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Interviewer: Can I ask your name please?

Tim Hutchings: Tim Hutchings.

Interviewer: Thank you, Tim. And what's your connection with Stevenage Football Club?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I think I've got two. One and first and foremost is as a supporter and I come and act as a match day ambassador in the boardroom. And secondly as Chief Executive of the Hertford Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The club has been a member of ours for many years and we're not only proud of what they've achieved, but proud of what they've done to support businesses in the locality.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Okay, if I may start first of all in your role as a supporter, if you like. How long have you been following the club?

Tim Hutchings: Oh, on and off probably for about the last 10 years. Originally I come from the West Country, so I was watching other football as well before that. But I very much embrace what's happening at Stevenage.

Interviewer: And in the time that you've been coming here, have you seen many changes? Well, first of all in the ground itself?

Tim Hutchings: Well, the ground has been improved. A lot of the improvements were actually done, you know, before I became involved in it. But I think it's, you know, it's a great, tidy, neat ground and on a match day it creates such a great atmosphere.

And I suppose that's the big change actually, is that the club's moved through the Conference, into the Football League, you know, bigger crowds, more atmosphere. That for me is the big change.

Interviewer: How- and how do you feel about the club's current position in League One? Do you think it's sustainable and can it be built on?

Tim Hutchings: I do think it's sustainable and yes, I do think it can be built on. You know, you think about the most recent game actually. Something like eight or nine of that team were in the Conference with Stevenage. And they've grown and they've developed.

And I'm still not quite sure how much further they can go. But you know, they keep getting asked questions and they keep

coming up with the answers. So yes, I do think the club can grow. I think, you know, there's some big leaps between the Conference and Division Two and obviously Division Two into Division One. I guess the next leap is really a very large one and that will be a challenge.

But everything I've seen from the people in the club and in the team, I'm sure they'll address that as and when they need to.

Interviewer: You said there that there are a large number of players that were in- that played in the Conference with the club. Do you feel that they generally have improved as players as the- as the club has moved through the divisions?

Tim Hutchings: Oh, without question. And I think a lot of the change is mentally actually. You know, we saw them come into the league last year in the first game against Macclesfield and there was a cup game actually against Portsmouth, who had just come down from the Premiership.

And we were disappointed they'd lost. And you know, I felt looking at them, one or two thought, "Well, actually, do we deserve to be here?" I think they now know that yes, they do deserve to be here and have developed accordingly.

And you know, there's not one of them yet you look at and think "Well actually, they shouldn't be here."

Interviewer: The- as well as those players that have moved up through the leagues, have there been any signings you've been pleased with in the time?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, I think all signings coming in have contributed. I suppose the most recent one is Reid. He's come in, he's come in from Newport and I think he's really grown. You can see the way he holds a ball up now and the way he- you know, the team in attack revolve around him. I think it's wonderful to see. And I think he'll get better still.

Interviewer: Do you think- how do you feel the club is progressing after losing Morrison?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I think they've done remarkably well. I mean, Morrison scored a lot of goals, no question about that. And, you know, we need to score more goals currently, I guess.

But nonetheless, to lose a player of that stature who's not simply gone on- you know, he went from here to Millwall, but he's now playing in the Premiership and he's been playing international football.

And I think that's another indication just how good the rest of the team are. Because yes, he was a good player, he was probably one of our better players, but he wasn't head and shoulders above the rest, in my view.

Interviewer: And the current manager, Graham Westley, how do you feel about him and the job he's doing?

Tim Hutchings: I think he's doing a magnificent job. You know, the record speaks for itself.

He's got tremendous belief in himself and in his team and in what they're doing. And I think this season actually, you know, he's probably added another dimension in that, you know, you can actually see where he's questioning what he does and how he does it.

And where he thinks he's getting it wrong, he changes it and I think he's come on leaps and bounds and it'll be very interesting to see where he is in 10 years' time. For his own sake, one expects him to move on to really big things.

Interviewer: How did you feel when he came back to the club for a second spell?

Tim Hutchings: Oh, I think it was a great move. I think it- I was very comfortable with that and you can see the direction the club's taken ever since. It's been onwards and upwards, so yes, I was pleased.

