capital League! We did win the league that night and I have the medal to prove I won something with Wealdstone as a player...crafty bugger Hallie!

That was prior to the FA Trophy and Conference double – What was it like to be around the club and the players at that time?

I hit it off with the players immediately; they were as focused as you get on winning and improving. They are still the finest bunch of players I have worked with as a group and sit alongside the Charlton team that were promoted via the play offs in 1998 as the most enjoyable and dedicated professionals I have had the pleasure to coach.

David Morritt had tremendous

ambition at that time for the club, Brian and I were given as good resources as you would get in Non-League at the time, we trained like a full time club, travelled like a full time club and had a mentality to match. I looked forward every week to training after work and enjoyed every 90 minutes of every game because the manager was so good at his job, let me do my job and the players were so responsive. It is such a shame that after all that work and planning that promotion to the League for the countries best Non-League team was down to a vote of the very clubs that were threatened by us. Then the following season it all changed, Scarborough went up eventually under Neil Warnock and look what's happened to him. I remind him every time I see him. From where we both started, I still commute to work and he goes in a helicopter!

Any special memories of the club?

Where can I start, they are all special. Brian Hall will always be dear to me and close to my heart. He really gave me my first opportunity and the game lost a magnificent man and manager, someone I believe would have gone on to great things had tragedy not taken him from us. I would go so far as saying we might even have been together sometime like Clough and Taylor!! Great games; the semi finals against Enfield, the FA Cup games

against Reading and Swansea (where we were robbed)... Vinnie Jones - what can I say about him? We kept in touch for a long while during his playing career and for a short while when he started in the movies. Characters like Roy Davies, Polly Perkins, Robin Wainwright, always come to mind but Dennis Byatt is one of the funniest and most dedicated professionals I have ever worked with. He had to be, but he did it and was, alongside Paul Bowgett, one of the best pairings in the game at that time. Dennis has had an unfair share of tragedy in his life, yet he is the nicest, most honest and personable guy you could meet. He deserves more than anyone I know to get a break.

The Championship winning team were all stars and I could just list them as they all bring back memories of great moments, Alan Cordice's goals, Bob Iles saves, Greeners whinging! I could go on. There were the quiet professionals; Neil Cordice, Steve McCargo, Mark Graves. And how do you describe Andy Graham?

The final was the first of many magic moments in the Wembley Dressing Rooms, I had no idea that Wembley would become a second home to me later in life. Wealdstone gave me the confidence and the desire to drive on as a Coach and belief that I could make it to the top of my profession. I will never forget that.

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Following Wealdstone you took up a role with the FA taking on various Coaching positions, leading up to a role at the 'original' FA National School.

That was something

that was new to the game at the time. Speaking from the inside, there were some very good players that moved through the system, but do you think it worked?

It certainly worked - the players that came through bear testimony to that, but it was always going to have a shelf life because it was the template for the current Academies.

I had two spells at the FA; the first when I moved from Wealdstone was to become Regional Director of Coaching for London and the South East. We set up the Centre of Excellence programme within the professional game and this fed the National School at Lilleshall. I had the pleasure of working with some of the games top players and a whole generation of Internationals through this. To say this system failed when the



likes of Sol Campbell, Joe Cole, Jermaine Defoe, Scott Parker, Jamie Carragher, Nick Barmby, Ian Walker, Andy Cole, Glen Johnson, Phillip Neville and many others (who have had long careers at the top) came through Lilleshall would be unfair. Consider the Talent Identification put in place - it also Identified Alan Shearer, Stephen Gerard, Frank Lampard, Jamie Redknapp, Steve McManaman, Robbie Fowler and more for the National Youth Teams I'd say we did pretty well. Nothing existed in an organized way before that.

The biggest success was that having the 14-16 age group of elite players in one place. We were able to conduct several research programmes and learn a significant amount about player development which could be passed down to Academies later. Few people know

that Will Coerver who established the Dutch techniques learning programme was actually employed as a full time coach at Lilleshall where he perfected his system. The team of regional

coaches we had at the time including myself spent hours and days travelling the country introducing technique training in FA Licensed Coaching Centres and in the pro clubs. We were way ahead of Spain and the rest but politics and resistance led to these programmes being abandoned. This always rankles with me when I hear the pundits going on these days about Spain leaving us behind. This was not the first time and my second spell at the FA was cut short for similar reasons and for me left us where we are now, when I believe we could have been leading the world.

