

File: BMD Gareth Roberts

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Interviewer: Okay. Can we just start by stating your name?

Gareth Roberts: My name's Gareth Roberts.

Interviewer: And what your involvement with the club is?

Gareth Roberts: Well, my involvement is, that I'm a part-time supporter.

Interviewer: You're a part-time supporter.

Gareth Roberts: I'm a part-time supporter.

Actually, I'm a Bristol City season ticket holder, but I live in Hertfordshire, and I'm a keen football fan. So, if I'm unable to get to a Bristol City game, then I will often look in the paper to see if Stevenage are playing, and I will come along and watch them.

My other connection through the club is, that I know one of the officials here, so he's encouraged me to come along and watch them.

So, I suppose I've been coming along, on and off, for four seasons now, and it's been an enjoyable experience, and quite a change from my normal watching.

Interviewer: So how did you become a part-time supporter?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I suppose when I was invited along to a game when, I think, Peter Taylor was in charge. And Stevenage were in the Conference at that time, so going along to non-league football was an interesting experience.

I mean, going from games where you normally need to pay £30 to get in, to one where you only, I think the entrance fee was £10, was really good. And to be able to just spend that much money for an afternoon of entertainment was worthwhile.

Interviewer: So do you live in Stevenage now?

Gareth Roberts: No, I live in Bishop's Stortford, so I'm about half an hour away.

Interviewer: Okay.

How long have you been living around this Hertfordshire, sort of, area?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I've been in Hertfordshire for probably 35 years now, so a fair old while, really.

Interviewer: Whereabouts have you been living in Hertfordshire, then?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I've been in Bishop's Stortford nearly all that time.

Interviewer: Okay. Whereabouts is that?

Gareth Roberts: It's in Hertford.

Interviewer: Yes, whereabouts is it?

Gareth Roberts: It's in East Hertfordshire.

Interviewer: Yes, because I'm from Rickmansworth.

Gareth Roberts: Oh, right. So you're diametrically opposed to the other end of the county. So you've come across Stansted Airport no doubt, and it's right next to there.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, yes.

So, when you first came to ____ [0:02:01], what, sort of, made you want to come back again and again?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I think the interest, first of all, was that there was a player playing for Stevenage at that time, who I'd seen playing for Bishop's Stortford, interestingly enough. And he'd been a player that I'd always noticed at Bishop's Stortford, because he seemed so much better than the normal run-of-the-mill players.

And Bishop's Stortford are actually in the lower – even in those days – were in lower divisions than Stevenage. And that player was a guy called Steve Morrison, who's gone on to represent Wales at international football, and he's now a Premiership footballer, playing for Norwich.

So I thought it was quite interesting to come along to games that were of a lower stature than I was used to watching, and at the same time, being able to spot players who were really, maybe, a standard or two above the one that they were playing in, and spotting them, whether they were going to go on and play at...

I think the other thing that's very different about coming and watching a game like this is, you're far more involved, in terms of being able to go and have a drink at the bar and see the players after the game, and so on, particularly when there's that non-league football thing. It's changed a little bit now that they're in League 1.

Interviewer: Yes.

Do you think part of, like, the reason why you, kind of, [like it 0:03:35], is because this is, like, probably the best time in Stevenage's history?

Gareth Roberts: I think it's undoubtedly the time in Stevenage's history. I mean, the fact that they've become a league club after all these years, and not only that, but having one season in the league, and managing to get promotion through the play-offs, was amazing.

I came to the play-off semi-final against Accrington Stanley, and the ground was heaving. And the fact that they'd managed to move into that situation, where they had a good chance of going up, was, I think, a surprise to everyone, particularly as they'd gone through a bit of dodgy patch earlier on in the season.

But it's a good side, I think, that Westley's got here. And he's got a team spirit. You don't always see the prettiest football at Stevenage, but it's effective. They manage to get the ball from back to front quite quickly. And I think if they had a couple of goal scorers in the team, they'd probably be doing even better than they are at the moment.

Interviewer: In the short time you've been here, have you noticed any changes in the size of the crowd?

Gareth Roberts: There has been a small increase in the number of people coming alone, but not to the extent that one would be expecting. The difference between Conference football and League 1 football, it is big, and you would expect – I would have expected – crowds to be doubling for that change of division.

So my own team, Bristol City, if they went down two divisions, you'd see a big drop off in the crowds. And our average support certainly went up when we were promoted.

