

File: BMD Michael Welch.mp3

Duration: 1:10:52

Date: 0/08/2016

Typist: 815

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Michael Welch: My name is Michael Howard Welch and my connection is with the club. I was a player for the club and I've also supported them ever since, which is about 56 years, I imagine, yes.

I first started supporting the club at the age of 14 in 1956. The team then played in the Delphian League in 1956. What about the team? Do you want the team name?

Interviewer: I don't know, do you want- shall I ask- before you tell us the team, can I ask you how you came to Stevenage and how- what brought you to support the team to start with?

Michael Welch: Well, I was born at Graveley and as a youngster, obviously Stevenage was my local team. So we used to get on our pushbikes and go and watch Stevenage in 1956.

Interviewer: So how far did you have to go on your bikes?

Michael Welch: We had to go about 2 ½ miles, from Graveley to Stevenage to go and watch the games. And as I say, we used to go home

and away with Stevenage, even then. That's what we used to do.

Interviewer: How far did you go?

Michael Welch: Well, we went all over the place with them, when they were in the Delphian League. And we actually got- we beat Anfield in the FA Cup away and then we got beaten by Quintin Casuals, I think it was, in the next round. But we were only a little club then, so that's a great achievement.

Interviewer: So what do you remember of the Anfield game?

Michael Welch: I just remember a bloke called [Taylor 0:01:55] the winger, who obviously lived in the old town. And he went by about 2000 and scored a fantastic goal to actually get the win, playing with all these other players.

Interviewer: And what did the supporters do when that happened? Was there a great..?

Michael Welch: Well, there was, because we were in the lower league than Anfield. They're in a higher league than us. And to go down and win at Anfield was one of the highlights at that age, when I was 14 obviously. And that was- that was a great achievement.

Interviewer: And did you always go with the same group of people? Or there was a group of you who went to these on your bikes?

Michael Welch: Yes, it was always the same- well, there's three people who lived in Graveley and we all went to Stevenage on our bikes, obviously to support them.

We had to do- we had to do milk rounds and paper rounds to pay for the- to actually go into the grounds.

Interviewer: How much did it cost to go in?

Michael Welch: I can't remember now. Not a lot. But we still had to do milk rounds and paper rounds in evenings and weekends to actually get the money, so we could go and support Stevenage Borough.

Interviewer: And did you- and you went- every game you went to?

Michael Welch: Every game. When home in particular.

Interviewer: And what was the ground like?

Michael Welch: It was where the police station is now. And they obviously- the A1 went by and it was this side of the railway and we had to be careful the balls went over the stand onto the line, railway line. But the ground was where the Stevenage Police Station is,

roughly. This side of George King, so it used to be an ironmongery. That's where we used to play.

Interviewer: And what was the pitch like?

Michael Welch: Pretty muddy. It wasn't drained very well. Mud bath. But other than that, it was good, brilliant. That was it on that one.

And as I say, I have got the team that played against Anfield.

Interviewer: Tell us the team.

Michael Welch: The team that played against Anfield in the FA Cup in 1956 was D Folbigg in goal, Anthony right back Evans, left back Rogers, Jackson, Blockson, Taylor, Turner, Dennis, Brock, Chapman and Staff. And they played in the Delphian League, as I say, at the time.

Interviewer: And did you look that up before you came today or you remember it?

Michael Welch: No, it's always been up there ever since I was 14. I've known the team since I was 14. I'm now 70 years old, yes.

Interviewer: So what part of- how big a part- what part did it play in your life as a teenager, being a Stevenage supporter?

Michael Welch: Well, they were on about moving grounds and obviously, you know, we wanted to try and get a team good enough that if we did move from, we used to call it the Old London Road, to a decent ground- and in the end we moved up here to Broadhall Way, which again was another big achievement.

