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Interviewer: And your name, sir, please.

Paul Fairclough: Paul Fairclough.

Interviewer: And Paul, what's your connection with Stevenage Football Club?

Paul Fairclough: I was manager here from around about 1990 and I did 10 years in 2 spells.

Interviewer: Okay, well I'd like to start off with that move from Hertford Town, wasn't it, over to Stevenage? Can you tell us how that came about?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, it came about because I wanted- I'd just passed my full FA licence and I believed that that was going to make me the next Alf Ramsey at the time.

But the professional game was closed door completely, because I'd knocked on it several hundred times. So I decided

to find a vehicle that could help me achieve what I wanted to achieve. And that was go through the Football League steps of winning games, enough games and championships to get into the Football League.

So I saw an opportunity, there was a vacancy at Stevenage Borough. I contacted the then chairman, Ken Vale, and went for an interview in the council chambers in Stevenage. And was told in no uncertain terms that promotion was on the agenda first season.

And that's where it all started for me.

Interviewer: So their ambition matched your ambition at the time. Were- did they- did they take some convincing or was it a meeting of minds?

Paul Fairclough: Well, the chairman then, Ken Vale, still is a great friend of mine. He's a [brusk 0:01:32] Yorkshireman, very dower. Sheffield Wednesday supporter, that's obviously the reason why he's so dower.

But he was, you know, very keen. Having been a mayor, a previous mayor of Stevenage, he was very keen to, you know, keep things bubbling with the town. And obviously like minds, we were very like-minded and so we jumped into bed and got on with the job.

Interviewer: And you first came down to the ground, what sort of job did you see in front of you at that time? What were your priorities?

Paul Fairclough: Well, I was- I was very excited about the whole thing. You know, it was a- it was a step up from where I'd been at Hertford Town. We'd had a very successful season there and we'd won the Herts Senior Cup against all the odds.

So I was confident and in a good mood to attack things. And the side needed to be energised and reformed, you know, into- and the winning formula and to play a different type of football and more attractive type of football.

Interviewer: And were you allowed to bring in your own people?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I was- in those days it was- there were sort of one or two people who were already here. There was a strange few anomalies going on that I wasn't happy with. There were a couple of sponsors who actually sponsored players, that sort of thing.

And I was taken to- to a side one day and told, you know, "You should be playing him, I play his wages." But we soon got around those sort of things and those ideas. And we got on with the job of building a team from local players, players, you know, within 10, 15-mile radius of Stevenage and the bulk of them from the Stevenage area.

Interviewer: And were they semi-professional players at that time?

Paul Fairclough: Oh yes, absolutely. You know, I liken it to- from the money point of view, I mean, the first year we were here, the players used to get paid- in the first league we were in, they used to get paid enough money to go and have a drink in the bar.

The next championship they had enough money to have a drink in the bar and perhaps take their girlfriend for a meal afterwards.

The next time we won something, the money went up to a point where they could have that drink after in the bar, they can have the meal, but they can also get their shopping from it.

And then after that, you know, we started getting into serious business when we got into the Conference. And it was, you know, serious then. It was a good contribution towards players' mortgages.

Interviewer: And so what about you? Were you still teaching when you first came to Stevenage?

Paul Fairclough: I was still teaching and bringing up a young family as well, so juggling a lot of things. And it wasn't until we made the Conference, that was the 3rd championship.

We'd won the 3rd championship and went into the Conference and it was prevalent then that the club needed to really start thinking about growing. And that's when I made the transition from being a teacher to being a fulltime football manager.

Interviewer: So when you were teaching as well, how did you organise for the training and match day routines and so on? What happened?

Paul Fairclough: In those days, you used to do so much. You know, I mean, I can remember I used to drive the minibus and many a day were I'd take the kit home and I'd take the training bibs home.

And I can also recall we wanted to train- we wanted to do things differently, you know, we wanted to get an area where we could train in the evening under floodlights.

So I can remember going to see the chairman and doing a deal with the school that was over the road at the time. And we purchased some of these huge drums, wooden drums of cable.

And my job before training every night was to reel these cables out, you know, half a dozen of these big, wooden rollers and hoist up cantilever floodlights and perch them around an area.

And then after that I can remember- actually, we secured some land up at a school, up in the north part of Stevenage where we actually found some old streetlights and we erected them. I remember digging the holes and helping lay the foundations and for that, you know.

So I was very, very hands on throughout my whole stay here. I don't think there was- you know, there was nothing I didn't know that was going on in the football club and there was nothing I wasn't prepared to do at the football club to make it successful.

Interviewer: And if you had a game on a day when you were teaching, was the school cool with you leaving early or..?

Paul Fairclough: You know, up until- it was just rush, rush, rush. Everything was rush. I mean, I didn't use to take time off, because when we

were- while I was still teaching, we were still in the Ryman League structure, which limited your journeys. So it wasn't a problem.

I mean, obviously if you're going across to South London, that could be difficult and you'd have to be slick with your movements. And because I have kids to pick up from school it's the same sort of thing and family life had to come first really.