So I think it must be a disappointment to the Stevenage board that they're not getting more people from the town along.

In the first or second season that I'd come along to the game, I went along to one of the Wembley Trophy Finals, when they played York City, and I think that was probably 2008. And there were 30,000 people from Stevenage there. Well, certainly 20,000. So there was the demand there.

And 20,000 or 30,000 people from Stevenage going along to a Wembley Final means that you've got 20,000 or 30,000 who are interested enough to go to one game. Well, even if you only get half of those going along to a regular league game, you've got 10,000, and they've never come anywhere close to getting that number of people in the ground. I mean, for a start, it only holds 7,000, but they're not regularly picking up anything like that.

So that must be a challenge for the club, I would think, to try and spread the word, and get more people through the turnstiles.

Interviewer: What do you think the club needs to do to attract more people?

Gareth Roberts: Well, it's certain, success is not going to make a difference, because they've had the success, and it hasn't made a difference.

So, you probably – I mean, as a neutral – I would think that Stevenage, in the short term, have probably gone as far as they're going to go.

The next step up to the Championship is one that I would – in my view – they're not ready for yet. So, they're not going to do

it by becoming more successful, because it's not turning [round 0:07:16].

I would imagine that improving the facilities in the ground would make a difference. It's actually quite easy to come in and park. And if, perhaps, you had a better view, from a better stand, then people might feel that that was one of the things that might make them come along. Because, at the moment, to all intents and purposes, I think it's still Conference facilities, really.

This is one of the very few grounds in the country where you can stand at the side of the pitch and watch the game. They have a terrace on the side of the pitch, which is unique at that level.

But if that stand was replaced by a seated stand, or one of the other one's even because, I mean, there are a group of people who like to come along to a football match and stand and watch it, and I count myself as one of those, really.

So I think it's a challenge for them. I don't know the answer. But I would say the facilities would have something to do with it, because the success of the team doesn't seem to be bringing in the people like you might expect.

Interviewer: Do you think the, sort of, rapid success of the club has also been a hindrance. They now need to, sort of, stabilise themselves in League 1 before they can go any further?

Gareth Roberts: There's bound to be some time of stability. Now, whether the fans are going to be used to that... and they've had two promotions in two seasons.

There was a period in between '96, '97 and 2006 or 2007, when they had their first FA Trophy success, when there wasn't a lot of success in the club.

And, really, in the last six years there's been nothing but success. So how the fans are going to respond to that not happening, one will have to wait and see. But you never know, they might surprise us all. They might surprise us all, and sneak into the play-offs this year.

Interviewer: What do you think has been the main factor behind Stevenage's success?

Gareth Roberts: Well, looking on it, as a bit of an outsider, really, I think the team spirit appears to be fantastic. They're a fit group of players. And, if you've got that, then you can - if you're fit enough to be better than the opposition in that department - then it allows you to play your game a bit better.

And they've got some skilful players too, but I think it's the team spirit and the fitness of the players that makes the difference.

They've also got an ambitious young manager, who seems to manage to get the players to run through brick walls for him.

And you've got a group of players there, who were playing for the club in the Conference, and there are some matches where it's just that same group of players, and they haven't really brought many in. So team spirit must be – they must know each other pretty well now, and want to win for one another. And their success this season has shown that.

Interviewer: How do you find the atmosphere between Bristol City and here? Do you, sort of, get involved with the chanting, or is it just watching the game?

Gareth Roberts: Well, that's a good question because, when I go and watch Bristol City, I obviously care passionately whether they win or lose. And, although I've become very interested in seeing Stevenage win, it's not the same matter of life and death for me.

Yes, I do make a noise when I go and watch Bristol City play, whereas, I probably clap the players onto the pitch at Stevenage, and maybe punch the air when they score, and that's probably about it.

In terms of the comparison, between what's a long-established football league club and Stevenage, our gates average five times what Stevenage's are, so there is a lot more people in the ground.

It's a bigger stadium. Although, again, that's probably going to be replaced in the next season. So there is very much the, sort of, big match atmosphere down at Ashton Gate, which you don't really get here.

You will do, probably, for the odd games. There's Sheffield United next week. You will probably see that there will be a big match atmosphere.

But some of the lesser games, it's true, that there's not a great deal of difference between what the atmosphere was like in the non-league days. I think their chanting crowd have probably upped their game a little bit, and I see one or two good chants coming over in the last couple of years. And

they've got a drummer and things, which adds to the atmosphere.