But no, that was the achievement, which we wanted, to move away, because the Old Road comes by and when you come out with your bikes, all the lorries and buses and cars were going by. And we had a hell of a job to get out of the ground after matches, with cars and things and it was a nightmare. Absolute nightmare. But other than that it was good.

Interviewer: So what was it like cycling home when Stevenage had won?

Michael Welch: Oh, well it was always good. Like here now.

Interviewer: Yes, and what happened when things hadn't gone so well?

Michael Welch: We'd cry. We'd cry.

Interviewer: So could you say something about what it means to you today to come in and do this interview?

Michael Welch: Well, it does mean a great deal to me, because in my heart I've always- I'm an absolute fanatic on Stevenage Football Club. And I can't talk about it at home, because the wife's got arthritis of the spine and she's on tablets and all she obviously

is interested in is looking after herself. And she hates football anyway.

And it's nice to come here and talk to somebody who appreciates what I've done. And just the pride I've got in the club. And I can't do it at home. So it's always nice to come out and have a little chat about it.

Interviewer: Well, we're delighted that you've come. So going on from being 14 and so on and cycling on your- from Graveley to here, what was your next- where did it go from there?

Michael Welch: Well, on the next, next I was then coming up to 16, still living at Graveley. And the club came and interviewed me about- because I played for the school team, in goal, and they said, would I be interested in coming and starting training for Stevenage Football Club under 16s?

And I said, "Yes," and we trained up at the Barclay's School and I got in the under 16 team. And then I went through, this is about in 1958, I should imagine, '59, and then I played for the under 18 team.

And then when I got to over 18, I then played in the A team, which played in the Herts County League. Then I went from the A team into the reserves for a few games. That was in the Metropolitan League. And we played against Arsenal reserves, Tottenham reserves- sorry, Arsenal A team, West Ham A, most of London clubs, their A teams we played in the Metropolitan League.

We always got thrashed, because they were good sides. But it gave the players who didn't play in the first team a game, obviously on the Saturday. And I travelled all over the place

with the reserves. And then I played once in the first team and that was at Merthyr Tydfil in an evening kick-off when both of our goal keepers were injured and I had to just play that one game. But that was one game which I'll treasure, because we didn't get back into Stevenage until four in the morning. Because of the road, obviously. We hadn't got the M4 then. We had to go all the way through Cheltenham, Gloucester.

Interviewer: So you went- you went on a coach, did you?

Michael Welch: We went on a coach all the way round the outskirts. And we hadn't had anything to eat and we had a- we called in at a pub to get some cheese and biscuits on the way back home, just to give us something to eat. It was good.

Interviewer: So what year was that?

Michael Welch: That was in the 1960s when it- the bloke in charge of the team at the time was a bloke called George Curtis, who was manager. He was a player, he played for Southampton. And he came up as manager when we moved up to Broadhall Way. That was in the Southern League.

I'm trying to think now. Yes, that was in the Southern League. Again, I've got the team who I played with.

Interviewer: And do you remember that again off by heart? You don't need to look that up?

Michael Welch: I remember that off by heart. I mean, it's all down here. That team was Friesland, Pratt, Brigs, Heiner, John Mills, Ray Freeman, Colin Powell, Peter Walker, Terry Inks, Johnny Brooks and Micky England. That was the team that played at Merthyr that particular night.

And as I say, we played in the Southern League at the time.

Interviewer: And did many supporters come from Stevenage down with you to Merthyr? What was the crowd like?

Michael Welch: No. I mean, an evening kick-off there's only just the coach and a few supporters come with us, hardly any because it's an evening kick-off. But at the time it was a great achievement to come back to Broadhall Way, because that same team, not me in particular, I wasn't playing, but we played Barnet.

And there were 3,000 people, when George Curtis was here, for an evening kick-off. One night we got 3,000 and that was in the Southern League.

Interviewer: And what does that feel like?

Michael Welch: I mean, the atmosphere was tremendous and I think we actually beat Barnet on that particular day. I forget what that was in now, can't remember what cup it was in. But it was in some cup, because Barnet were in a higher league than us.