Interviewer: Tell us a little bit about your duties on match days. What- how do you go about your business here?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I work with a guy called Keith Claisebrook and our role is to make sure the hospitality and the board room runs smoothly, I guess. And the start of our day will be about 12, 12:30 and the match officials usually arrive about then.

And we'll spend probably 45 minutes, an hour chatting to them, making sure that they're comfortable, making sure that they've met all the people they need to meet within the club.

And after that, we generally get- you know, people from the other clubs turn up, the directors and so on and so forth. Most of which wouldn't be known to anybody, but they're nice people and they're dedicated in their own way to their own teams.

And I can honestly say, you know, the many, many people I've met from other clubs, there's very few that I've taken a dislike to. In fact, I really haven't taken a dislike to any of them.

And one or two famous people that we've had through. Last weekend we had John Motson in the club, we had Dave Reid, the DJ- Mike Reid rather, not Dave Reid.

And throughout- you know, a lot of politicians, funnily enough. Berry came down last season. They had a minister with them and a couple of MPs and they were all nice people, interesting people. And occasionally I'll go away with the club and visit other clubs and see how they do it.

And I think, you know, we learn something when we do that. But actually, we also learn that we're pretty good at it here as well. And I think people like coming.

And I guess our first match in the Football League against Macclesfield, the directors from there came down and they made a very nice presentation to us. Actually really, really nice people and we drew the game. We should have won it actually, but it was nice to draw with nice people.

Interviewer:

How does it compare playing at the level the club are playing at now to back in the Conference days? I mean, the standard of play in the clubs you're playing against, can you see a marked difference?

Tim Hutchings: Oh, absolutely. I mean, at its very, very best, all these teams every now and again will hit some real high notes. But you know, I can think back to a game in the year that we got promoted out of the Conference, we played Histon.

We beat them 1-0 and to be frank, we were atrocious. We wouldn't get away with that in the Football League, we'd, you know, be on our backside, spanked if we played like that. So you know, I think the big difference is you can't afford to make mistakes in this League. If you do, you get punished. And probably that's one of the big learning curves, I suppose.

Interviewer: The- so the current setup is, as you said, it's one for consolidating that position. Do you think that Stevenage can realistically attain championship status, say in the next five years or so?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, I think that's really realistic. I mean, currently we're sitting, well, I don't know, six points off the play-offs, something like that. I think the big challenge is not on the pitch, it'll be off the pitch.

You know, if you go into the Championship, you've got to have an all seater ground and all that sort of thing. There's no point hiding it. Our crowds are still below most of the clubs we play currently, leave alone in that league.

So there will be all sorts of challenges. But I think from our playing perspective, there's absolutely no reason why they shouldn't.

And you know, it's not all about the players. People like the board, Phil Wallace the chairman. You know, he's taken this club and run it on a business bases so there's no debt. It's

properly run. And he'll deal with that. And if we get into the Championship we'll manage. It'll be an interesting journey, for sure.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the- well, the current ground, could it be redeveloped or is there any room for a move elsewhere, perhaps in the locality?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I mean, that's not a matter for me really. Certainly it needs to be developed. We could do with another new stand and a bigger stand in the Broadhall Way. And I think that's already been mooted, I think. There's no question about that.

I would guess that the board will look at, you know, the side of crowd that we attract and would attract in a higher level and make some judgment on that.

But I would like to think that, you know, Stevenage Football Club stays in Stevenage. That's what should happen. I'd hate to think we do an MK Dons or something like that.

Interviewer: It's- it is difficult being so close to London and in proximity of so many other professional football clubs. Do you see- the fans that come here, do you see- are they regulars? Do you have many season ticket holders or do they go elsewhere and watch other teams?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I think we have a good, sound core here. You know, it's certainly not as big as we would like to see, of course it's not. We would like to see 5, 6,000 here every week, rather than 3, 4,000.

But I think that having been said, it is- it's a good place to come and watch football. You know, you're close to it, there is a family atmosphere. You're right that there's a huge bit of competition with small teams like Spurs and Arsenal down the road.

But you know, parents can bring their kids here safely. They won't be barracked with a lot of the bad language and whatever that goes on at some of these larger clubs.

