

Gary McKeown: I only played a couple of years but loved the spirit and the banter.. and we finished with promotion through the play-offs!



BY ROGER SLATER



Gary McKeown was a trainee and youth player at Arsenal, though he never played in the first team. He did play nearly 70 times in the Football and Scottish Leagues while on loan and at Dundee, before playing for five years in Hong Kong and one in Greece. In 2003, Gary returned to the UK and signed for Bishop's Stortford, from whom he joined Wealdstone in March 2004, making his debut in a 0-1 defeat at home to Harlow Town. Gary made 65 starts and two substitutes appearances, scoring nine goals for Wealdstone before he finally hung up his well-travelled boots...

Gary, where are you based now? And what do you do for a living / hobbies? I'm currently based in Winchmore Hill, North London. I've been working away from home on and off for the past five years, more recently working in Russia for a gas & chemical company in the semiconductor industry.

Pre Wealdstone, your career started at Arsenal, taking in Hong Kong and Greece I believe - Do you look back on those days with a smile on your face? Any Regrets?

I started at Arsenal and was there for five years, 1987-1992. I had a few loan spells at Shrewsbury and Exeter before I moved onto Scotland with Dundee FC for another five years, 1992-1997. Finishing there I moved to Hong Kong for (wait for it) five years (1997-2002) playing for Yee Hope, Hong Kong Rangers and Sun Hei as well as representing the Hong Kong League XI and I played for Apollon Kalamarias in Greece for a season (2002-2003), before returning home and playing for Bishop Stortford then Wealdstone.

I try not to look back too much but when I meet up with old team mates and talk about old times that does bring a smile to my face - it's not usually about this game or that game or who won this or won that, it's all about the laughs we

had, the changing room, the tours away and the nights out! The highlights are being able to do a job that you look forward to going to everyday, and a job that you love doing. I'm yet to find a better job out there than being a professional footballer. The biggest regret has to be the amount of injuries I had. It leaves you wondering what might have been....

Were there big differences in the game in the UK and overseas - and again when you dropped into Non-League?

The biggest differences overseas is that the game is technically far better overseas than in the UK. Here, the game is based far more on power and pace - it's all played at 100 miles an hour; It's exciting but overseas coaches encourage you more to express yourself. The game has changed a lot since I finished and in non-league the pitches are so much better. And at last players are being encouraged to pass it more.

You joined Wealdstone in 2004 from Bishop's Stortford and played the following
CONTINUED OVERPAGE

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

season too, before you retired. The club was striving to survive let alone compete at that time...what did you think you were joining and what was it like as a player at the time? Before I joined in 2004 I'd just left Bishop Stortford and I was going to call it a day, then I had a phone call from Gordon and he sold the club to me.

What Gordon really told me was that we were just outside the play-offs with a few games in hand at home. It wasn't until reading the programme before my debut v Harlow, that I realised we were 12th in the league and about 15 points adrift, I really thought that Gordon Bartlett had one over me ha ha!

He was right though - we finished in the last play-off spot and won the play-off for promotion.

Any real memories, highs and lows of your time at WFC?

It's a really good memory, remembering that we were so far behind that 2003-4 season (mainly due to sharing a ground with Edgware) - we had so many games in hand, then we went on a run and couldn't stop winning. Playing three games a week and working was tough - and it was three games a week every week with the League and the Middlesex Cup as well, but what a finish! We won the Cup and then won the play-off at Dulwich Hamlet on penalties following a season where the club (me included) had missed quite a few....

Was that challenge at Windsor the worst piece of timing ever or was there more to it?

Ha ha, I remember getting sent off after about 15mins! I ran in and confronted the boy who had been running around like headless chicken, every challenge he left the boot in and it wasn't only me that wasn't happy about it.

I stuck the head in and (rightly so) was given a straight red. Strangely it was the first and only time in my career I played with a lady referee in charge but it didn't matter - I didn't have a leg to stand on if I'd even thought about arguing the decision!

I don't know what was more embarrassing; while taking the long walk I heard as clear as anything a 'Stones fan shout "Gary McKeown you're a disgrace" or the fact that when I stuck my head into the boy's face, my forehead caught his big front teeth and I walked with

a red face covered in claret. I duly apologised to the boys at half time and they went on to claim a good away point.

Have you kept in touch with players or anyone at the club at that time? We did for a while. We had a good team spirit at that time and as with all teams, players come and go but we always used to meet up around Christmas time. We did that for three or four years, but I haven't seen anyone recently.

How would you describe yourself as a player? I don't really like describing myself, I'd prefer others to have their opinion but I'd like to think I could play a bit.

Are you now a fan or involved in the game at any level? Any thoughts in Coaching / Management? I took my coaching badges when I finished playing but it wasn't for me. I still love the game and try to get to The Arsenal whenever I can.

I also played five-a-side for a while to stay fit and I love playing for the Vets. I love the banter and it's great to get out there again, even though it's playing off memory rather than what's left in the legs.

Finally, let's make out you're a late addition to the voting for the next President of FIFA. What are the headlines in your manifesto?

"And now to a clean level playing field for the world's greatest game".

Talking about Blatter getting a FIFA ban! If everything we hear is true, then he should be jailed and so should all of those people who let him get away with it for so long.....