But that was under manager George Curtis. From then on, I don't know if anybody can remember this, but we then went

broke. Which again was heart-breaking for me, because for my football team to go broke was heart-breaking.

And we- the other thing that broke my heart was the fact that they dug a four-foot trench from goal to goal to stop us playing on Broadhall Way.

Just before this, before they dug the trench, I always remember the only game that was played on a Boxing Day was when me and about 50 supporters put about 3 lorry loads of sand on the pitch, to play a game against Merthyr Tydfil.

We literally drove the lorries onto the pitch, because it's all rutted, and we covered the pitch in sand and swept it all in and we were the only team to play that particular day. And I think there was about 3,000 and we beat Merthyr Tydfil about 6-0.

Interviewer: And whose idea was it to do that?

Michael Welch: Well, there was a bloke called Hammond here at the time. And the pitch got cut up a couple of weeks before we were going to play Merthyr, it got cut up pretty badly. And he said, "Well, the only way we're going to level a pitch out-" because it was all rutted and all gone hard, because it was frosty, he said "The only way we're going to play it is if we cover the pitch in sand."

And it must have been about 50 of us with shovels and spades and luckily we actually had a sweeper machine. And we swept it all.

And a bloke called Johnny Brooks, who used to play for Tottenham, brilliant player, he was- came down and he said, "You can't play on that pitch." And by the time he came back, at about one o' clock, half past one, he said, "That's absolutely

brilliant.” He said, “That is the best pitch I’ve played on.” And that was just like a billiard table.

Interviewer: You rolled it- you rolled the sand.

Michael Welch: And it all rolled in and it was all brushed in and it was all white lined. In fact, the- I think we had to mark all the lines in a pink spray, so the bloke could see them, because of the sand on them. It was brilliant.

But that was before they put this big, four-foot trench through. I don’t know who it was, who owned the ground at the time, but he wouldn’t let us play here. And he put this trench right across the middle of the pitch, so we couldn’t play on the ground.

He said, “Well, if you want to start up a new club, you’re not playing here.” And that’s when we went down to King George’s.

Interviewer: So if we pause there, I’ll just...

Michael Welch: Right.

Interviewer: Can we go back to when you first started to play for Stevenage? Can you remember the first day that you turned up at the ground?

Michael Welch: Yes. I mean, the bloke in charge was a bloke called Folbigg. And he came, as I say, to Graveley. And I went to the first

training session and I didn't know anybody. Very nervous. And he said to me, "Come on," he said, "You're doing all right at school, I've heard that you're a very, very good goalkeeper," he said, "and that's somebody who I'd want. And we'd be pleased if you could come and play for Stevenage Football Club."

And so that was the first training session we had, which obviously was up at Hartley School. We trained twice a week and we went from the under 16s, as I say, to the under 18s. And we got to the Youth Cup final, the Herts Youth Cup final where we played Watford at Watford, in the final of the Herts Youth Cup. And we got beat 4-3.

And they had 3- they had 3 penalties that I had to face and they scored every one of them. And so we actually lost that particular game at Watford, under floodlights. None of us had played under floodlights before. On a sand pitch at Watford and lost 4-3.

But again, it was something which I go back to as a brilliant achievement for the club.

Interviewer: Can you describe for me what it's like standing in the goal on an event like the Watford match?

Michael Welch: Well, I mean, as for Watford, I mean, it's altered now, but it's the same ground under floodlights. We went out about 10 minutes before the start and we had never seen floodlights- we'd never played under floodlights before on this sand pitch, because it got cut up during the winter, obviously.

And they had quite a good side and we just stood there and thought, "Well, do you think we will play particularly well under these conditions?" Because none of us had played in it before.

And only when I played for North Herts, because I played for North Herts as well, as a schoolboy, we played at Luton once. I'd played under lights at Luton, Kenilworth Road, for North Herts under 16s that was.