And I suppose the major difference for me is, that I'm watching the game in a more relaxed frame of mind. It's quite nice, actually, it's quite nice not to worry about whether the team or winning or losing too much. Although, I have to say, I do look out for Stevenage's results these days.

Interviewer: Do you think having standing terraces makes a difference to the atmosphere here?

Gareth Roberts: I think it does. I think without that, I think they would struggle here. I always sit in the main stand, and there's very little, or no atmosphere, in the main stand, which is unusual, even for seated areas in football grounds. You normally get some singing and chanting, even from the posh bits. You don't at Stevenage at all, which is... I mean, occasionally, they join in, but it's pretty rare. So without that standing terrace, I think the atmosphere would struggle.

I went to a game in Germany last season, to watch Borussia Dortmund, who were the champions last season in Germany. And they've got a terrace of 29,000 people. Behind one of the goals, they've got a standing terrace of 29,000.

Interviewer: Yes, I've seen one of their games here, against Arsenal, the Champions League, this season.

Gareth Roberts: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes.

Gareth Roberts: And then that's an amazing sight, particularly when 15,000 or 16,000 of them are jumping up and down.

And if they can have safe standing in Germany, and they can have safe standing Stevenage, I don't see why we can't have more safe standing, elsewhere in the league, in this country.

Interviewer: Were you in attendance at the Newcastle game?

Gareth Roberts: I wasn't, no, no. No, I didn't come to either of the Newcastle games.

Interviewer: Well, when you saw the result, sort of, what was your reaction? Was it, sort of, like, how the Stevenage supporters were celebrating, [or 0:14:41] would have been a quiet, sort of, approval of how well they've done?

Gareth Roberts: I think so. I certainly remember the first one, the first game, because there was all the furore as to whether they were going to be playing at home or away. But that was in the days when I didn't really feel that I had much of an interest in Stevenage.

Last season's one, obviously, was – I'm not particularly keen on Newcastle anyway (Laughter) – so it was quite nice to see them [here].

There's always been an arrogance to the Newcastle fans, which I've found a bit irritating. So, yes, it was quite nice to see The Borough put three past them, was it, I think?

Interviewer: Yes.

Gareth Roberts: Yes.

Interviewer: So, if there was a situation where Bristol City and Stevenage ever met, where would your allegiance be?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I'm afraid it would always be with Bristol City, but I'm not sure that, unless it comes up in the FA Cup, it's going to happen this season.

But I'm afraid that, with Bristol City being in their desperate situation, that they are at the bottom of the Championship at the moment, it could well be a league fixture next season. But let's hope not, eh? Let's hope it never happens.

Interviewer: Well, I'm a, sort of, Watford man, so it, sort of, it's seems likely as well. (Laughter)

Gareth Roberts: Well they're not doing so great this season either. So we could have both Watford and Bristol City playing at Stevenage next year. (Laughter)

Interviewer: I'm sorry. I've forgotten what I was going to say. Sorry.

Gareth Roberts: I can tell you about the Wembley game-

Interviewer: At Wembley, yes.

Gareth Roberts: -which, I have to say, was a great occasion. I went to the second time Stevenage played at Wembley, which was against York City.

And I was fortunate enough to get tickets in the, what I think they call the, sort of, it's the main, sort of, royal box area of the ground, which was my first time at the new Wembley. And it was quite an experience.

And I've since been there to see Bristol City play. And that wasn't such a great experience, because we actually lost to Hull in the play-off finals, when they went into the Premier League.

But to see Stevenage, it was a lovely sunny day, and I have to say, their fans turned up and made good noise, both on the way to the ground.

I remember stopping off at Baker Street, for a pint in The Globe, and there was a good number of Stevenage fans making quite a lot of noise.

And I think there were people looking at the Stevenage shirts and wondering who the teams were [they/that 0:17:36] were playing. And I think York also play in red and white, so I can't remember, I think Stevenage were playing in white on that particular day.

And it was a game with, certainly Steve Morrison scored one of the goals. He may have even scored both of them. But I certainly remember Mark Roberts lifting the cup, and being able to go up right to where the players were going up the steps to collect the trophy.

And, yes, there was lots of jubilation. And I imagine that it was quite a good party in Stevenage that night, because they were obviously very happy to win. And there was some good football played, there really was.

And as I started off by saying, to see Morrison go on and not only play for his country, but to play and score in the Premier League, has been interesting, watching his career.

