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Interviewer: Okay. Can I ask your name please?

Geoff Gibbs: My name is Geoff Gibbs.

Interviewer: Okay. What's your association with Stevenage Football Club?

Geoff Gibbs: Originally I was just an ordinary supporter like everybody else. Over the last five to eight years I was, firstly, Communications Officer for the Supporter's Association and more recently I'm Secretary of the Supporter's Association. With my team of other committee members, we're responsible for trying to get the numbers of supporters who are part of the association up to almost 1,000 people.

Interviewer: Okay. How are you doing at the moment with that?

Geoff Gibbs: In terms of the numbers, we've got 722. We had 909 last year, but because we've had very lucrative and very popular FA Cup runs around Christmas and January time, that's when we get a few people coming in to join the Supporter's Association. To be

honest, it makes sense if you're part of the association from day one, really from the preseason friendlies, because what you can get is a discount off any shop stock or certain suppliers in Stevenage and the surrounding areas.

For instance, I've got to go to see a solicitor on Friday and I've got 10% off my legal bills. One thing like that pays for the membership for a year.

Interviewer: Fantastic. That sounds a good deal. It sounds like it's support as well as the club, it seems to be a reciprocal arrangement with supporting local business.

Geoff Gibbs: Yes, that's right. Alex Tunbridge, from the club, has done a lot with working in the community with schools and voluntary organisations. It's nice to think that the club is part of the community, not just here on match days, but here all week really. To be honest, we have fans coming from quite a far afield, if you like. Not just Hertfordshire, but places King's Lynn. We've got some supporters who come over from Sweden and Norway occasionally.

We just don't know where the composition of the crowd is likely to come. I've even had people coming down and talking to me who are, what I call, ground hoppers. They go around and try visiting every club in the country. Of course, with a few new stadia, there are more trips to make. We've had one or two people. We had someone the other day came from York and also someone from Newcastle.

Both of those sides are actually clubs we've beaten recently in cup competitions. They still came and had a friendly word with me.

Interviewer: Can I ask, first of all, you said you originally started off as a supporter. What attracted you to Stevenage?

Geoff Gibbs: Mine is a very unique baptism to the club. My home town, as you can tell by my accent, is South West, it's Swindon. I come from Wiltshire originally. In 1973 my job brought me up to Hertfordshire and I stayed here ever since. For the first few years of working up here I was still supporting Swindon, albeit from a long way away.

Then we had the classic game, as far as I was concerned, which was in January '98 when Stevenage got drawn away to Swindon in the FA Cup third round. Talk about divided loyalties. I didn't know who to support then, really. Just before that Stevenage had been refused permission to join the League, because at the time a decision was made their ground wasn't suitable. Wasn't adequate for the Football League.

So, even though they won the Conference, they weren't allowed to go up into the League that year. I am a great believer in fairness and justice and that struck me as being totally unfair. I started getting quite interested in Stevenage, being my local club as well. As I say, when we came to this cup game, I was sitting in the Swindon supporters, but I think by the end of the game I had become a true Stevenage fan.

Interviewer: That was the moment?

Geoff Gibbs: Yes, I think so, because after that it was a combination of things. It's probably my most vivid memory. Being down in

Swindon, I basically found it easier to get a home ticket. I wasn't really bothered, to be honest, who won that game, to be fair because I was supporting both sides. Swindon went ahead very early on and I thought, "This is going to be a bit one sided."

Then, Stevenage, to their credit, came back and equalised midway through the first half. Then the conditions really deteriorated. I was sat level with the penalty area, down one end of the ground. It was horizontal driving hail, basically, into the faces of all the Stevenage supporters, who were sat in an uncovered stand at Swindon, called Stratton Bank. It was appalling. It was gales. It was hail. It was sleet. It was now. And it was driving right into... They were all under these transparent plastic sheets trying to keep warm to some degree.