I'd played under lights before, but most of the team hadn't played under them before. It's a great experience.

Interviewer: What difference does it make having- what's the difference between..?

Michael Welch: Oh, it's atmosphere. You know, I had quite a decent game actually, because they said- the supporters who went said that if hadn't have been for me, they would have got about eight. Yeah, about six saves I made, which I was pleased with, obviously.

But you can't stop penalties, so every penalty- near enough every penalty hit the post and went in, which was heart-breaking for me as a goalkeeper, but that's how it goes, you know.

Interviewer: So there's quite a bit of pressure.

Michael Welch: Oh yes, yes. There's- I mean, a game like that there is quite a bit of pressure.

Interviewer: Is that- how did you deal with the pressure?

Michael Welch: I was all right. I mean, didn't really bother me too much. I quite enjoyed it, you know. Because I had a good game, I enjoyed it. And afterwards coming back on the coach, everybody said, "Well played," you know. You know, "If it hadn't have been for you, we'd have lost about eight." So no, I was pleased. It was an achievement and I thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Interviewer: And training went on as being two days a week or..?

Michael Welch: Training went on twice a week.

Interviewer: And you went after work or..?

Michael Welch: Yes, after work. I had to go to work at- which I worked in Stevenage, I went back home to Graveley and had a bit of tea, jumped on my bike again, biked back to the old town, obviously at the Barclay School. And trained and then had to go all the way back home on a bike.

We just biked everywhere. No cars, no- we had to- I biked everywhere, just to play for Stevenage Football Club.

Interviewer: And presumably it was dark, you know, it was dark at night and in winter.

Michael Welch: Oh, it was pitch dark, yes. It was dark. It was dark by about six. Five, six. And when I got home, I'd say to mum, "Well, I can't have a lot of team, because I've got to do training for

Stevenage tonight.” And it was the same for the A team when I played for the A team.

Although we trained then at Barnwell School, we changed obviously when we played in the A team. We trained at Barclay School- Barnwell School then, because the first team trained at Barnwell, under George Curtis. The first team and the under- A team always trained- the A team trained with the first team, so George Curtis would keep an eye on us and make sure we were improving.

Interviewer: And what did your family think about your involvement with the club?

Michael Welch: Well, I mean, it's nice, because we used to have- we were very smart. We used to have black coats on with the Stevenage badge on it and when I left the house to go and play matches, I was always proud to walk through Graveley, down to the high street.

Because I was always- coaches coming by or they used to come down to the high street and pick me up. And I'd stand there with this badge on my coat, blazer, black blazer. And I used to think, you know, “I'm playing for Stevenage.” Brilliant. Yes, brilliant, over the moon with that.

And as I say, we went through the A team. And then from the A team, we- the goalkeeper got injured, the first team goalkeeper got injured for Stevenage at the time, a bloke called Freestone. Then a bloke called Dave Abury went in goal, he was a reserve goalkeeper.

And after he played one game and he cracked his leg at Broadhall Way, playing for the first team. He came out for a

ball and he got crocked and he had to go to hospital with his broken leg.

And that was one game I played. While Freestone came back, he only had a hand injury and was only out for one game, but I was called up from work to go and play for the first team.

I was working and I got an urgent call, can I meet the team and go and play at Merthyr for this one game?

Interviewer: So where did you work?

Michael Welch: I worked at a firm called OC9, which was an electrical contractor. Luckily I was in town and they- the firm contacted me and said, "We've had an urgent call from Stevenage Football Club. Can you join the team and go and play at Merthyr tonight?"

Interviewer: So what was their attitude to you being a player?

Michael Welch: Oh no, no. "Just go," they said, "Go." Yes, there's no problem with the work, they just said, "Oh, leave your job and get down there as quickly as possible." And I just played that one game.

Interviewer: So which year was your Merthyr year?