And I've often wondered by Mark Roberts hasn't been picked up by other clubs, because I think he's a player who could probably play at a higher level.

Interviewer: Have you noticed any rivalry, since you've been here, between other clubs?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I came to a game, which was a play-off semi-final, about four years ago, between Cambridge and Stevenage, and certainly, there was plenty of rivalry on that particular evening. But I think Stevenage might feel they've left the likes of Cambridge behind now.

Interviewer: Yes. So, [no, 0:19:14] Stevenage don't, sort of, have a main rival - whereas Bristol City ____ Bristol Rovers - at Stevenage.

Gareth Roberts: That's right. Stevenage don't seem to have that do they?

Interviewer: It could be Watford, but they've really, sort of, met too many times to build up a rivalry.

Gareth Roberts: That's right, no. Watford is probably 10 or 15 miles down the road, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes.

Is there any particular player that - since you've been supporting the club - that you would say is your favourite?

Gareth Roberts: Well, I mean, I've mentioned Morrison. I mean, certainly, I would say he's been the standout player. I think Stacy Long is a good player. Mark Roberts I've mentioned already.

I think the midfield, Bostwick and Mousinho, is probably as robust, and strong a midfield pairing, as you've got in any club in the league. And I would imagine that any team that comes across those two know they've been in a game.

So those are the players that stand out for me, I think.

Interviewer: Do you think the squad has what it takes to stay in League 1?

Gareth Roberts: Oh, they'll stay in League 1, yes, yes. Yes, they won't be relegated this season. There's too much spirit, and there's too much quality in the team, I think.

And, although you often look at teams that have gone up, as ones that might come back down, winning is a mentality that, you know, it's easy to keep when you've got it. And you only need to look in the championship, to see what Southampton and Brighton have done. They've come straight up and have carried on winning.

So, although I think Stevenage are probably going to finish mid-table, and they won't carry on winning everything, I think they'll stay up.

Interviewer: Do you think the current squad, sort of, will move on a bit, like, next season? Or do you think they'll be able to keep the players they have?

Gareth Roberts: That's a good question. I think they probably need to buy a striker. In terms of hanging on to their players, they've all come from non-league, so whether people would say that they've maybe gone as far as they can do, I don't know.

I mean, if I was looking out for a centre-half, I'd probably have Mark Roberts on my shopping list. Other than that, I imagine that Mousinho could probably do a job at Championship level as well.

Interviewer: Would you say a club like Stevenage is important to the town of Stevenage? And I suppose, as a general question, do you think, sort of, local football teams are important to their town or city?

Gareth Roberts: I think it's absolutely crucial for establishing a presence, an ethos, a sense of belonging, and particularly when you've got a one-club town. And if the club's doing well, quite often the town feels good about itself.

Now, Stevenage has more of a chequered, and more of a recent history than some other clubs, but if you see the effect it has in towns and cities, when their teams are doing well, and conversely, how they feel when their teams are doing so well, it's interesting.

I mean, if you consider, for example, that Stevenage are now playing in the same league as Sheffield, the two Sheffield clubs. Sheffield's a big city, and you will walk around Sheffield and see people wearing Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday shirts. And they, as a city, I think they feel quite depressed that they've got two clubs in that division.

[Well, /While 0:22:50] Stevenage should feel quite proud of having a club in that division. I don't know, if you walk round Stevenage, how many Stevenage shirts you'll see, but hopefully, more than you would have done three years ago.

Interviewer: Do you think the club now is, sort of, because it's in League 1, it's, sort of, like, it gives the town a more sense of belonging, something to be proud of that's, you know, has put Stevenage on the map more, it's made it into the football league ____ [0:23:19]?

Gareth Roberts: [And] true. Well, Stevenage is a new town, established after the Second World War, so it's got a fairly short history itself.

And there aren't any other teams, apart from Stevenage and Crawley, from new towns, that have made it through the divisions and into the football league.

Milton Keynes bought a franchise, really, from ____ [0:23:49] Wimbledon, which became the MK Dons, and they didn't actually have to win any promotions to get where they are today.

So, you know, I think it must be important for towns like Crawley and Stevenage to have a successful football team.

Interviewer: I think there are so few towns, sort of, in the top division. What makes a, sort of, so city football clubs more successful?

Gareth Roberts: I think a lot of it has to do with tradition. A lot of it has to do with how people are brought up, for football to be very important for them. If you look at the North West, for instance, the number of football teams there are there is phenomenal: The Bolton's, the Blackburn's, both Liverpool clubs, Manchester clubs, Wigan, Blackburn, the list goes on, and yet they still manage to be supported, and it's a real football area.