Interviewer: I've heard that one of the potential secrets of your successes here, with the fitness of the players, what ideas had you come with and how did you put those into operation?

Paul Fairclough: Well, you know, motivation of players was key to it all really. And I felt the way you motivate players is to chart results. Everything they did on the training pitch and on the main pitch was charted.

I suppose it was the early days of what we now call pro zone, you know. But I used to monitor them, we used to have races and every race that they had was recorded and published on a board, so there was- it was always internal competition within the squad all the time to achieve and be better.

And of course, I used to- I mean, I used to push them to the limits. You know, I used to push them on the track. I mean, I knew what I was doing, it wasn't a case of sort of crushing them or breaking them.

But it was a case of making sure that they were going to be the fittest and be the best that they could possibly be when they went on the pitch.

Interviewer: And that- how did you know when you had a group of players that were going to go on and win things? Because that came quite quickly, didn't it?

Paul Fairclough: Yes. I mean, I was a very sort of, I say confident young man at the time. And very, I felt, cutting edge. So I was very confident in the methods that I used and I felt that if I could get the rights players together and create the right team spirit, I felt we'd be an unstoppable force.

And that's what it became, because when we won the first- the second division, it was called the Ryman's- the Diadora Davison Two North, I remember people saying to me, "Well, done, that's good, but we perhaps need to consolidate now."

But I wasn't in a- you know, I wasn't in any frame of mind to consolidate. I had an aim that I wanted to fulfil. I'd set myself a 10-year plan. But I was quite- I was also quite an impetuous person at the time and wanted success quicker than that. So I was driven for what I wanted and for what I wanted for the club as well.

Interviewer: And were there any key players at that time that you thought were instrumental in the way that you were pushing the club forward?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I mean, everyone's- there's been some great players who have come through the club. And you know, great people who worked with me as well. People like Paul Peterson worked with

me, Noel Blackwell worked with me, the late John Harding worked with me.

And Noel Blackwell was a great leader of the team on the pitch before he turned into sort of assistant manager. He was terrific. He was a player's- having just been a player, he knew what was demanded on the pitch. So he was a great player for the club.

People like Martin Gittings were great players. There was just a host. You know, local boys like Paul Bowjer, who played his role at the club. So there were just a host of- we had very good players.

What we had is, we had a- we had a combination of winners. You know, the majority of players who went on the pitch for Stevenage Borough were winners.

And that was our- that was one of the key things, as well as the fitness and technical ability. They were people who wanted to win things.

Interviewer: And what was your- what was your relationship like with the players in those early days?

Paul Fairclough: I felt that at the time, I wasn't- you know, I wasn't a player who was- I wasn't a manager who would continually have confrontations with players. I believed in talking, I believed in listening to the players and so I wasn't a bully, I was firm, but I was also very fair.

I think it was the schoolteacher thing that was there, you know. So that was- that was my management style. I don't think anyone will remember me as being a bully.

I was enthusiastic and I was aggressive on the touchline, but I was really fair and open with the players and talked to the players as to why, what and how.

Interviewer: What about your pre-match routine? What would you- what would you do?

Paul Fairclough: Our pre-match routines, you know, I was very much into setting them targets before games. Many a time I'd slope up alongside a player and give them a piece of paper an hour before the game and that would be telling quite clearly what I expected of him today, making them feel relaxed, making them feel sharp, making them feel good. You know, making them feel good, making the changing room a good place to be, making the kit nice.

You know, everything was laid out perfectly and we wanted to get a sense of professionalism about what we were doing.

Interviewer: And was there aggression there in terms of the way you viewed the other team? I mean, was there any sort of crazy gang mentality or anything like that?

Paul Fairclough: No, there was no crazy gang mentality, but there was this sort of feeling at the club that something special was growing. And we knew that, without being arrogant. We were a confident bunch and we were respectful of the opposition. But we believed in ourselves. There was a lot of self-belief of what we were doing and what we were trying to achieve.

Interviewer: Let's talk about some of those achievements and in particular those first couple of championship victories that eventually got you up into the Conference.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I mean, obviously the first season was the, as I say, the Diadora Division Two North. And I can remember some of the places we had to visit where- places like Tilbury, going down at Tilbury Docks, Aveley, Molesey, places like that, you know, real places that even now are still dear to my heart, even though I wouldn't perhaps want to go back and play football there again.

But some very interesting places and to win that championship was obviously the start of everything. It was- it came very quickly, it was done in the first season and there was a great sense of achievement having done that straight away. So I was buoyed with confidence, the players were buoyed with confidence and ready for the next challenge.

Interviewer: And did the- did the town turn out at that time? Or was it a slow process?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, when we- I mean, Stevenage had always had a- they'd got a good history. Stevenage Town, I think it was. But I think it had faded. There weren't as many people supporting the club.

Interviewer: They'd been through some tough times I think.

Paul Fairclough: Yes. So I was a case of- it's when something special starts happening, whatever it is, people like to be a part of it. And people like to be part of something that's going somewhere or something that's winning.

