

STONES INTERVIEW BY TIM PARKS

Ross Lafayette

'I was scoring goals for Welling as they provided me with the tools.. here at Wealdstone we have the wide players & the quality to do the same thing'



ROSS Lafayette went so under the radar the first time he pulled on a Stones shirt that we even got his name wrong in the programme!

Ten years ago, the then-23-year-old was "so excited" to be signing for the Stones that he could overlook the misspelling for the prestigious home friendly with Leeds United's Championship side. That game was arranged as part of the deal that took Wealdstone's star striker Jermaine Beckford to Elland Road in an £80,000 move - and the summer's evening ended with Ross grabbing the deciding goal in a 2-1 win in front of a 1,400 crowd at The Vale.

"Yeah, that whole evening was unreal" laughed the target man, who was the first capture of this close season and the first name on Dean Brennan's wanted list. "I was talking about those days only the other night with Northy, who caught the tail end of the Lee Chappell-Chris O'Leary-Jimmy Gray era.

It was a crazy time - such a good dressing room with the banter flying about and some unreal things happening. The Superman pants thing and the whole autumn leading up to the Rotherham FA Cup game - I'm not as outgoing as some of the others but that was a special time for everyone."

Ross was on the periphery that autumn of 2009, only appearing six times as manager Gordon Bartlett went with the dynamic Greg Ngoyi-Charlie Mpi combination up front. "Looking back with reflection, I wasn't at my strongest back then - just recovering from an anterior cruciate ligament injury that had stopped me playing for 18 months. I was just desperate to get some game time and thought the move to the Stones would be brilliant



Dan Finill captures the moment Ross hits the net v Hitchin in pre-season

Below: A bit of a boob in the programme 10 years ago!

for me. It's a big club - I grew up in Rickmansworth and Croxley Green so I know all about the history of the club - but it was all too soon and I needed more recovery time."

He was only on the losing side once (a Middlesex Cup defeat to Uxbridge) and was influential coming off the bench with his solitary goal in Wealdstone blue coming in a 3-1 FA Trophy win over Margate at the Vale.

He also made a late appearance in the epic here, FA Cup game with Rotherham coming on in a double substitution with Danny Spendlove that so nearly saved the game at 3-2 behind.

"Spenny was brilliant and nearly scored a after a solo run, and then I was played in on goal but it was just too far ahead of me and the keeper saved. It might have been glorious!"

"In the end I felt I wouldn't break back into the side and went back to Aylesbury, where I'd played my early football, and then Burnham."

It was a move to Southern Leaguers Hemel Hempstead in 2010 that really sparked the career of the 6ft 2in striker. "I was playing up front with Dennis Fennemore and it was a great partnership. My goals there earned me a move to Welling in the Conference South, and we blasted our way to the title in 2013. That was probably the best period of my career - so far! Jamie Day was the man-

ager and he really believed in me, giving me the tools to score lots of goals. We had quick wingers who got the ball into great areas, giving me the chance to finish... and Dean Brennan, the boss here has a similar philosophy. He likes to keep the ball on the floor, getting the ball wide and at speed and we have the rapid, clever players to really make it work this season.

"The club kept the strong core from last year - Northy, Jerome, Shepp and Greenie - and brought in some seriously talented new players. Dejon and Dennon will score goals while Jacob Mendy is brilliant and slightly unpredictable! We may not have the biggest names but it's a good changing room, lots of joking and laughter and real competition for places. I was at Billericay with Connor Smith last season and I know what a good character he is, and a great box-to-box midfielder who can pick a pass. And he's got that Irish humour!"

Ross scored an impressive 36 goals in 79 games at Welling, including a couple of stellar displays against Luton Town (on their way back into League Two in 2014 as Conference champions).

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WEALDSTONE V LEEDS UN	
STONES	LEEDS UN
blue and white	all white
Sean THOMAS	Casper ANKERGREN
Marvin MCCOY	Ben PARKER
Lee CHAPPELL	Paul HUNTINGDON
(C) James GRAY	David PRUTTON
Alan MASSEY	Rui MARQUES
Ryan ASHE	Lubomir MICHALIK
Keiron FORBES	Fabian DELPH
Chris O'LEARY	Nell KILKENNY
Stephen HUGHES	Jermaine BECKFORD
Greg NGOYI	Luciano BECCHIO
Danny SPENDLOVE	Alan SHEEHAN
Jamie OSBOURNE	Mike GRELLA
Ross LAFETTE	Bradley JOHNSON
Gary JONES	Fabian DELPH
Terrill LEWIS	Enoch SHOWUNMI
	Alan MARTIN
Referee: Stuart Burt	
Assistants: Rob Allum & Richard Jaye	
4th Official: Brendan Doherty	
MATCH SPONSOR Tim Vernon	
Match Ball Donor: Howard Kraus	



Above: Ross leaps to score for Welling and (above right) he celebrates a goal against Dartford on opening day. Foot of page: Ross pictured in 2009 (far left) with Ryan Ashe and Chris O'Leary celebrating a goal against Margate in the FA Trophy

"I got one goal against them and the crowd was saying 'sign him up, sign him up!' says Ross.

"And that summer that's just what happened. John Still was the manager and he brought me in, my first full-time contract, on a promise that I would replace the veteran Paul Benson as the season progressed. But he sold me the dream. I only made one start, in a 2-0 win over Cheltenham at Kenilworth Road in front of 9,000 and I played pretty well I thought. But back came Benson after that game and that was it, my Football League days were over".

Ross was being a bit hard on himself. His stock as a physically-intimidating centre forward was still high and he went out on loan at Conference National sides Welling and Woking before landing another pro deal at fast-rising Eastleigh. Then it was a season apiece at Aldershot, Dover and Sutton United, with a ten-game loan spell at Maidstone last year before a move to Billericay that tested the endurance of the Rickmansworth-based striker who hated the endless treks around the M25.

"Wealdstone is a great fit for me, just 15 minutes from home for matches and training and

they match my ambitions, to score goals and get promoted. Meeting Rory was the clincher. And since then I've been impressed by the signings and the club as a whole."

Ross has worked in digital media for eight years, originally with the Independent and the Evening Standard but now for the new start-up Flash Talking platform that hopes to make its mark in the field. And if you understood that you're clearly not an old print-media dinosaur like me!

He can tailor his office hours around football but confesses that the workload has become really tough now the games have started. "We've got EIGHT league matches in August and I really can't fathom why it's so many, so soon. It seems like we've only had a two week break this close season and it makes the first month hugely important. But we're gelling well as a squad and winning... we're ready for anything!"



NEXT PLAYER INTERVIEW: CONNOR SMITH. DON'T MISS IT!



ROSS LAFAYETTE

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