The great thing about my first spell at the FA was the opportunity to work with and learn from great coaches who became lifelong friends. Bobby Robson, Dave Sexton and Don Howe were

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

world leaders in the day and soon to be followed by Terry Venables and Graham Taylor. This was a real think tank and a fantastic time to be involved. Bob gave me my first taste of World Cup football when I was invited to join the staff in Italia 90, initially scouting the groups and then joining the squad in Turin at the quarter final stage. I learned a bit about penalty shoot outs at that tournament which paid dividends for Charlton in later life!

Later, you were to take on the role as Director of Technical Development for the FA and subsequently Technical Director. What was the brief?

The brief as Director of Technical Development was straightforward, Howard Wilkinson, as Technical Director had a wide remit covering, International Football, Academies, Grass Roots, Football Development, Sports Medicine and Science and Coach Education. He recruited me to take some of this load; I was responsible for England Youth Teams up to the under 21s (Howard was under 21 Coach), The launch and development of Academies and the support services; Sports Medicine, Science and Scouting. I was responsible for the Elite side of things.

We designed several programmes. 2K6 was a programme designed to give the England Manager the best support and squad of players available for the 2006 World Cup and beyond. We started a concept called Club England, which was a development programme from the

age of 14 – 21 it was a ten year plan based on the fact that with thorough preparation and consistency, continuity and stability we would be strong for the 2006 World Cup and grow stronger for subsequent Euro's and World Cups. The period through to 2010 has seen anything but, with 7 England managers including two interim coaches of which I served with 4. Each manager made changes to the backroom, the squads and the culture. I am not saying they were wrong but I am saying we had no consistency throughout the period. Add to this 5 changes of Chief Executive and a picture begins to emerge which has nothing to do with player development and skill.

Academies were launched and the Charter for Quality was implemented, England Youth Teams began winning tournaments and the Germans, French and Spanish all came to see what we were doing. All England Teams below 21 played 4-3-3 in a flexible and dynamic style based on passing and movement. We had planned and begun work on the National Football Centre, we had undertaken a worldwide study of what brought success at International level. We visited all the top European countries, went to Brazil and Argentina, learned the lessons and the future was beginning to look bright. I managed a staff of around 50 coaches, scientists, scouts, medics and other specialists. We had international teams doing well in every age group. These guys

are virtually all at top clubs now; Manchester United and City, Liverpool, Chelsea, Tottenham and more because 5 years into the programme it was abandoned, Trevor Brooking was brought in and the Technical Director role was made redundant, the Technical Department disbanded and the National Football Centre project was mothballed. It is so good to see that at last led by David Sheepshanks the current regime under David Bernstein has completed this project and there is an intention to appoint a Technical Director again. I have and always will be a big supporter of the FA and everything they try to achieve; I hope it is a real success.

In both of the primary FA coaching roles, you've worked with some great players and played a part in their development, but there must also have been some frustrations in those roles.....

You can read into the previous comments a number of things that frustrated me. I believe we have lost 10 years when we could have been right up there. When I left the FA we had gone from 13th in the European Rankings for Youth Development (measured on National Youth Teams success) to joint first with Spain, Spain remained consistent and we did not. I have worked with some great players; they deserve to have achieved more at International level. The media took the stance that the players let the country down at the World Cup in South Africa, somehow I think

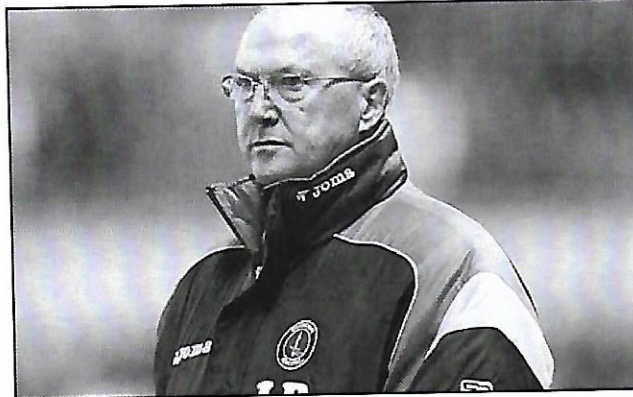
5 Minutes of your time

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in reality that we have over time let them down actually. **You've been part of the England Team at three World Cups under different managers, each with their own approach. Assuming that these are the best players at the biggest competition, do the different management styles impact on the squads and the performances?**

They do and this is precisely part of the problem, there is little consistency. Players who are used to a regular style or philosophy at club level are expected to adapt to a different style when they join up with England. This is OK when the National Team has a consistent style, culture or philosophy (like Spain or Germany), however in England each manager has tried to develop his way.

