

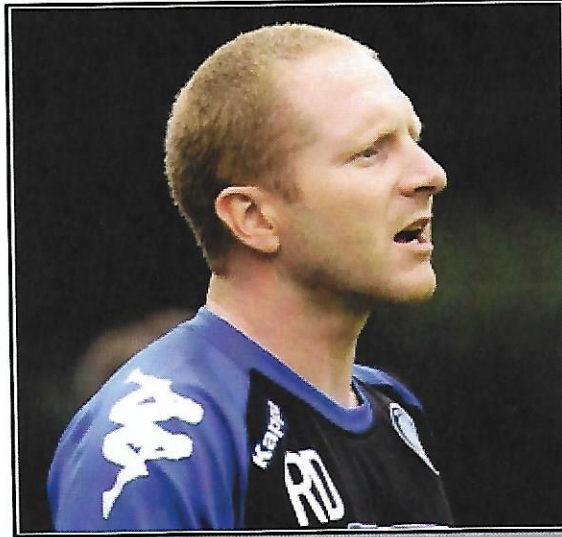
5 Minutes of your time

Roger Slater

Five minutes of your time, please – with Richard Dobson

Five Minutes Of Your Time is a series of interviews with people from different areas and eras within the game. This one features Richard Dobson, currently Assistant Manager at Wycombe Wanderers FC...

Richard, You joined Wealdstone just before the Transfer Deadline in 1998 but what was



your career in football before that? I had come through the youth system at Brentford FC and spent a year at Reading FC before moving to Farnborough Town who were then in the Conference. Farnborough were a decent passing team and I really enjoyed my time there although having broken into the First Team at 18 years of age I suffered a ruptured cruciate ligament to my right knee which kept me out for well over a year. By the time I got back playing again I was 20 and had missed 18 months of development so it felt like I had to start again having had a promising start there. I spent four years at Farnborough before Gordon Bartlett contacted me asking if I fancied going on loan

to Wealdstone as they were in a promotion run in and he needed a couple of players to help them get over the line. I felt it was the right time for a new challenge and had heard good things about Wealdstone and their fanbase so I made the move.

On joining the club, your first game was a Tuesday night away to promotion rivals Braintree Town. There was a lot of anticipation around the club, and the win that night was very important in maintaining the promotion challenge. What was it like for 'the new boy'? I didn't know any of the lads when I arrived in the dressing room so I was a bit of an outsider coming

into a settled group along with a lad, Andy Peakes who had also just signed on loan from Rushden and Diamonds. I remember coming out of the tunnel for kick off and being surprised at the noise that greeted us and the amount of Wealdstone fans there. At Farnborough we were averaging attendances of around 1000-1500 at home and whilst they were a good set of fans they

were not the most vociferous. At Braintree the Wealdstone fans sung throughout the game and I remember thinking that it was the sort of passion and intensity of support that you get at Football League level clubs. I still remember the goal – Brian Jones drove a low cross across the six yard box and Dennis Green steered it past the keeper. It was a good competitive game between two sides at the top of the league and it was enjoyable to play in. Brian Jones was excellent on the night and we deserved to win the game. If I recall correctly it was the start of a seven game unbeaten run that culminated in promotion. At the

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end of the game the Stones fans invaded the pitch as we'd been the first team to beat Braintree in something like 47 matches which was an incredible unbeaten run. Your Stones career was cut short by injuries, as was your playing career as a whole – had you always had it in mind to go into Coaching and Management or was that a result of finishing on the playing side?

Coaching was something that I'd always wanted to get into. My Dad was a coach at Brentford FC and he would often take me to his Centre of Excellence coaching sessions to assist him so I became fairly comfortable with coaching groups of children at a relatively young age. I remember being sat in the dressing room at Merthyr Tydfil before a Conference game for Farnborough when I was 18 years old. We had got there early and the management staff were working their way around the dressing room discussing which of the players in their opinion had the qualities to go on to become managers or coaches when we finished playing. We had a few players such as Dean Coney who had had good careers in the game and were coming towards the end of their playing days, seeing their last couple of years out in the Conference. You knew Dean Coney would go into coaching when he finished playing because of his knowledge

and leadership qualities. When the staff got round to me they all agreed that I would definitely go into coaching or management when I finished playing so even at 18 years of age there must have been something that people could see in me that lent itself towards a career in coaching. The silver lining to the knee injuries that I sustained and my subsequent early retirement from playing was that I started a full time coaching career at a professional club at 25 years of age and have now been coaching full time for 11 years having worked with all age groups from under 9's right through to senior professionals. This has meant that I have gained a great deal of experience and knowledge through attending courses and working with professional coaches and managers such as Paul Lambert, Peter Taylor and currently alongside Gary Waddock. I have been very fortunate in my coaching career to have worked with the people that I have and to have gained the experience that I have by the age of 36 when most players are hanging up their boots and contemplating starting a career in coaching.