Michael Welch: The Merthyr Tydfil must have been in the 60s. I can't remember exactly when, but it was the only game I played. Which it didn't bother me a lot, because I wasn't good enough,

I didn't think, for the first team. But we still beat Merthyr on that particular night. We beat Merthyr 1-0.

And that's another thing I remember, because we had this free kick and this bloke called Johnny Brooks, who's one of the best players I've ever seen playing for Stevenage anyway. He took this free kick and their goalkeeper said, "I'll leave it, that's going over." And it dropped in. And we beat them 1-0.

And again, that was quite an achievement for me, but never mind. That's the only game I played, but I was happy with that.

Interviewer: So what made Brooks such a great player?

Michael Welch: Well, he was an England International. He played for England, he played for Tottenham. And Hammond got him to come and play for Stevenage. He used to live in the old town and he used to clean people's windows when he played. And he- even now he's one of the best players I've ever seen playing for Stevenage.

I mean, he's got ball control, he's got everything. At the time, when he first came to Stevenage, he was idolised by the club. He's a great player. Pass a ball on a sixpence.

And I watched him play at Wear when he was 70 years old, in a charity match, only a few years ago. And he could still pass a ball. And he was 70 years old.

But that was part of the team I played with.

Interviewer: Did you know- and you knew at the time that he was going to go on to great things, did you? You could tell he was..?

Michael Welch: Well, no. He played for England, he played for England and he played for Tottenham and he came down the leagues. I think he played at Reading and then he came here when he was just about at the end of his career.

But he- he brought on a lot of youngsters, because all the youngsters in the team, like Colin Powell, who was a Stevenage boy, and Hicking, the winger, was only young, coming from Manchester down here to play. And he coached them and they were good players. Good team.

Interviewer: So in the 60s, you all had- you all had jobs. What sort of jobs did you do?

Michael Welch: Oh yes, everybody had jobs. Johnny Brooks was the same as a- was a window cleaner. Colin Powell was a window cleaner with him. Peter Walker was another, he worked- I forget where he worked. John Mills was a big, strapping centre half. I think he's dead now. Most of these players, I don't know if they're still with us. I mean, I am, but I hope they are as well.

But I'm still here and I'm enjoying every minute, every minute. And as I say, we started a league up again down at King George's in the old town and I don't know whether that was under Paul Fairclough or whether there was somebody else as the time.

But we started a new team up at King George's in the old town, it's a roped off pitch and we went there and supported them. Because we couldn't use Broadhall Way. And then I think the council took the lease over from this particular man, I forget

who it was who owned it then. And we came back to Broadhall Way.

That was when Paul took over the reins and he took us through I don't know how many, three or four leagues, up into the Conference. And we had some great times when we were in the Conference under Paul Fairclough. Great man. Great man for this country club.

I don't think people realise what a sterling job he did. Well, they do, but you know, I- me personally, I think he's brilliant.

Interviewer: So when did you stop- when did you stop playing and become..?

Michael Welch: No, I had an interview with George Curtis and he brought me in the office and he said, "Look, I'm afraid that you're just taking up space in the A team and the reserves." He said, "I've got a few youngsters coming along and I want to obviously bring them through," he said, "And you're not quite good enough to carry on playing for Stevenage. And unfortunately I'm just going to have to tell you to leave the club."

And then I went and played in the North Herts League. Dropped down into the North Herts League and played about six or seven seasons in the North Herts League. And then there's another special moment I've got, this is at the end of this.

There's one special moment I've got and that was I played in the North Herts League for a little village called Weston, just up the road. And we played against this team called [Bedwell 0:25:32] Rangers and they had a bloke called- a winger called Tommy Watson.

And I still used to come down the club, because George Curtis said, "Just because we don't want you to play, we still want you here at the club to help a few youngsters along," and so I did a bit of coaching, things like that. Or training with them.