And so by winning games of football and the word spreading around locally, the supporters came to watch the game and we could- we started to take supporters away from home. Which I thought, "Hang on, this is strange. There's a bus going today." And then there were two buses and people making their way to games, which we never- I never expected at all.

And as we went through the leagues, that grew and grew.

Interviewer: What were the home gates in those early days?

Paul Fairclough: I think it was about 200 and something, 250, something like that.

Interviewer: And by the time you moved into the Conference, what..?

Paul Fairclough: Well, I mean, the gates were pretty good. I can remember one game in particular down here at Broadhall Way against Kidderminster Harriers. And we don't know why to this day, it was the record gate up until the ground got a little bit bigger. It was the record league attendance and I think you'd have to check that out.

But for some unknown reason, the ground just swelled. We broke every health and safety law that was going at the time. The gaps between the walk around and where the terraces

should be, they were all full with people and if the health and safety people had come in on the day, they'd have abandoned the game.

It was a huge, huge gate and it took us all by surprise and it showed us the real potential that was here.

Interviewer: So you moved into the Conference then, are there any specific games that stick in your memory during that Conference season?

Paul Fairclough: The first season in the- there were a couple of games that stuck out for me.

All right son, how are you?

Male 1: Yes, good. I went to- I'll see you after.

Paul Fairclough: There were a few games that stuck out, yes. One of them was at Macclesfield. It was in our first year of the Conference, we were getting ready for the Conference. We were getting the feel of the Conference.

Make no mistake, this was a big step, going into the Conference. So we were very much getting a feel of it and we went to Macclesfield, at the- it was the last game of season. Macclesfield had won- had won the championship and we were going along there basically to make the numbers up on a big day of celebration.

And I knew at this stage that- I was building for the next season. From six months- from the second half of that season,

I was building. And we went up to Macclesfield and we became real party poopers. And we- what was meant to be the biggest day of their lives, which I'm sure it still was, we beat them 3-0.

And it was one of those significant moments in time where you just know and I just knew that next season we were going to- we were going to get promoted. I just knew. Because every piece of the jigsaw was slotted in really, really nicely and we just tore this team apart.

And they wanted to finish on a high, so it wasn't a case of, "Oh, the job had been done." They wanted to finish on a high, because I know what that feeling is like. I know what it's like to win a game, win a championship, have someone visit you because you've still got a game to play. You want to finish on a high.

So I realised something special was going on. So that was a- that was a real game that I remember very, very well.

Interviewer: I mean, you had that realisation on the day. Was there anything you said to your players about how they ought to be looking at what was happening with Macclesfield?

Paul Fairclough: No, no. When we were in the changing room, I just told them to listen to the cheers that were going on outside, the celebrations that were going on outside. I said, "Because in 12 months' time, that's going to be you."

Interviewer: And they were convinced by that?

Paul Fairclough: I think the players- you know, as I say, we brought in players from the London area, the likes of Phil Simpson, the Barry Hayles', people like Richard Nugent, who was a local boy. We had- we were ready and ready to take on anybody.

Interviewer: So the atmosphere at the beginning of that championship winning season was different? You felt that this was...

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I mean, we obviously knew the task that stood ahead of us and we had to- there were some big, big games. There'd been- Woking had been the thorn in our side for years and we'd had- semi-final of the trophy we'd been beaten by them and there was a game down here the year we won it where...

Woking used to always pull a big crowd at that stage and I remember the game that was- we knew then that we had one foot on the stand to lift the trophy. And Woking came to us and they'd got a couple of injuries in the side, which we felt we could exploit the areas that they were in.

And we hit Woking very hard, very early on. And I think we ended up winning by about 3-1, 4-1, which was- had never happened before. They'd always come to us and they'd always rolled us over.

But now we had superseded the great Woking and that was a further boost to that season towards going to win the championship.

Interviewer: But of course there were some off-field issues that clouded that particular season. When did you start to hear about the issues with the ground?

Paul Fairclough: Well, it was something that I I was aware of, you know, that we had to get- but what I have to say, it was about the ground and being ready. And I was pretty focused on getting the job done, getting the championship won. And I was confident that I could leave those sort of things in the hands of the then chairman, Victor Green.

I was fairly confident that, you know, I'll do my bit on the pitch, you must do your bit on the pitch- off the pitch. And as far as I understood, we had to- there was a case- the rules of the Football League were that basically, you- even though you were going on holiday in the summer, you had to have your suitcase packed by Christmas.

And apparently we knew that. In other words, the ground had to be ready the Christmas prior to the May that you went up. So you had to have your ground in order six months before. You didn't get that leeway from winning it and then that sort of two month period to get it ready before the season kicked off.

And that was the contentious issue and the then chairman, Victor Green, was confident, because by the time the season finished the ground was perfect. The ground- the last game of the season, the ground was perfect ready for football league. And the then chairman was- he was confident that he could challenge the FA and have this decision reversed.

So I remember coming back to pre-season training, we still didn't know what league we were going to play football in. We didn't know.