Research shows that it doesn't matter if the national team plays differently to the clubs, as long as the way the national team plays is consistent. This is what we were trying to achieve with the International Teams development programme. All of the England sides working on the same strategy year on year and the first team reflecting this development at the top. When each successive manager changes the strategy the players have to relearn or adapt. No matter which clubs the players come



from in Spain (remember some of them have played in England) the National teams in Spain all play in a consistent way at all age groups. A manager should be appointed because he buys into the strategy not because he is expected to revolutionize it. We expect too much from our National Coaches. We appoint them on the basis that they have some secret, magic formula that they are going to bring to the table and our players will automatically over achieve. When they fail we sack them and pick the next one out of a hat.

Subsequently there was the spell at Charlton, some time with the Northern Ireland side, Fulham and even Bishops Stortford. (Excluding the current role at Southampton) where is Les Reed happiest – the International or the Club arena, in an administration or a more hands on Coaching role?

I have been very lucky to have experienced just about every aspect of life in football, when the book is published it will be very interest-

ing! I enjoy coaching and teaching. I have educated coaches in China, Africa, Eastern and Central Europe and in the USA and the Caribbean. It has given me the opportunity to experience football all over the world and learn about differ-

ent cultures and ideologies. I get a great thrill when I see a coach that I have trained being successful, I took AVB on his first coaching course at 17 years of age, we still stay in touch.

There is nothing better than being on the training ground or in the dugout. I am glad to have had spells in club and International football. I wouldn't have missed the International experience for the world and could easily return to that arena. Club football gave me the experience of an FA Trophy win, promotion to the Premier League twice and numerous great games in between. I was part of the last game at the old Wembley and coached Great Britain to the Silver Medal in the Maccabi Games in Israel recently. That's why I helped out at Bishops Stortford; - nothing beats the dressing room on match day wherever it is. I have learned a lot about the game; Technical Director was a great job which has helped me in the other roles I have had off the pitch. Director of Football at

5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Fulham was partly a hands-on role as I still worked with the first team, especially on match day. As a club executive at three clubs and now a Board Member I understand better how clubs work and that life in the Boardroom is probably more stressful than the touchline, something as managers we probably don't appreciate.

I would be a better manager for the experience if I went that way again. The game is changing at the top, managers are becoming Head Coaches, more roles like my current one will become the norm and managers will have less authority over wider matters at clubs. New owners will have higher expectations and clubs will be run more on business lines. I enjoy a challenge and I enjoy building things, I haven't ruled out a return to the tracksuit but I believe in what we are trying to achieve at Southampton as it is different and the future.

What is your involvement at Southampton?

I am a member of the Board; a Director of the club. We have a small Board and we are all executives so decisions are made quickly, it helps to get things done. Board members are responsible for Football (me) Finance and Operations and the Executive Chairman overseas it all so there are only four of us. I am responsible for what we call the Football Development and Support Centre. It is a concept rather than a facility. FDSC incorporates Coaching, Sports Medicine and Science, scouting and recruitment, kit and equipment and the Academy.

I work closely with the Manager and the Chairman on football matters and manage a staff of about 50 in those 5 departments or pillars. The Manager is able to focus on coaching the team and only the three first team coaches report directly to him. This brings the stability I mentioned earlier because very few staff are affected by a managerial change, the culture remains the same and the strategy stays on course. This was the vision of the Chairman and it is working. It is the hardest job I have done yet but I really enjoy it. Being a manager would be a piece of cake after this! We have a great staff and everyone is pulling together as one.

I'll grant you a wish; you can change one thing about your career – what would you change and why?

I would have stayed at Charlton and kept them up in the Premier League. They had back to back relegations after my resignation on Christmas Eve when my position became untenable, I had never had the opportunity to sign players and took over a depleted and defeated squad. I believe if I had stayed I could have kept them up. People remember the 40 days I was given as a failure but I never got relegated.

I moved to Fulham who were also in trouble and we kept them up, sadly at the expense of Charlton. I loved that club; had years of success there, still do, I was devastated when they went down and then again. I am so pleased to see them

on the way back. I wanted Chris Powell on my coaching staff but Watford wouldn't release him so I am chuffed it's him leading the revival. It was the right club for me to manage but at the wrong time, I did it out of loyalty but it was not the best situation for me to show what I was capable of.

Finally, looking at the game as a whole are there changes you would like to make to the way football is run or structured to benefit the game? Is there one change that you think would make a difference in the short term?

Goal-line Technology will now become a reality. It will have a significant effect and change the way the game is refereed.

I sincerely hope the FA is going to take the opportunity to get player development back on track, especially at International level. The Premier League has taken the lead with Youth Development and I would like to see significant changes at grass roots. Player wages need to be got under control and clubs run on a sound financial footing and I think the FA needs more people like me on the Committees. Professionals who have done the job and see it from all perspectives 'From Touchline to Boardroom'. Not a bad name for the book, that...

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.