Your first step on the Coaching side was in Youth Development, like your Dad, also at Brentford – Then from there to Wycombe – what were the steps in between? I am grateful to Barry Quinn

who was the Head of Youth Development at Brentford FC at the time for giving me the chance to join him in a full time role. Barry had coached me when I came through the youth system at Brentford and when I was forced to retire from playing I had been working with Brentford's Football in the Community Department coaching in schools. My previous relationship with Barry meant that he knew my character and when a role became available he offered me the chance. I spent six years at Brentford as Youth Co-ordinator coaching various age groups before an opportunity came about at Wycombe Wanderers as Centre of Excellence Manager. At the time I had a couple of other offers from bigger clubs but something just felt right about the role at Wycombe and I opted for that one. In hindsight it was the right choice as within six months I was given the Youth Team Managers role and a year later I was appointed Head of Youth Development. At the end of the 2010/11 season Gary Waddock needed an assistant for the remaining six games of a League Two promotion run in and asked if I would do it on an interim basis. I agreed and we finished the season unbeaten to gain promotion to League One. He then offered me the role full time during that summer and I combined the Assistant Manager role with the Head of

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Youth role to maintain some continuity with the youth department as we'd had some success with the likes of Matt Phillips, Kadeem Harris and Jordon Ibe breaking into the first team as 17, 16 & 15 year olds respectively. Matt moved to then Premier League Blackpool having been selected for Englands U19 and U20 sides, Kadeem moved to Cardiff last season and Jordon was sold to Liverpool having beaten Kadeems record as the youngest player ever to have played in the Football league for Wycombe. There have been several other young players to have made their debuts having come through the youth ranks in recent years and currently half of the First team squad are products of the youth system so I have been able to affect the club from top to bottom over the last couple of years which has been a great position to be in. Your involvement with Wycombe over the last few years has involved sending players like Matt McClure out to clubs like Wealdstone. What does the pro club hope to achieve from a loan like that?

The experience of being involved in what I call the 'winning end of football' is crucial for young players. Having come through development backgrounds where winning is secondary to development the young players have to make that transition into football where three points



matters and learn how to win matches. They have to understand the importance of playing to win and how it affects clubs and peoples livelihoods if teams don't win. Learning to play under the pressure of having to win and in front of crowds is crucial to their development towards moving into First Team football at Wycombe. Having a loan spell at a club like Wealdstone assists in that process and gives them their first taster of competitive football. Last season we played Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough in front of a crowd of 38,000. Our left back on the day was an 18 year old youth product who had only made a couple of brief substitute appearances before that game. However, he had gone on loan earlier in the season to a Conference South Club and the experience that he'd had there may have helped him to deal with

the occasion a little better. Now as Head of Youth Development and also as Assistant Manager how does the day to day workload pan out? Unfortunately the Youth Department has been closed at Wycombe during the summer as part of cost cutting. The Supporters Trust have taken over the club and are having to reduce costs in order to run at break even. The Youth Department has been one of the victims of this procedure which is disappointing for all involved. Up until this point my days had been really busy as not only did I have to take the First Team training sessions and prepare for matches in a relegation battle last season but I also had to manage the running of the Youth Department and prepare for the implementation of the Elite Player Performance Plan which the Premier League have introduced in an attempt to reshape youth development in this country. The workload that led to preparing to become a Category 3 Academy under the new rules was significant and made the last 5 months of last season extremely challenging. With the demise of the Youth Department it has allowed me to focus on one role as Assistant Manager now and has given me time with my family who had been neglected somewhat due to my workload at the end of last season. My wife and I have just had our second child so it is important for

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me to balance my work life and family time now. Gareth Ainsworth has just been appointed as Player/Coach to assist Gary and myself so the workload has been shared and it has allowed us to plan, prepare and focus fully on the job in hand with the First Team for the forthcoming season.

Do you get the opportunity to watch other games and players, or is that left to the Scouts? If you do watch players, what do you look for – what would make a young player stand out in a game?

I watch a lot of games over the course of the season. Most of them are assessing future opponents but I do like to watch matches from other leagues to keep an eye on potential players or just to observe and learn from other managers and coaches. I watched Wealdstone play Hendon last season and it was good to see several familiar faces and say hello again.