Interviewer: So in fact, the ground issue really only came to the head after you'd won the championship, as far as you and your team were concerned?

Paul Fairclough: No, no. It was there. And this is what I was very angry about, because, you know, Mr Green was aware of the problem. And whether it was a case of money holding back the development of the ground to make it developed- to develop it quicker. I think that's what it was. So it wasn't- we didn't adhere to the rules.

Interviewer: And did that affect your relationship with the chairman during that season? Or was it only afterwards?

Paul Fairclough: No, no. It was- it was after that, the next season. Yes, it definitely- because it had affected- it affected performances on the pitch next season all round.

I had a group of players- I had a manager who'd climbed Mount Everest and then been told, "Sorry mate, you're up the wrong mountain, you've got to go down and do it..."

So I- there was a little- I became a victim mentally, which was wrong. And the players, you know, became victims as well. They thought, "Well hang on, we've done this once. Why when we've done everything we're supposed to do as footballers, why are we having to do it again?"

Interviewer: Well let's come back to that, but I think we probably glossed over a little bit the success of that season and what was happening on the pitch. Because it must have been fantastic to

be leading that group of players to a pinnacle that would have seemed unbelievable just four, five seasons before.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I mean, the journey took six years. I had a plan for ten and we did it in six. Four championships in six years. And I don't care what anyone said, whatever level you play at, winning a championship- doesn't matter what level you're playing at, winning championships, not coming second...

There's managers who have had careers and players who have had careers and never won anything. There's managers who've had promotions but never won anything. So winning it, actually winning them was the real thing for us and the real thing for me. And winning that final season was fabulous. It was just great.

People like Barry Hayles just terrorised defenders all around the country at that stage. The sheer mention of his name on the team sheet used to, you know, frighten people to death.

Interviewer: And are there players who made significant contributions to that season? Who was your captain at the time?

Paul Fairclough: Who was the captain at the time? You're asking me a very good question.

Interviewer: Maybe you had to- with the good teams, you have to have 11 captains.

Paul Fairclough: No, I know the captain. The captain was Steve Berry. I had- I had two fantastic midfield players. I had Steve Barry and Paul Barraclough, who played alongside each other. They were just phenomenal.

And Steve, when he came to me, he'd been playing football in Hong Kong and I wasn't- you know, I didn't take any notice of reputations at that stage, so I hadn't realised that he'd played football at the highest level for people like Sunderland.

And I kept him hanging on for six weeks before I offered him anything. I almost- I gave him a trial. Because I didn't- reputations didn't wash with me at the time. But thankfully, he signed for us and he was just the perfect captain for us.

Interviewer: What sort of style of football were you playing during that season?

Paul Fairclough: We- you've hit the nail on the head. We were playing football. You know, with people like Barraclough and- Steve Berry was the classic fetcher and carrier. He could- he was about 32, but he looked after himself. Great physique, fantast engine. But he was a footballer.

And Paul Barraclough, who'd played at a lower level, was a tenacious midfield player who wanted to win and he'd win tackles and give the ball to Steve Berry. But he could play himself.

So we played football. We had people who could- who were quick and sharp and bright. So we were a footballing side.

Interviewer: And Barry Hayles ___[00:26:36] to feet at that time, he's always a good player off the shoulder.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, Barry played off the shoulder. He was- Barry was not massively technical, but what he was, he was very quick and he had low sense of gravity, very, very strong. But he had a winning mentality as well, you know.

He was- the players that we brought in were hungry and Barry epitomised that. He was a hungry young player.

In fact, I- I took him from a team called Willesden Hawkeye where he was actually paying subs to play football. So bringing him here and giving him a few quid in his pocket was Christmas, you know.

Interviewer: So how did you come across Barry?

Paul Fairclough: Oh, I used to go out and scout around London, sitting in the stands, as you do, with your collar up and having a look what's going on and start talking to people. And I saw these two guys and I thought, you know, Phil Simpson and Barry Hayles, they were a pair, they were a combination. And we took them.

Interviewer: And did you bring them down to the ground to have a look around and did they take some convincing? It was quite a step up for them.

Paul Fairclough: I brought them down, yes. We brought them down here and in fact, they played in a game down here, I think it was Middlesex

County. So we- that was after I'd started talking to them and obviously that was a great opportunity for them to see the ground and the setup. And they loved it and then the rest was history with them.

Interviewer: And so the game when you won the championship, when you won the Conference, can you talk us through that one?

Paul Fairclough: Yes. I'm trying to remember who it was against, because- does anyone here know what the last game was? Was it Halifax?

Interviewer: Some of the research that I was reading, it seemed a bit of confusion as to whether the championship was actually won before the last game of the season or not.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I think it was. I can't remember, you know, because I won it with Barnet and I get confused as well.

So I remember- I remember the after bit of the game. They're the- I remember- I don't remember the game, it's crazy, you know. Some of the big events just blur.

Interviewer: And was there- was there anything that the Borough Council did to mark the occasion?

