

A few pertinent questions for... Dean Papali

Last season kicked off a series of interviews with well-remembered Stones players of the past. Today, Roger Slater takes up the cudgels with talismanic striker of the mid noughties, Dean Papali...

DEAN joined Wealdstone at the start of the Southern League campaign in 2006. Prior to that - despite living in Slough - he turned out for Brook House FC in Hayes at the age of 15 as it was more competitive.

Dean had lots of success at junior level and was asked to join Northwood (roughly aged 18), but as the season started he was spending a lot of time on the bench. Hungry to play football, all he needed was a chance!

It was at a time when another former 'Stone, Dean Clarke was in unbelievable form for Northwood before moved onward and upwards to Woking. Dean rejoined Brook House as he still had many close friends there, and soon starting scoring again - around 25 that year and then 43 goals the following season, prior to the step up to Wealdstone.

In his couple of years with the Stones, Dean started 68 matches, came on off the bench in 23 and scored 41 goals of which 11 were penalties (inc friendlies). Not a bad games-to-goals ratio!

So where is he now? Well, Dean got married last year to Niki and they have two boys - the eldest, Tyler, is just about to turn

DEAN AT THE VALE

Most fans will remember Dean from our time at Northwood, but he was in Gordon Bartlett's plans once we'd moved to the Vale in 2008. Here he is pictured in pre-season that year



BY ROGER SLATER



4 and their new addition Jaxon is 10 weeks old. He feels blessed, and is a real family man. Dean works as a teacher in a Pupil Referral Unit with students with challenging behaviour and that have difficulties socially and emotionally. So now those questions..

What brought you to Wealdstone? Gordon contacted me during the close season and I felt the time was right to step back up. I'd always been very confident in my own ability as a player and I'd always scored goals but when things didn't work out at Northwood it knocked me back a little. Moving away from my comfort zone and friends at Brook House was a big challenge. This time, GB reassured me that I was fully in his plans and thankfully I made the move. It was only over time that I found out that Gordon was also very good friends with one of my closest friend's fathers, Cliff Charles, and GB had been keeping tabs on me for a while.

First Impressions? When I joined it was alongside players with a lot of experience so I kept a very low profile and was rather quiet. I remember really wanting to get the respect of the older players and that started to come after a few games. I worked tirelessly on the pitch because that was 'my game', I scored a couple of goals and a few team nights out helped too!

The camaraderie amongst the players was good despite there being so many players that came and went that season. I was always made to feel really welcome early on, but it wasn't until the season started that I realised the passion, commitment and how much the club meant to the fans.

Your first season was a tough one in the Southern League, from a fans perspective the club went through a lot that season - how did it affect the squad? It was very up and down, and week after week it was the same story - lots of individual errors cost us points. On top of

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that, the team seemed to change quite frequently. Like I said the camaraderie was pretty good from what I can recall and some of those beastly long journeys helped bring the team closer together. The journey back was always great after a rare away win.

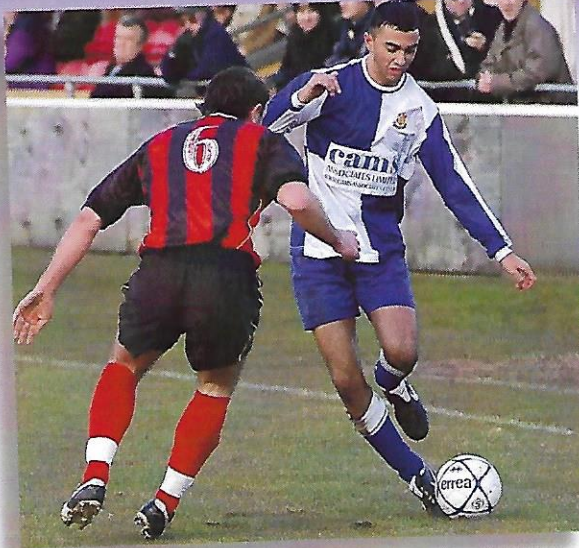
I respected the fans and being new and young I just got my head down and tried my best but you could always sense the frustration of some of them. They knew the club should be achieving more.

I know it was always great reading the forum after a good performance but no so much after a poor one..... especially individually.

Late on that season, John-Jo O'Toole and Theo came in from Watford but we were still deep in relegation trouble - then you were back in the starting XI and scored 7 goals in 6 games (four wins and a draw) and Wealdstone were safe. What are the memories of that spell? I absolutely hated being out of the side and that still is now and will always be my downfall.

I can recall a couple of games where me and Theo did the business and our pace caused the opposition problems. Gloucester away springs to mind. I think there are some clips on YouTube somewhere; a long ball was played to me and my first touch was decent, then I took the defender on, beat him and scored. It was part of a great run of games that kept us up although I can't really remember any massive celebrations when we survived as we all felt that we had under achieved.

The following year in the Ryman saw yet more changes



CIREN CALL One of Dean's most memorable games was the 3-0 win at Cirencester in January 2007, just as it seemed relegation was a certainty. Papali got the opener

and you were in and out of the side a bit? How did that affect your thoughts and your game?

I was absolutely buzzing from a good first season personally and then I went on a clubbing holiday with friends in the summer of 2007 which absolutely ruined me.