And perhaps more importantly, they can come and do it on a reasonable budget. You know, if you go to Arsenal with a couple of kids and a couple of parents and have a burger or whatever, you're probably not talking much change over £200.

You can come here and get away with an awful lot less than that and I think have a really good experience.

Interviewer: So speaking about Graham Westley and the current team, what- what is it that he has brought to the club, do you feel, that's made a success, a relative success in that you've come up? What has he brought to the club? Has he instilled anything in the players?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I think he has. You know, he's brought organisation. And he's, without question, instilled a confidence in the players. And you know, one of the things that irritates me is they're a very fit team and a lot of clubs will criticise that fitness and their physicality.

But actually, they play some really nice football on the back of all that. And I think that too often gets ignored. You know, they are what they are, but you can come here and see some wonderful football.

Anybody that was here last season playing Newcastle would not question the right to have won it 3-1. In fact, it could have been more. And more particularly this season, playing against Sheffield Wednesday, 5-1 here and it could have been 10-1. It could have been any number you want to think of.

And it wasn't physicality, it wasn't just because they didn't play terribly well. It was because we played some really tremendous football and pushed the ball around and it all worked on the night. But you know, it was good stuff.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about any sort of- you mentioned some games there against Sheffield Wednesday and Newcastle in the cup. Are there any games that really stand out and can you describe them for us?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I've got quite a short memory, so most of my memories are fairly recent. But they are around, you know, demonstrating the resilience of the club and also its high level of ability.

You know, I mentioned earlier on that the game ____ [0:13:25] about three or four years ago when we- it was the season we came out of the League. And we were poor, but we scraped a 1-0 win and you thought, "Well, this is a team that..."

You know, I remember the old Liverpool teams of the 60s and 70s, or at least I do, and for them it was win. Doesn't matter how you played.

And then, you know, the FA trophy against Kidderminster. We were 2-0 down and really out of it and I don't know what Graham said at half time- was graham here then? That's a good question. What was said at half time, but they came out

and they won. A great occasion. And then, of course, second time around at Wembley.

A lot of people forget, we won the first competitive cup final in the new Wembley and we don't make enough of that actually. So that's great stuff.

I think this season, obviously Peter Vincenti's- sorry last season rather, Peter Vincenti scoring our first goal in the Football League. That was a big moment. It settled things down and it really passed a big message. You know, we're here and we deserve to be here.

Interviewer: Were the fans nervous making that- making that step up into the Football League?

Tim Hutchings: Do you know what, I'm not sure they were. I think they thought, you know, we should have been here 10 years ago we feel a bit robbed about that. And we're here now, we deserve to be.

And so I don't think the fans were that nervous about it. Maybe the players were a little. You know, we drew, it was a game we probably should have drawn. But I don't think anyone will hold that against them. I think it was good.

Oddly enough, I think the game I felt we should have done better at was the game against Portsmouth the following week. And it seemed to be two or three games before they looked as though they thought they were where they should be.

But I feel fairly confident that they know- they know their strengths, they probably know their weaknesses too. And I don't think any one of them thinks that they can't go further.

Interviewer: The- we've spoken about the club and the fans and you said that there could be more fans in attendance. What would bring more fans to the ground, aside from Premiership football. Do you think the club and indeed perhaps the council or the district could do anything to get more supporters in?

Tim Hutchings: I think the club has a good relationship with the local authorities here, so that needs to be said. and you know, we've had three consecutive promotions and you- well, two I suppose really, isn't it?

I suppose on the back of that, you would wonder why more people weren't coming through. That having been said, there has been a, you know, a staged increase in the local support year on year and that which is here seems to be holding. So on that basis, I guess a lot of clubs will be quite content.

But as I say, you know, a lot of people's first thought is probably Arsenal or Spurs or something like that. And I think we've just got to try and change that.

You know, this is about supporting your local area, it's- you know, I don't think anyone should come here simply because it's geographically the local team, that's not what I'm talking about. But it should be one of their first thoughts and when you come here, there's no guarantee, you get good games, you get bad games. Of course you do, but by and large the quality of football is pretty high.