Paul Fairclough: Again, you know, there was just- we knew that- there was a massive celebration at the end, because the Conference had- they were just beginning- the Conference were learning how to

do things properly at that stage. So they were trying to mimic what was going on in the Premiership, with the stands and everything else.

So I remember after the game there was commotion on the pitch, getting stuff ready and getting the medals ready and then- and I remember the- actually the trophy being handed to Richard Nugent.

And then I remember it being given to me. And it was just a great feeling and I think the first people who I went to see after that were my wife and my two girls. Who- both the girls had got involved with doing bits and pieces down at the club. One of them used to work in the burger bar, one of them used to collect footballs for me and record times at training.

It was very much a family affair, and my parents were here for that game as well, which was fantastic.

Interviewer: So your wife's been supportive of these trips to watch small, small teams all around London on nights when you were supposed to not be working?

Paul Fairclough: Well, she- she didn't come to- because my wife's worked non-stop. She hasn't had a break from the kids, you know, she had the six weeks off when she had the kids and back to school, back to- because she's a teacher.

But she used to travel. We used to- the family used to travel on the team bus. The bus- I mean, I think that was one of the big changes that was probably unheard of at those times. The manager refused to leave the carpark unless his wife and kids were on the coach.

But that was it, if they wanted me, I came with my family. So many is the time that we used to travel back on the coach together. Sometimes my wife didn't come, but the girls would be there on the bus.

I've got regret about bringing the kids up and the wife through football. It does- you know, because football is not all about winning. But we were very- a very- I couldn't have done it, as they say, without the support of my wife and I literally couldn't. And I wouldn't have wanted to have done it without the support of my wife either.

Interviewer: Did it make it easier that Stevenage was a family club? Because I could imagine there'd be some clubs where that sort of thing wouldn't be quite so easy.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I think what's got to be remembered is Ken Vale was, for me, the person who made Stevenage Borough into what it was. Ken was- Ken was- I can remember Ken and I, we used to meet and- for training nights and he's say, "Here, lad, the team were bloody awful Saturday, I'm not bloody paying you." And we wouldn't get paid.

And- or we'd have to- and sometimes the money would be paid from the fruit machines. That's how we were being paid in those days, so I used to have to get to training and I used to finish school, run up here, get all the pound coins out.

I had to get all the pound coins and put them into brown paper envelopes and we used to have this big, wooden bar over there, which was great fun.

So we had this sort of family thing going on and there was a close community and Ken drove that forward with the type of

person he was. His wife Betty was involved with the club and it wasn't until things were really escalating and really getting out of hand that it needed almost a fulltime type person, chairman and so Ken, you know, proudly and a little bit reluctantly handed the reins over to Victor Green. But Ken was instrumental in creating the family atmosphere.

Interviewer: And what about the supporters at that time? What was their- what was the feeling amongst the supporters as the club moved from this small, non-League club to something that was really going places?

Paul Fairclough: Well, they couldn't believe their luck obviously, you know. And it gave- it's been a new town and not having real roots, it started at the beginning to put real roots into Stevenage.

Stevenage was being mentioned on the news, the weather forecast was- "The weather in Stevenage today," that hadn't been done. But because of the effect that we were having on it.

And obviously there's a lot of good industry in Stevenage, it's a growing town and- but the people were proud of the football club and we were nicking supporters from other clubs, from Watford, from Luton and Royston and people like that. And Hertford and Hitching, who were the massive rivals.

I mean, I still go over Hitching and have chats with Andy Melvin, you know, and it was- because Hitching Town were always this team, you know, that were doing well and before they knew, it, Stevenage had sort of overwhelmed them and you only have to look at where they are now.

Interviewer: Absolutely. So let's come back to this aftermath of that Conference winning season and the role that Victor Green had to play in trying to convince the Football League that ground was in fact ready.

Paul Fairclough: Yes. I believe- I mean, my perspective of it was that it needed someone to pay for what needed to be done earlier than what it got done. And I think Victor was always waiting for the money to come through the council or whatever.

Had he- and I think had he just gone, "Right, I'll have to build- I'll have to put my money in it and then get that back from the council," but I don't think he was ever confident he was going to get that and it would ever be done. So it never got done on time.

That's my perspective of it. I mean, I might be completely wrong, but that's my perspective of it.

Interviewer: But he was still holding out hope, even after you'd won the Conference.

Paul Fairclough: Of course he was and he paid a lot of money to- I mean, it wasn't his money, I heard later, but he got people to obviously help him with the court case. The court case cost a lot of money.

And I remember going to the courts in London, you know, to hear the result.

And that was a shocking day. I went with my wife, that was a really shocking day, because after all the evidence and I'd

been brought forward and there was a slur campaign as well that went on at the time also.

Interviewer: In what way?

Paul Fairclough: There was a slur in the national press. You know, I got accused and Victor got accused of trying to bribe opposition and stuff like that. You know, it was all nonsense and it got proved to be nonsense. But there was a slur campaign and...

Interviewer: Where do you think that originated?

Paul Fairclough: It originated from Torquay United, because they didn't want to get relegated and they wanted us not to be promoted, so they could keep their status.