I thought, "That is a true fan to sit there for 90 minutes." The game went on and it became more difficult for Swindon who was defending against the wind. The goalkeeper for Swindon that day was someone called Fraser Digby. He wasn't the biggest of goalkeepers. He was a very competent goalkeeper, but he was struggling to kick the ball from the goal area out of the penalty area because of the wind. As soon as he got any elevation to the ball, it was just blowing back in his face.

I used to referee young lads who were so small they couldn't actually kick the ball out of the penalty area when they had a goal kick. I just looked at Fraser and I just thought, "He's like a young boy. There's nothing he can do." He couldn't get the ball out to the sides. The fullbacks were too well marked by Stevenage forwards. He was desperately trying to kick the ball out. In fact, the winning goal came because he kicked it, I'm not even sure it went out of the penalty area, but it went quite a way up in the air and Grazioli, one of the Stevenage forwards ran in and basically bundled the ball past the keeper.

To come back in that kind of adverse weather conditions was just impossible, so Stevenage won 2 - 1 that day. Probably, that's the most bizarre, but most influential moment, I think, in both Swindon and Stevenage's history, for me really.

Interviewer: Can you think of any other memorable games that you've seen in recent times?

Geoff Gibbs: Yes. I don't know why, but it was always, the games against Woking in the Conference, even though they are not that local, they were always probably our most hated rivals. I saw a game at Watford which, I think, this is going back even before the Swindon game, when Clive Walker, who used to play for a club like Chelsea, he was dominating the game for Woking.

They beat us in, I think it was the Trophy semi final, but I might be wrong about that. I was so disappointed that day. I thought there has to be a better, a greater future for Stevenage. Round about that time, as I say, that was when I got interested in the club. But more recently, it would have been probably only about five years ago, we haven't obviously played Woking recently, in recent seasons because we're in different leagues now.

We had a game here, and it was highly charged. You could almost rely on those games, someone, at least one maybe two players, were going to get sent off. There was something about these games. As I say, again, it was a tradition that Woking had beaten them at a few critical times. Like the game I referred to at Watford, which had this kind of intensity with both sets of supporters really.

We, basically, were playing here at what was Broadhall Way then and we went ahead. Then Woking, I think, took a quick free kick and got back to 1 - 1. Ironically, somebody who used to play for Stevenage went and scored for Woking to make it 2 - 1 so that wasn't particularly popular. Then we got a penalty at that end, to my left, and John Nutter, who took the penalties then, he equalised to make it 2- 2.

There was probably about four minutes to go, but then the referee played, I think, about five minutes injury time. The ball was worked and I think Woking almost scored down that end. The ball was right down the right hand part of the pitch. A cross came in from a player called John Nurison. We had a tiny little player called Dobson who popped up and scored the winner, if you like. It was so late, it was 30 seconds to go; there was no way that Woking could come back.

I was worried about the stand because everybody was jumping and shouting and screaming. The whole stand looked as if it might actually collapse. It was a tremendous atmosphere. Those kinds of games stick in the memory really. I'm sure others have got different memories, but that one particularly was very sweet being against the side it was.

Interviewer: Can I ask about the relevant recent success of the club. There have been back to back promotions, for one.

Geoff Gibbs: Yes, there have. That's right.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about the rollercoaster seasons that you've had?

Geoff Gibbs:

It's difficult to put it into words really. I think it started with the Trophy final, obviously, which was the first time Wembley was used for a competitive final. That was against Kidderminster. We were 2 - 0 down at halftime. You can imagine the mood in the Stevenage supporters was very, very morose at halftime. We come back and we win the game 3 -2. That was an important game because it kicked us on, I think. It gave us the impetuosity to start to perhaps believe in ourselves.

We won another Trophy final against York and we lost one, unfortunately, to Barrow. But there was a general grain swell of, this club could go somewhere, if you like. We seemed to be a side, to be fair, which gets stronger most seasons in the second half of the season. Not a particularly good starting side in the early couple of months, but after Christmas we seem to kick on.

We had this tremendous run going. It was just the confidence the players had in themselves, if you like. Players have come and gone. There are players who I occasionally think, "Yes, he played for us." He might have played half a season or maybe a season and a half and you forget them so quickly, if you like. Obviously there have been the exceptional players like George Boyd and Barry Hayles. We all have our favourites.