As I say, it's a good experience, there's a bit of humour in the crowd. There's- you know, you're close to the football. And I think the players actually care about the local fans. I think there's a certain intimacy, if you like. And I'd- I just think the club's got to keep plugging away and I think they'll come.

Interviewer: The- you talk about the fans there and their relationship with the players. How do you feel that the players react or rub along with the fans? I mean, you may be in a position to answer that.

I mean, do they- do they care about what the fans think?

Tim Hutchings: Oh, I think without question. I think it's- you know, you've only got to look at it when things have gone well. It's easy when things go well, they're always a good relationship. But actually, when things don't go quite so well either, it's very rare for people to get on players' backs. They do try and encourage.

I mean, I won't say that everybody does, because that's human nature. But I think, you know, first and foremost, the local fans here do try and encourage. And I'm absolutely certain that that's welcomed and respected.

Interviewer: Okay. Can I ask you, do you follow the club home and away?

Tim Hutchings: I don't- well, I'm here for most home games and I get to some away games. Probably- this season the only away game I've got to is Oldham, funnily enough. And actually we go out to Preston in a couple of weeks' time.

So I guess I see about 8 or 9 away games each year. And it's also good support from the club from supporters at those games as well.

Interviewer: How do you think the- is there a fair number of supporters that on average travel to away games?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, I mean, as a proportion of the home crowd, yes, I think it is pretty good. You know, you get a cold night in Milton Keynes as we did last year with the first round of the cup, which again was a match where the team really demonstrated their resilience.

You know, we were losing going into injury time. We missed the first penalty or the first couple of penalties I think of the penalty shootout and we still came away with a win. Yes, and there was a good crowd there and I think they lifted the team. You could see it. And very, very welcome. You know, it does make a difference.

Interviewer: Stevenage, the location, it's one of the post-war new towns. You just mentioned Milton Keynes, how do you think the club- this new town club, if you like, is doing in relation to others? You mentioned Milton Keynes there, which have essentially gone from Wimbledon and Crawley have just been promoted.

Do you think it's- these towns can hold football clubs?

Tim Hutchings: I think they can. And I think they've all got different challenges. I mean, Milton Keynes is a bigger town probably than Stevenage. It doesn't have the local competition, you know. You've got to go some way to find another local club. And it's unquestionably a lot of money poured into it. And of course it had the base of the old Wimbledon team.

Crawley, I don't know the full ins and outs, but they've got a similar sized ground, similar sized crowd. But they seem to have had an awful lot of money poured in as well. So I think

out of all of those clubs, Stevenage has done it building the base and building upwards.

And I like to think that that will give it longevity, that it is its strength at the end of the day. What happens to the other clubs remains to be seen really.

Interviewer: Staying on other clubs, are there any notable fierce rivalries with other clubs that spring to mind?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I mean, obviously Barnet. That's not very far away. That's one of the away games I went to last year. In fact, I think we were beaten 3-0 there and 4-0, 4-2 here, was it? So that's a big one.

When Luton used to have a Football League club, that was obviously a big rivalry. Actually, we've never played them in the Football League, have we? Played them in the Conference. So that was a big one.

We went up to Northampton last year, that felt like a local derby, but it was partly that we were trying to get promoted as well. And they were worried about relegation.

But no, I suppose Barnet is the big local. It would be nice to see them both do well.

Interviewer: I mean, it's undoubtedly good for the area and perhaps the county as a whole to have those teams, playing a decent level of football.

Do you feel, maybe speaking in your capacity at the Chamber of Commerce, have you found that the success that

Stevenage have had over the last couple of year has paid dividends towards local businesses in the area?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, a lot of the feedback I get is anecdotal. But certainly a number of the local hotels have done very well out of it. And I guess ___[0:23:01] Park does pretty well out of it on a match day.

And every indicator that I see suggests that having a successful football club in the area makes a difference. You know, if we make ourselves even more successful, the impact will be greater.

Interviewer: Certainly. Getting back to the fans that come here, how do you feel they- how do you feel about their support? Are they loud? You know, do they carry on chanting?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, they do. They do pretty well actually. I mean, they sit on the far side of the ground and then that's not the east part of the ground, I don't think, to make yourself heard. But they do and actually, you know, if the team's playing well they get the whole crowd going, the whole way around the ground. And it's- I think it's a great atmosphere.