So it got a bit naughty. And- but what I was- what I was more- what I was disappointed in was, I didn't hear the verdict from the judge's mouth, I heard it from the press boys. Because obviously the press boys must have been party to the summing up and when they came back into the court to sum up, the guys were turning around to me and says, "You haven't got- you're staying, you haven't won it."

And then obviously it was made official when the judge announced it and it was a crushing, crushing blow. I mean, I was dazed, you know, absolutely dazed.

Interviewer: And you had to pick yourself up and the team up and go again the following season.

Paul Fairclough: I had to pick myself up, yes. And sadly, that was difficult, yes. That was difficult to do that. We got very close as well. And there was- you know, you talk about games to recall and remember and we got very close the second year, very close indeed.

And I remember the game that really haunts me, and I've got to do something about it, I've got to see someone to get this damage out of the system. But the game was against Macclesfield Town, who we'd played in that other game.

Because they too had problems with their ground and so we were playing Macclesfield and I can't remember what time, but it was at a pretty key time of the year. And we'd planned for this game so well, really panned hard for it.

And I remember Barry Hayles was just coming back from injury and we had Dominic Nailer up front with Gary Crawshaw up front and we had a plan, strategic plan of how to beat this Macclesfield team, who were the contenders.

And we went 2-0 up with 20 minutes to go. At home. And just after we went 2-0 up, one of their key players got sent off. So they went down to 10 men and at that point, my front men had done all the work that I'd asked them to do.

So I remember putting Barry Hayles on and another forward, can't remember who it was, might have been someone like Neil. But another forwarder.

And I looked down the opposite dugout at Sammy McIlroy and Sammy McIlroy's hands- face went into his hands, he was just- he was done. He was gone. Because when he saw Hayles come on the pitch and this other guy come on the pitch, we lost 3-2. Incredible. We lost 3-2.

Had the game gone on longer, it would have been 4 or 5-2, just a weird phenomenon what happened that day. So that's another, you know, game that I remember very well.

Interviewer: Had the players collapsed?

Paul Fairclough: Oh yes, yes. Speechless, because it was a defining moment in the season. Yes, I need to go and sit on someone's couch.

Interviewer: And what was the dressing room like after that?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, everyone was crushed. Because it's one of those moments in football, isn't it? 2-0, 20 minutes to go, you're home and dry and that would have pushed us on, yes.

Interviewer: And obviously not that season, but the following season, you embarked on a major cup run. Can you remember how that started?

Paul Fairclough: Yes. Yes, I do actually. It was a rebuilding process. It was a rebuilding process. That- we denied- we'd denied certain players the chance to get promoted. You know, when we didn't go up, we denied a dozen of those players who could have gone and played in the Football League.

They'd agreed, come on, we'll give it one more shot. And they were still capable, so we had to let them go. We had to sell

Barry. We had good offers for people like Barry, so we had to go into a rebuilding process.

And do you know, I knew the side that we'd put together, I knew it was- I knew it was good, but I knew it wasn't special. It lacked so many things that my other sides had had.

Whether it was me, you know, I don't know. But it lacked what we had normally had. And so the club had never really had a club run, so I thought, "Okay, I'm going to focus everything into putting a good cup side together." Which I think is a different mentality, you know?

So we went about that. So it was pretty contrived, the cup run, because it became my focus. And it was- it turned out to be, you know, a fantastic piece of history for the football club.

I shall never forget it. The people of Stevenage will never ever forget and it people all over the world, I remember, will never forget it.

Interviewer: And of course, in the days when the FA Cup perhaps had more kudos than it seems to have in recent times and really those giant killing acts really were major news, weren't they? Swindon was quite an important part of that cup run, what can you remember about that game?

Paul Fairclough: I think Leyton Orient was that year as well, wasn't it? I mean, Leyton Orient, I remember that game. Peter Shilton was in goal, he should have been sent off after five minutes for building- pulling down Cory Brown.

Swindon was- Swindon was the one really, because we- they were going really well at the time in the Championship, they were- the then Championship. They were right up there.

And I remember the conditions, you know, shocking day. I remember all our supporters in the stand, no roof, rain lashing into them. And I remember Mark Welters who played for England, you know, smashing the ball into the back of the net from 40 yards, wind assisted, you know.

I thought, "Hmm, okay." But also, we got back into the game, Jason Solomon has scored a fantastic goal before halftime. And then we were then kicking with that ferocious wind. And it got worse.

There's no doubt about it, the wind got worse and worse. And we were, you know, we were building up, building up and the goal that won it was down to the conditions, there's no question about it. The conditions didn't help.

The goalkeeper took a goal keep, the ball's gone out of the box and it's curled its way back, almost, you know, 10 yards outside the box. One of our lad has got first touch and then Grazioli's poked in that historical game- that historical goal that got us into that all-important fourth round.

Interviewer: And so that was- that was you playing league opposition. I suppose it was almost a substitute in some ways for the league opposition you should have been playing every week really.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, it was- yes. It was a lot to do about how I felt that you know, "Hey, I'm as good as you guys." And that's probably one of the reasons why I did it.