Looking at London, again, it's a real football area. I think that areas that don't have that tradition struggle a little bit, and they need to develop it, but they can realise that it can be very important for the area.

Interviewer: Do you think the club struggles - because it is on the outskirts of London - that it struggles for support, because they'll have Arsenal, Tottenham, Chelsea, even, sort of, Liverpool, Man United, sort of, taking fans from the areas?

Gareth Roberts: I think you get that in any town where there's not a Premier League club. Little boys always tend to like to support clubs that are successful.

And I think that's made even worse in a place like Stevenage, where people have moved to Stevenage, families have moved to Stevenage, with allegiances to London clubs. It's not unusual for you to support the same team as your father supports.

But I think a local town allegiance to a football club is very important, and I think the glory hunters – the Manchester United, Chelsea and Everton fans and so on – no, and maybe not so much Everton these days, but...

I heard a funny joke the other day about a Man City fan being asked by a Manchester United fan, when was the last time they'd won 5-1? And his response was, "Well, when I was a Chelsea fan." And they were implying – or was it 6-1? – they were implying that the Manchester City fans had only just come on board because they were glory hunters.

Certainly you wouldn't be a glory hunter if you followed Stevenage, I don't think.

Interviewer: And do you think that's part of – the image of Stevenage is, sort of, regarded as a lower league club, and now they've come quite rapidly through the league, that the image of the club is still quite a, sort of, non-league club?

Gareth Roberts: I'm not sure. I'm not sure what the people in the area think about that. I mean, they - no, you'd have to ask them really,

but perhaps they ought to come along and find out. It's a good place to come and watch your football, I think.

Interviewer: So have you enjoyed the games that you've seen at Stevenage?

Gareth Roberts: I have enjoyed the games I've seen at Stevenage, yes, on the whole. I mean, I came to the 0-0 draw last Saturday, against Yeovil, and although 0-0 draws generally aren't that entertaining, and certainly it was a game Stevenage should have won.

Interviewer: When you came to your first game, was it an enjoyable experience?

Gareth Roberts: Now, you're asking. I think I spent more time watching what Peter Taylor was doing, than what was on the pitch, because he was... Yes, I think it must have been.

Interviewer: Do you think that's maybe the reason why some people don't like to come back to Stevenage? They'll see one game and then there will be, a, sort of, boring game, and they will, sort of, say, "Well, this is not really my cup of tea. I might as well go to something else," ____ [0:27:52] coming back..?

Gareth Roberts: I suppose it would be interesting to see how many of those supporters are regular supporters. You need, as a football club, to get your floating fans in more often.

Interviewer: Yes.

Gareth Roberts: And Stevenage must have these floating fans, and their challenge is to get them in. Whether the fact it now costs £21 to come and watch a game, as opposed to the £15 or so, that it did a couple of seasons ago, I don't know. I don't know whether, [that 0:28:22] money must be of a factor for people [Crosstalk].

Interviewer: Do you think some people are being priced out of football here, at Stevenage?

Gareth Roberts: Well, they're being priced out of London football. And you might think, "Well, if they can't afford London football, perhaps they could come and support Stevenage instead."

I don't know if the club does promotions around the town to get people to come along to certain games, but that's certainly something we've tried at Bristol City, with varying degrees of success.

And, in fact, I see that Sheffield United, if you're under 16, you can go along and watch their game today for £1, which can't be bad, can it? And, of course, Sheffield United are down here next week.

Interviewer: Were you able to go to the game at Old Trafford last season?

Gareth Roberts: No, I wasn't, unfortunately. I think I was away on holiday. But I probably would have liked to have gone. And so, whether I would have counted as a glory hunter or not, I'm not sure.
(Laughter)

Interviewer: Do you think, at this level, the FA Cup is a lot more important to teams, then, at Premiership level?

Gareth Roberts: Well, if you look at the Stevenage Borough Memories Day, as being a factor in that, I think some of their biggest memories have come from FA Cup days. So it's certainly been very important to this club.

I think it's a great shame how the FA Cup doesn't seem to be taken as seriously by the top four or five now. Having said that, of course, Manchester City, it was their first trophy in a long while, that they won last season, [when they 0:30:00] won the FA Cup. So maybe your teams are starting to come back to the FA Cup fold.

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