As I said, it's, you know, I think it's a great place to bring young kids to come and watch football. Old kids for that matter. Bring anybody.

It's- I can't really speak highly enough of it, I just think it's a great local club, well run. I think it knows where it's going, I think it knows itself and knows its limitations, without question.

And people who care and it's not just about glory hunting, it's caring about the community club. And yes, I think we're all pretty proud of it really.

Interviewer: You've spoken about the community, does the club do a lot of work in the local community, supporting causes and things of that nature?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, I mean, I'm not directly involved with that, so the details- I'm sure we see a lot of the work that they're doing with the local youth clubs and local football clubs. You know, on a match day here, there will always be a local club forming a tunnel for the players to come out and obviously just at Broadhall way there's the training pitches that they've put in. You know, it's got a real- as I said, it's got a real feel of what it is and its place in the community. And I think it does build on that.

Interviewer: You mentioned about the new- the facility at Broadhall Way. Do you think that has paid dividends for the club in terms of players that they've brought through the youth system?

Tim Hutchings: It's probably still a work in progress, as I see it. You know, we need to get a few more through that. It's not that old actually and if you look at what some clubs are able to put into youth development, it's far greater than can be put in here. But it will pay and it- you know, again for the youth players, we're competing with Spurs, Arsenal. In actual fact, when I

was running youth teams here, you'd get teams up from as far afield as Ipswich and Southampton all competing.

So it's a big job for Stevenage to compete for those youngsters. But the better it does, the easier that will become.

Interviewer: How are your relationships with other clubs in the area? You mentioned the bigger clubs, Arsenal and Spurs. Do you have a relationship with any of them to loan out players and for them to bring players to yourselves?

Tim Hutchings: Well, that's not really my area, so I couldn't answer that. But you know, we've had Arsenal youth- well, the Arsenal team came and played here in a pre-season friendly. And I have to say, it was some great football.

You know, that was an especially good thing to bring young sons to come and watch and see how it's played.

No, I think there's a decent relationship. But how it works beyond that is not for me.

Interviewer: Fair enough. And you said that obviously it's- this club is community-focused and it worked hard to bring the younger generation here. Do you see many female supporters at the ground?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, we see quite a few actually. I couldn't give you precise numbers, but you know, you just look around and see the evidence with your own eyes. It's good and I think the one

thing that should be said, a number of people have been coming here for many, many years. A lot longer than I have.

It's really in some people's blood, I think.

Interviewer: What attracted you to Stevenage Football Club when you first came to the area?

Tim Hutchings: Oh crikey. Well, I suppose my first connection was through the Chamber. You know, back in the days when Barry Hayles was playing here, I suppose. And I was just impressed by, you know, the willingness to get involved in the community and not just with football, but with businesses locally and that sort of thing.

And I think it's just grown. It's an old relationship now, it's a bit like an old slipper, I suppose. But it- it's just, I think, a great club to be involved with, on all sorts of levels. And you know, more people need to do it.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit more about the work that the chamber does with the club?

Tim Hutchings: Well, we've brought in quite a few business events here. We sponsored a few games, but actually they don't do very well when we sponsor them, so I haven't tended to do that recently.

I remember the first one we did, we played St Albans when St Albans had their one season in the top flight of Conference Premier. And we thrashed them 1-2, I think when they beat us

and it was- we did everything. It could have been 10-1 to us, but unfortunately it wasn't.

And funnily enough, I mentioned the other Histon game, which was diabolical, which we did. So we've sponsored a few bits and pieces. We occasionally bring groups of businesses here on match days. And again, they turn out to be mainly draws as well.

In fact, last time we actually sponsored a game, some mates of mine said afterwards, you know, because it was all on the board, 'Sponsored by...' "Oh, not the chamber again, it'll be a poor game." And they're usually right, sadly.

But we've had other events in the Broadhall suite. In fact, the last one I guess was last Christmas actually. We had- Graham Westley came and spoke to a whole group of business people. And what we hope from that is that business people are going to learn from a successful manager some of his secrets and they do and I think they're impressed.