Interviewer: Who was the manager of Swindon at the time?

Paul Fairclough: Steve McMahon.

Interviewer: And afterwards?

Paul Fairclough: He got sacked.

Interviewer: Oh. And did you have a drink together after the game or..?

Paul Fairclough: No, he didn't stay around.

Interviewer: He didn't stay around?

Paul Fairclough: No. I mean, you know, it's a crushing, crushing blow for senior teams to go out at home in the FA Cup against, you know- sometimes they've got no choice. The force is so powerful in these teams, you know, it's unstoppable.

Interviewer: And what about your dressing room after that game?

Paul Fairclough: Oh yes, fantastic. I mean, it was fuelled with anticipation more than anything else. Well, what's happening and where are we going from here? So yes, kit was fantastic.

Interviewer: And when was the draw made in those days? Was that still a Monday?

Paul Fairclough: No, pretty soon afterwards. I was invited to go to the FA Headquarters and Kevin Keegan was doing the draw. I remember talking to him before the game- before the draw and he said, "Who would you fancy, Paul?" And I said, "I fancy Man United, of course, money."

And he- when he pulled the draw, it was midway through the draw. I remember he- Stevenage Borough came out first and then he pulled out Newcastle United and he said to me, "Well, you didn't get Man U, but you got a United."

And I remember Newcastle United, who were just colossal at the time. And I don't remember any other part of the draw. Don't remember it.

You can ask me anything, I don't even remember. I was in a daze as to what was going on and what was going to happen.

Interviewer: And you came back and spoke to your players afterwards, what was the feeling at the club?

Paul Fairclough: They were all gutted, everyone was gutted. I was disappointed, because we wanted to play away from home. You know, if we're going to play Newcastle, we wanted to play

in front of 40,000 supporters. But we knew here, so obviously- we were naïve, I didn't understand the rules and regulations.

If you go into the FA Cup, you go in because you're capable of holding any kind of cup tie, you can't just reverse it. We- I wasn't aware of those rules, so we had to play the game here.

But anyway, we soon, you know, latched onto the idea that that was cool, so let's try and have the best of both worlds and draw here and go back round. And that's what happened.

Interviewer: You're not telling me you planned for a draw, are you?

Paul Fairclough: I absolutely did not, no.

Interviewer: But there was a wee bit of controversy before the first tie as well, wasn't there? Did Newcastle send some officials down to the ground?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, they did. And I think the chairman, Victor Green, was- he'd become a bit of a media whore at the time, you know, and Victor was very good at manipulating situations. And he really did manipulate a situation.

Victor- it was Victor Green who started the, you know- they turned up, they were stupid about the way they did turn up. They turned up for a ground inspection, it's got nothing to do with them. It's got nothing to do with them, what our ground is like.

You know, they'd been drawn in the FA Cup. So- but we got wind of them coming down and we got- Victor Green got the

TV stations ready and waiting for them. So when they got here, they were labelled as the bullies, who do they think they are? Little Stevenage. And of course that's what created all this euphoria that started then.

Interviewer: So do you think that was a good move or did it backfire on the club eventually?

Paul Fairclough: Do you know, there's one player who played for Newcastle, and there were some great players who played that season, the likes of Alan Shearer, David Batty, John Barnes and people. But John Beresford played in that game and if you ask John Beresford- I saw an interview a few years ago on what was one of the most momentous games in his career. And it was the Stevenage Borough game, because of what went on. Their- their professionalism had been challenged by these upstarts and everything that went with it. You know, he's played in massive premiership- but then this single game sort of got to him more than anything else.

Interviewer: And did it get to you or were you cool under the pressure?

Paul Fairclough: No, it got to me. I was- I suppose, on the outside I was cool as personified, on the inside I was all over the place.

Interviewer: And what were your specific plans for that Newcastle game?

Paul Fairclough: Well, my initial thoughts were we were going to get smashed. So I took assistance for that game. I'm not ashamed to say it. I was inundated by people who sent me all kinds of letters saying they could help me. And one guy who's remained a friend to me today, he did help me.

He helped me to believe that not only could we beat Newcastle, but we could beat the FA Cup. And I got...

Interviewer: And who was that?

Paul Fairclough: A gentleman called David Elliott. Who went on to work eventually with- through my invitations and through my opening a few doors with him with Arsene Wenger, you know.

And we did a lot of role reversal with the players. We took on the role- each player, I gave them the role of one of their players and so we went through what their thought processes are.

And so they all took on the role with real gusto and even started talking- some of the Italians started...

But- and their fears came out, so we knew that- it's really weird and we put all the fears on the board. We had 13 fears. When we became Newcastle, they had 13 fears. It was a draw. Weird.

But yes, so there was a great self-belief when we went out. There was no fear, there was a real belief that we could win the game.

Interviewer: Are were you going to do that by playing football or by out-strengthening them?

Paul Fairclough: No, we had a team that had been designed to play in the FA Cup. We knew how to stop opposition, we knew how to stop them in key areas and we always had a threat upfront. I think we took them by surprise by playing three fellers up front.