Jason Goodliffe, who used to be one of my favourite centre halves. He was Mr Stevenage, if you like. He always put himself 100% on the line. We've got one or two of them now. Mark Roberts and one or two others you would say are really going to die for their club, and try and perform well.

It was that kind of momentum which started with that cup win, which, I think, has brought a sense of belief. Of course, that was under a different manager as well, Mark Stimson. We felt

particularly bad when he left midseason and went off to join Gillingham. That took a little bit of recovering from. But if you look back over the last six or eight seasons, every season has been better than the season before because of what we've achieved, I think.

I don't think we will probably get promoted this year, but we're in a very solid position. We're in the highest position of any of the promoted clubs from Division Two at the moment. There is a genuine belief. Not everybody agrees with the tactics. Not everybody agrees with the player selection. Not everybody agrees with everything about the club. But there are a tremendous unity and camaraderie, I suppose, I would say between the players and the supporters.

You've only got to go to a game like we did last week at Brentford. We have over 500 supporters, which for a Premiership side, isn't a lot. But we had 500 people travelling to that away game. Probably, our average home game, even this season would probably be around 2,500, maybe a little bit higher. So a good percentage, 20% to 25% of our fans are prepared to go, certainly to the nearer away games.

For many of us, I think, we are a side at the moment that is playing better away from home. We've had two back to back wins now away from home. I think that, sometimes, we're a little bit too cautious at home and perhaps treat the sides with a little bit more respect than they deserve. If we could play as well here, for the rest of the season, as we are playing away then who knows. We might end up sneaking the play off place again.

When you get into that situation, it's a game at a time. It's more like the cup competitions that we're used to winning. It's all about the winning mentality, as I say, and that comes from the manager. He has his critics. He's got a tremendous success

rate here. But like all managers, you're only as good as your last result, are you really?

Interviewer: Absolutely. This may seem like a bit of a strange question to ask. How would you compare Graham Westley and Paul Fairclough as managers?

Geoff Gibbs: As managers?

Interviewer: Both...

Geoff Gibbs: Westley is a motivator, certainly. Again, I think he could galvanise a dressing room and I think that's where some of our famous results have come from, if you like. As a man, I like Paul Fairclough very much. I think he talks a lot of sense. He seems to have a more human, personal side to dealing with situations, if you like. He was at Barnett, when Barnett was struggling very recently. But he emerged from that very difficult situation with a tremendous amount of dignity.

I read articles he used to write in the Evening Standard in London, and you thought, "That's someone who you would not have a critical word to say." Graham doesn't have that because, as I say, he has a minority of people who are quite vociferous and they just don't like the tactics, basically. They like the results and he can argue that he gets results.

But I've got my own beefs. I always tell him every season when he comes to talk to the Supporter's Association, "I don't like the fact that he brings everybody back for corners and leave nobody up front for a counterattack." He would point to the

pretty impressive defensive record we've got for playing that way. Last week here, against Yeovil, we were chasing the game trying to win the game with 10 minutes to go. We had four players back on the halfway line basically. The other six, forget about Chris Day in goal, the other six were in the penalty area all taking the corner.

There's nobody up here from Yeovil, because Yeovil are also all back. We're not pressurising them, I don't think because you get the feeling that he would rather take a point rather than risk losing three. I don't know. His record is good. I think he would motivate anybody in the dressing room, but sometimes, I think, he overcomplicates things with his choice of tactics, if you like.

We're accused of being a long board side. We aren't actually anymore long board than most of the sides we're playing against this year. But I would like to go back to a little bit more of the passing football, which I'm sure the players are capable of, which has come in the past under Graham, but also under players like Paul Fairclough. Particularly, Mark Stimson was very good at getting the ball, pinging around and very attractive to watch, actually.

But if you asked me, "What would you rather watch attractive football or winning football?" I have to say winning football.