But also, we've got some of those business people who come in and buy a ticket and come to the match and some do. So it's- you know, it's a relationship which works for both of us, I think.

Interviewer: So as a fan, how does the club's success or lack of it throughout the season affect you personally? How does it feel to go to work on a Monday morning after Stevenage have had a bad result at the weekend?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I've got a guy who works for me in my office who's a Luton supporter. So we have a bit of banter. He hasn't been sacked yet, but he's come close.

But it's- you know, I'm coming to an age now where I can be a bit pragmatic about these things. And I tend to feel if we've played well and lost I can get over that, it's when we've played really poorly. Then I'll go away and sulk for a while, but I get over it.

And fortunately at the moment, it doesn't happen very often. We've won more than we've lost and as I say, promotion two seasons on the trot and you know, last year- I guess we started last year thinking, "Well, as long as we stay up that'll be good."

This year, you'll find people will say, "As long as we stay up, that'll be good." I'm not actually in that group, I think we can do better than just stay up. I think we can be up there challenging for a play-off spot and that will be good.

Interviewer: Do you feel- going- let's look at- if Stevenage was to get promoted again, maybe via the play-offs, do you think they would be able to sustain Championship football at this relatively early stage in their league career?

Tim Hutchings: I think they would be extremely challenging. And without actually- it would depend on two or three things. One would be whether the players themselves could raise their level yet again. And I wouldn't bet against that. It's a tremendous ask, isn't it? You know, you've got the Championship with a team that largely came out of the Conference. But it's possible.

But on the size of our crowds compared to what other clubs are doing, you know, even in our current league. You know, you've got Charlton with 20,000 plus, Sheffield- well, both the

Sheffield teams. You know, MK Dons had over 10,000 last week. It would be a big, big challenge.

And it's not only about developing the team, but about developing the ground and the facilities and how all that works. I think it will be a massive challenge.

But, you know, at the end of the day, I think when Graham came back to the club, if we thought we'd have won a second FA trophy, that we got promoted out of the Conference, gone straight through Division Two and into Division One and touch wood, holding our own at the moment. I think people would have been very happy with that result. And perhaps just a little bit surprised.

So I think if we got into the Championship, we'd probably manage. But it would be challenging.

Interviewer: Well, I mean, last season's game against Newcastle in the cup I think for many people proved what a good side Stevenage can- Stevenage can be.

Do you think that they could sustain that- sorry, not so much- well, in all competition really? I mean, the level- did you feel that you could noticeably up their game for that against Newcastle? Or did they just play themselves?

Tim Hutchings: Well, I think the Newcastle game was interesting, because they started and it was- you know, you looked and you thought, "Well, actually, Newcastle will settle and then beat us." But actually, as the game went on, we got better.

And you could see players starting to believe that they're a decent team. And they had a bit more space perhaps than

they get in a normal League game. And they really did cash in on that space.

But you know, you can't judge a team on a one-off. They're not the first lower league team to beat a higher league team. But what I think that demonstrated was the skills and ability to be taken out of them. And you know, the rest of the season I guess proved that.

This season, you know, it will be interesting. We haven't had back-to-back wins yet. And we- you know, we've beaten Sheffield Wednesday, we've beaten Charlton, we were lucky not to draw away- unlucky rather not to draw away at Huddersfield. We did well against the top teams, we need to do well against the lower teams.

Interviewer: You mentioned these other clubs, are there any particular grounds that you enjoy going to visit from a- from a grounds point of view and also the club? You've spoken about Macclesfield earlier on and how friendly they were. Any places you like to go?

Tim Hutchings: Yes, well, I have to say when I went to MK Dons last year in the cup, Pete Winkelman, their chairman I have to say was absolutely charming.

You know, his team had lost and lost a fair bit of revenue, the next cup game was to be televised. And as a demonstration of how to react in that situation, the guy was an absolute gentleman, so that will be something I'll remember from last season.

I think this season, going to somewhere like Oldham. Very old fashioned, not a great ground in truth, but nice people with a

background and steeped in the local community. You know, that sort of thing demonstrated to me just what a wonderful game we're all involved in really.

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