“Hey, what are these guys doing, attacking us? You know, you’re not supposed to do that. You’re a small club, get 10 players behind the ball.” But we didn’t, we went and played with 3 front men.

Interviewer: And can you remember being in the dressing room before the game?

Paul Fairclough: Yes, I can remember it all, yes. It was really, really exciting. The whole thing was fantastic.

Interviewer: But what did you say to the team before they went on?

Paul Fairclough: Oh, it was just a case of, you know, we’re ready for this. This is a moment you’re going to remember for the rest of your lives, make it a memory for all the right reasons.

And you know, all the obvious things that you say. You’re playing for your families, you’re playing for each other, the town and the response was just incredible.

Interviewer: And nonetheless, the team went one goal down quite soon.

Paul Fairclough: Well, we'd rehearsed it. Funny enough- because we did a lot of what ifs. You know, what if this happens? What if that happens? How will we- how will we cope with that?

And one of the what ifs was what if they scored within the first three minutes? They scored in the first three minutes.

I can remember it clearly, Gillespie went down the wing, he crossed the ball, Shearer coming back for his first game in six weeks, bang. Oh, Shearer's scored. Three goals in the two cup ties, all the goals.

He came back too early. But we'd rehearsed that, we knew- so we knew what to do, how to respond to that. Because we'd talked about it, because it was one of the fears that we'd put up on the board. What if? What if they scored? So we knew how to respond.

Interviewer: So you planned for the occasion, but that goal that Grazioli scored, talk us through that.

Paul Fairclough: The disallowed goal, first of all. He scored a similar type goal before that, which was ruled offside. But we knew they had a weakness from corners.

There's a great picture and it's in one of the toilets. We actually- one of my players had a specific role to do, to stop one of their best attackers of the ball in the box. And you see it every day now in the premiership, players holding each other.

We were holding one of their players, there's a photograph of it. We had hold of one of their players and stopped him from jumping. Grazioli, who was the smallest player on the pitch, came in and scored.

Interviewer: Amazing.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: So the return leg then after the amazing achievement of going back to St James' Park.

Paul Fairclough: Yes, that was good, because we had to play Gateshead in between. And Gateshead was Newcastle, so we- I said to the chairman, "Come on, can we have a trial run?" So we went on the same- we went by train, booked a hotel.

So when we went to play Newcastle, we went on the same train, I insisted on the same rooms, the same diet, everything was- so familiarity. But one thing was different, we didn't have Grazioli. He'd got injured in the game.

But they went- Newcastle, that was controversial, because there was the- a fax was put in our changing room, deliberately left in our changing room. And it said, "I hope you beat..." something really derogatory about us being cocky bastards or something like that, using the F word.

And it was a fax sent to Kenny Dalglish from- it was from Graham Roberts, who's actually played for us in the past. And

we were the cheeky upstart and it got left in our changing room. So a bit of psychology going on.

They went 2-0 up and I remember Gary Crawshaw getting a goal back, it was his birthday, prodded one in. I looked across at Kenny Dalglish, there was about ten minutes to go, he was white at this stage, because we were on the up.

Dennis Gallagher had been in goal and made some great saves and then I remember putting on Paul Thompson. Paul Thompson was a boy I'd signed and paid money for, one of the first players. He got injured very early on here and he was a Geordie supporter, a Newcastle supporter. And he wasn't fit to play.

He just was not fit to play. He was 80% fit, but we chucked him on and the first thing he did, he got into a fight, smashed Stuart Pearce, got into a fight, rattled Stuart Pearce, wrestled with him on the floor. And that rattled the team, you know.

And we were pushing, we were having a go, you know. And as it was, we didn't- we didn't have enough to pull it back. And sadly that heralded the end of the run and was- it was a great experience for us. But as soon as we turned up on the...

When something like that happens, it finishes. It just goes bang, it finishes straight away. And the team's performances after that cup run were pretty poor.

You know, you walked in on the Monday and it's symbolic. You know, we have this temporary stand and it gets taken down in front of your eyes, because you're here and you see it getting taken down. And it's almost- it wasn't a nice thing. You know, you see this stand taken down.

And I always felt the players had been- there'd been so much attention and so much adulation and so much- so many little

things going on for them and it was as if it got out of control. And I lost control of the situation after that.

I did not know how to manage a team who had been that successful afterwards. I didn't know how to do it.

Interviewer: Nonetheless, I think that much of the current day success of Stevenage can be- you can see the roots in those eight years that you were here the first time. What do you feel is for Stevenage now?

Paul Fairclough: I think what they've achieved is fantastic. You know, Graham Weston has done a brilliant job. Phil Wallace has done a great job, bringing Graham back for the second time. People say, "Never go back." He's proved that going back can be more successful than the previous time.

And I feel now that they won't want to hear it, but I do feel they probably need a period of consolidation now. They might have to look at playing a different style of football to get higher, but they certainly play an effective game that gets results at the lower levels of football.

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