Interviewer: Absolutely. You mentioned that the fans that you took to Brentford, those 500 fans that went down there, a good away crowd.

Geoff Gibbs: Absolutely.

Interviewer: How do the fans and the players interact in general at the club, home and away?

Geoff Gibbs: I've never seen the kind of interaction after a winning result, obviously. The players come across. The players do things which, perhaps other clubs do. They write emails to the fans, basically. There is a lot of interaction, a lot of engagement with the fans. But you could tell, I think they appreciate it. If someone goes, as about 100 fans did today, up to Bury, it's a long, long way.

At the present time, with the recession, it's not easy for people to afford the cost of the tickets, the travel and the refreshments. It's a lot of money actually, particularly if you go as a family. If you go and you watch the side and they don't have a shot in goal for 90 minutes, that's I don't think, a very suitable payback, if you like. There are some games when the opposition wins the game, if you like, and you can only play as best you can.

I honestly think, watching Stevenage, I always think it's 100% effort. There are players, people like Laird, they are actually putting themselves, as I said earlier, on the line to try and get a result. You can tell the effort. Okay, they're doing a job like all of us, if you like, but you can believe in what you see. The commitment is there. I think a lot of the fans appreciate the honesty of the players. They might not be the most technically gifted all the time, compared to who they come up against, but you can do a lot if you've got the right attitude.

Attitude, to me, is always more important than skill. You get 11 people with the right attitude and I think, generally speaking, they will overcome a side who have got more skill but who are very intermittent in their performance.

Interviewer: You said earlier on about the supporters that you have in the association. You said that fans come from all around.

Geoff Gibbs: Yes, we do. That's right.

Interviewer: Do you have a good base of support in the town?

Geoff Gibbs: Yes. I'm trying to remember what the percentage is. I think it's about 30% to 35% of the fans in the association come from Stevenage itself. I suspect, if you looked at the wider attendance, apart from the away support obviously, if you looked at the attendance that we would get on any occasion, I think that's probably going to be replicated.

But we need to do more to attract people in. If people come and have a good experience here, we need through the chairman, through the manager, through all the management and administration and indeed the Supporter's Association and word of mouth from the regular supporters to try and get others to come along. There's nothing like this ground. It's not a big ground. Maximum attendance, I think, is about 8,100 and about 1,400 are at the away end, if you like.

If, as they will on Saturday, Sheffield United come along, they'll bring more than that I'd imagine. They will probably take a few of the seats at the end of the main stand. We need to match them in terms of noise. That is a particularly good acoustic stand and therefore, even if you only have about 100 in the away end, it does seem a lot more. So we need to generate that amount of noise around the rest of the ground.

It's starting to happen. The main stand used to be very quiet, this stand. But there is now support from all around the ground, I think and that's good.

Interviewer: You said that the club could maybe do more to attract people to games. Are there any specifics you could point to there?

Geoff Gibbs: The chairman, to be fair, has tried different pricing structures where people have had flexi tickets and combinations. So if you buy three or six, you can choose the games you tend to come to. As we've gone up the leagues then, obviously, the cost of attending has gone up as well because we have these different bands, if you like, in terms of the admission prices.

I'm just conscious, at a time when those prices are going up, as you know, people are questioning where every Pound is going, if you like. To survive at the present time, we need to kick on from here and try and maybe try a few things which might be loss leaders on one occasion. We've had things in clubs where supporters have actually been allowed to pay what they thought the game was worth.

That's a bit of a risky strategy, possibly, but there are discounts that you can give. There are things that can be done to try and get an extra 500 along for a particular game, if you like. Maybe we just need to be a little bit more innovative or creative. I think, at the end of the day, it comes from word of mouth and networking. People say, they haven't seen Stevenage for two years say, and they come along and it's a different type of football. A different atmosphere, if you like, to when we were in before, perhaps the lower part of the Conference and struggling to get results.

Interviewer: How does it compare, coming to a game in League One to either...?

Geoff Gibbs: What, the Premiership?

Interviewer: No. From the days in non League to now, how does it compare? The football and the atmosphere and just the day generally.