When watching young players I do not have a set criteria that I look for – you get a feeling when you see a good young player and you must trust your gut reaction sometimes. A positive attitude, enthusiasm and energy in young players are always important and any manager or coach would want to see those qualities but I am open minded about different types of players. If you look solely for a player with decent physical attributes you miss the clever tactician or the player with excellent technical ability and vice versa. Whilst the profiling of players can be useful if you are looking for a certain type of player to do a certain role I believe you

must be open minded about what players bring to the game and appreciate that all players possess different attributes and contribute to games in different ways. The main thing for me is “Does the player influence the game?” Is it an ambition that one day we’ll see “Richard Dobson, Manager” of a club climbing up through the leagues or would you miss the ‘hands on’ coaching element? I am currently doing an online course with the League Managers Association which is based around management and I have really enjoyed it. I would like to have a crack at management one day but as with all jobs in football you have to be fortunate to be offered the role and it’s often about being in the right place at the right time. At the moment I am continuing to learn and have an excellent relationship with Gary Waddock and Gareth Ainsworth which makes my job very enjoyable. A career in football is spent on a knife edge and your career can go either way at any stage. I just concentrate on being the best that I can be in the role that I’m currently employed in and if that earns me the right to move up the footballing ladder in future then fantastic. If not, then I’ll try to become the best Assistant Manager and hopefully be recognized for being totally professional in my work. You have to enjoy every minute in football as it can be taken away from you at any moment.

Given the opportunity, what 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? Good question! I have been fortunate enough to spend time studying RCD Espanyol in Spain and PSV Eindhoven in Holland. There is not a great deal of difference in terms of what they do with their young players compared to what we do in this country. I think the biggest problem we have in England is changing the culture. In Spain and Holland people are more patient and subsequently young players get more time to develop. The style of football is also more patient and considered so players with good technical and tactical ability have time to flourish. In England, very often the physical attributes are the most developed because of the speed of the game and the competitive instinct that we have in this country. Whereas other countries deploy different defensive strategies at younger age groups such as dropping off and defending deep to deny space we are all about pressing the ball all over the pitch, competing physically and winning second balls in youth football which can stifle the creative players, particularly those who are late physical developers. Football fans in England demand these qualities in their players so invariably coaches produce players to suit the demands of the game that the fans want to see. In Spain fans demand a more technical game and will whistle in derision if a player plays an aimless long ball forward. This

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is more important to them than having a player that chases and tackles and wins headers. How do you change 100+ years of football culture? I think coaching in this country is slowly changing for the better and more teams are trying to pass the ball and come away from being reliant on physique but there is much work to do. I am not sure what the answer is but I will stick to my beliefs in playing a possession based game and hopefully I can make a small difference in some way.

If you had to pick one or two young players to look out for in the future, who would they be and why?

I mentioned three players above who have come through our youth system at Wycombe and I believe they all have bright futures. Matt Phillips has just recently made his senior debut for Scotland having played for England at youth level. I believe he has a Scottish grandparent which allowed him to qualify for Scotland. He is currently being linked with a move to a number of Premier League clubs and I'm sure it won't be long until we see him play at the top level again. He is still only 21 so he has an exciting career ahead of him. He is a terrific lad, very humble and I would be delighted to see him gain more success in the game. Kadeem Harris broke the record as the youngest player to play for Wycombe in the Football League at 16 years 201 days and like Matty he also won the Football League Apprentice of the Year

Award when he was a youth team player. Still only 19 he will be hopeful of breaking into Cardiff team this season. He is an exciting winger who is direct and has good dribbling ability.

Jordon Ibe played his first game for Wycombe in a Carling Cup game whilst he was still only 15 years of age breaking Kadeem's record. He scored on his full league debut against Sheffield Wednesday before being transferred to Liverpool last Christmas. He has just been included in their First Team squad for a pre-season tour to America which is a brilliant experience for a 16 year old and shows how highly rated he is at Liverpool. He has the potential to go on and have a fantastic career in the game and I sincerely hope he does as he is a great lad with a wonderful mother who has ensured that his feet have stayed firmly on the ground despite what he has achieved at his tender age. Finally, 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?

Yes, we have good relationships with a number of Premier League clubs. Last season Gary Waddock and I were invited to Chelsea's training ground to observe Andre Villas Boas work with Chelsea's First Team and we spent some time with his Assistant Manager Steve Holland who was happy to talk football and answer questions we had. Moments like this give you a

fascinating insight into the way the top people in the game work and the detail that they go into in order to be successful. It gives you a standard to strive for in your own career if you have the ambition to reach the top. We have taken a lot from the time we spent at Chelsea and have implemented it within our coaching sessions at Wycombe and the way that we go about what we do. Having said that, you cannot copy others as you have to stay true to your own beliefs and philosophies on the game so the bits and pieces that we pick up from others and from studying clubs like PSV Eindhoven supplement and help to improve our own ideas on the way that we want to play the game and the manner in which we go about doing so. We hope to build an attractive side at Wycombe this season in what is an important period for the club having gone through a change of ownership. Funds are limited whilst the Supporters Trust address the finances of the club but it doesn't stop us setting Premier League standards in the way that we go about our roles and if we can improve the players and keep the fans happy with our style of play then we will not be doing a bad job in the circumstances.

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.