I got back in decent shape over a tough pre-season and started playing well - but then the week before the season started I tore my hamstring badly for the first time. It was an absolute killer as I was feeling so ready and confident for the season ahead and this was my first major injury. I thought I'd be back in no time and then I rushed back when I wasn't fully fit. That led to a tough spell, waiting for my chance and I found going from being one of the main men towards the end of the previous season to sitting out watching very difficult to adapt to. I came on off the bench here and there and scored a couple of goals but I was never able to find the consistency not playing every game.

Who were the players that stood out in your time at Wealdstone?

Carl Martin was a class act and I always admired Chris O'Leary's work ethic and determination. Chappell was a great character and a hell of an engine too. I must also mention Theo Robinson as we formed a good partnership but also a good relationship, he's a decent lad.

I'm also a massive fan of Dean Clarke and when we were both on form and fit, he was a dream to play with.

Do you stay in touch with any of them or the management?

I've seen GB at a couple of social events over recent years. Steve Hughes I see most weeks as he manages the reserve side I play for. Alan Massey I saw a few months back as the local club I play for had a final at Maidenhead. Then once a year I play in a match in memory of George Talbot (Uxbridge) and see the likes of Fergus, the Bamfords and Kevin Swift which is always good.

What followed Wealdstone?

I was always seeking to get back to the level of performance and happiness I had in my first season at Wealdstone but could never find it. I spent time back at AFC Hayes (as Brook House had been renamed), then Burnham, Beaconsfield and then for a good bit of a change at Chertsey. Chertsey was an interesting time as we won promotion and then the Chairman took over Farnborough and took some of the lads

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with him but unfortunately my face didn't fit and I wasn't asked. It was at this point I was very frustrated with the politics and the very average players playing instead of me and opted to spend the time with my son Tyler.

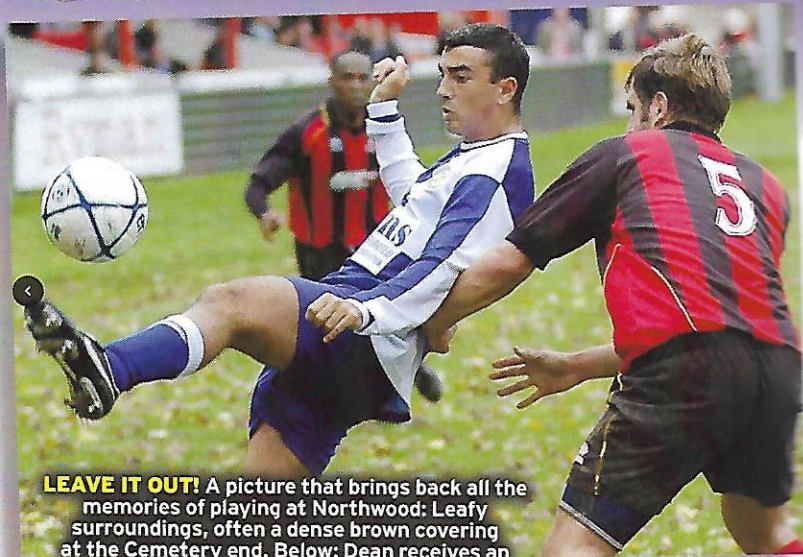
Year after year I've threatened the comeback but this has been much more difficult than I expected. Additionally, I have a bit of a back problem that doesn't allow me to play or train as much as I'd like without discomfort.

Despite the back, you still play a bit - any thoughts of Coaching, management at any level?

Even now I still get a couple of semi pro clubs call and try and sign me, but due to the commitment required I just play locally. I was playing for a local Langley side for a few years and won a few trophies and then this season I changed club and we won the treble plus I won a few honours scoring 33 lol. Management or coaching? Who knows....

What happens now if you're out and you hear 'that' Pigbag song (da da da da, Dean Papali, da da da da, Dean Papali)? It was definitely a massive highlight in my time at the Stones. I think it was first sung at Bath away, after I'd just equalised, and then it continued during my time at the club. Great! Those memories always flood back if I hear it and even when friends ask me to remind them how the song went!

The table is set for dinner. Five chairs. Who are your



LEAVE IT OUT! A picture that brings back all the memories of playing at Northwood: Leafy surroundings, often a dense brown covering at the Cemetery end. Below: Dean receives an award from a very young Gordon Bartlett

four guests and why (anyone dead or alive, real or fantasy), and what are you serving?

The greats; Muhammed Ali, Michael Jackson, Kanye West and Jose Mourinho (though I'm a Chelsea fan so my feelings may change very soon). They need no introduction! I's have to serve a real Spanish Paella with meat and fish.

Finally, does a mention of "Wealdstone" or "the Stones fans" put a smile on your face or a frown?

100% a big smile on my face.

My biggest footballing mistake was leaving Wealdstone far too early and not working harder to get fit and back into the team. I

was very naive but just as it remains today I was just super keen to play football week in week out and that was my reason for such a hasty decision.

The development of the club has been incredible since those days and a fitter, more mature Dean Papali would've liked to have been part of the success. Gordon is a manager I have the utmost respect for and has a great understanding of each player individually. His knowledge of the game is incredible and I admire the way he's stuck at things during all of the challenges he's faced with honesty and integrity.

The passion and care the fans have for the club is incredible and something you don't get even at a professional level.

There is just one last thing I must ask - am I still the most successful penalty taker the club has ever had? LOL!

I was so confident during my time at Wealdstone, then I missed a couple after I left and my whole mind-set changed!

In recent times at the 'Stones, yes I'm sure you are our most prolific penalty scorer but in the all time record I reckon you are about 100 behind Charlie Barker!