Geoff Gibbs: For me, the day is a bit longer than it used to be. I used to come in at about 2:50 and take my seat and it wasn't any problem getting a seat. Now I do quite a lot of work from about 1:15 to 1:30, over in the far corner where we've got our Supporter's Association hut, which is an information point for the Supporter's Association.

We're manning that and trying to promote the association of the club, but we're also selling little bits of club stock as well. So it's a very busy hour and 20 minutes from 1:30 and up to just before kickoff and you're rushing around really. I know people who come in as soon as the gates open just to savour the atmosphere. They're the real true fans, if you like, because part of the enjoyment, I think, is the anticipation of what the game is going to bring.

Yes. It's a busy time, if you like. It's completely different. It's more professional. I would even say the Supporter's Association are more professional, but the whole club, generally, are more professional. Things that I'm sure most of the fans don't know about security and the control room for the

police, and all those types of things that have to be done by the club and done properly. There's a lot going on. Yes, it's a different atmosphere altogether.

If we were to go up from League One to the Championship, then with the bigger clubs, particularly the Premiership sides that have been relegated, that is going to cause other problems, if you like. But I suspect if you ask Westley and Phil about that, they would take that anytime and try and work out the solutions to the problems rather than not have the problem.

Interviewer: I have been asked to ask you about the shoebox. Is there anything you can do to..?

Geoff Gibbs: The shoebox actually is the container I use to do out Supporter's Association halftime draw. There is obviously a 50/50 draw which, if you get a big attendance, you can actually win, if you win the first prize, you can win £400 or £500. For £1 a very good return. The Supporter's Association draw is not quite as glamorous as that, but we do offer tickets to the next home game for a couple of people. We, obviously, finance that.

The shoebox, basically, was just the best receptacle I could find. It was fine until one day, I can't remember which game it was, I was so excited I jumped up and down and landed on the shoebox, which completely destroyed it. So I thought, "Well..." It must have been in the Conference season when we went up to Division Two. Every season since, I've had an even better and newer shoebox.

Andrew rather embarrasses me at halftime because he basically always refers to Geoff and the shoebox. Usually, one of the players on the bench will do the draw for me and Andrew

will obviously read out the winning names. The shoebox is now a much sturdier one. I don't know what shoes it used to contain, probably something for my wife. But at the moment it seems to be lasting the course and probably will see this season out.

Interviewer: Hopefully the shoebox can be the metaphor for the club to carry on and go onto bigger and brighter things.

Geoff Gibbs: Absolutely.

Interviewer: This is your first season in League One.

Geoff Gibbs: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you feel is a realistic target say for the next three seasons, for the club?

Geoff Gibbs: I think we do need to consolidate it. I think one of the worst things that can happen is if you get promotion and then relegation the next season coming straight back. There are clubs like Northampton, over the years, and Swindon themselves, I mentioned Swindon earlier. They been up, they were in the Premiership for one season, but didn't last. Then are now in Division Two.

In fact, we have leapfrogged over Swindon. I was expecting to see them a couple of times this season, but they got relegated

to Division Two. Now, I think we are 10th at the present time. I would like, in the next couple of seasons, if it's not this season, to get to the playoffs and have a shot at trying to get promotion. But, realistically, I think we probably will be top half of the Table, probably for those two or three years.

I can't see us going down. I think we've made a very solid start. When we went up from the Championship to Division Two, everybody said, "As long as we ended one place above the relegation, because four clubs go down, then that would be satisfactory." Of course, we eventually got promotion and then this year, I don't know. It's looking good at the moment. If we could score a few more goals and add that to our very solid defensive record at the present time, then who knows.

As I say, kicking on, second half of the season, traditionally we've done well. It could actually be we could end up sneaking again, one of the playoff places. I think fans expect success and we may end up maybe not getting promotion again. It would be a record. I think no other club has actually done that. I don't think they've gone up three leagues in three seasons. I think that's the goal to go for but not be too disappointed if it doesn't happen this year.

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