And I said to the club, I said, "I've seen this great player, Tommy Watson." And they said, "Yes, but..." I said, "No, get him here."

So they said, "Well, can you get him to come down to the club?" So I had a work with Tommy, who I knew reasonably well, and he said, "All right, I'll come down and play for Stevenage or train with them."

He played six months for Stevenage and he was transferred to Peterborough for £3,000. Only after about six months, he only played for about six months, I think it was. And that's the first player that Stevenage have ever transferred. And I think we got £3,00 for him from Peterborough and he played for Peterborough and Timmy got injured.

But I introduced Tommy Watson to Stevenage and- because I saw him playing in North Herts football.

Interviewer: So you talent spotted, in a way?

Michael Welch: I talent spotted Tommy Watson. And he went on to play for Peterborough and he was going to go to a higher club, but he had an ankle injury and he had to pack up playing. But that was...

Interviewer: So when you were playing in these other teams, were you still coming to- were you still coming for the games here?

Michael Welch: I was still coming to every game. I mean, sometimes, in the winter, we- if we were playing near, sometimes we were playing just down the road from Broadhall Way, and I used to play and then quickly get changed and come and get in and see the last 25 minutes of games, when we were in the Southern League.

Oh yes, as soon as I could get away from playing, I used to be here.

Interviewer: On your bike or did you have a car by then?

Michael Welch: No, people would drop me off on the way past the ground and I'd just whip in and say, "Come on, what's the score?" No, no, I still supported them, even when I was playing, if I could.

If I could get away from the game I'd played in, perhaps it was down at- just down the road, like at King George's, I'd get back to Borough to watch Stevenage.

Interviewer: So would you like to tell me about some of the games you saw when you first started to spectate?

Michael Welch: Yes, well we went to a lot of away games when Paul Fairclough got us into the Conference. And we went to quite a lot of games, just a couple which stick in my mind.

We badly needed points and we went to Dover, an evening kick-off, and we went to Dover, bit of a hard place to get to, cold night. And we absolutely dominated the first half and we

were a goal down. We just couldn't believe we were a goal down.

And we went to the other end, because you could change ends then, we went to the end where we were kicking in and we were still losing with 10 minutes to go and we had a free kick.

And we- Stevenage then had a winger, I forget what his name is now, that will perhaps come to me in a minute. And he took this free kick straight through the wall and into the corner, made it one all and we thought "Great result, one all." And then we had a bloke who is still playing, Efetobore Sodje, who was playing for Stevenage at the time, centre half.

He headed this ball out just over the halfway line and the ball came to a bloke called Mr Hayles, Barry Hayles, one of the greatest players I've ever seen playing for Stevenage. And he picked up the ball, went past three defenders, around the goalkeeper and scored to make it 2-1.

And we came out of there elated, because it's quite a way, Dover, at night. And we were driving back and said, "What a great result, what a great result." And another one which we went to before we won promotion, we went down to Slough and we were 3-0 up after 10 minutes.

And we stood in the bar having a cup of tea at half time and one of their supporters said, "Who's this bloke called Barry Hayles? We haven't seen him. He's useless."

And I said, "Wait a minute, mate. It's only half time yet. You wait until the second half, you might see Barry Hayles."

And within 10 minutes of the second half, he got the ball, went past 2 players from 20 yards, hit this ball and got it in the top corner. And I said to the steward, "That is Barry Hayles at his best." And he said, "He's a good player."

The thing about that...

Interviewer: And what did it feel like, you know, the next morning or when you went back to work on Monday when Stevenage had won?

Michael Welch: Well, Stevenage had one- every time they won, we were elated. Some of the games, like Woking's always a special day away at Woking. Parking in the trees and their supporters were pretty rough, they would come with sticks and try and hit us and things like that on the way back.

Some of the places you go to were very difficult sometimes, but it was experience. We would go away with the team under Paul, because we always good football, so it was always an entertaining evening.

And I love evening games anyway. And so there are a few more games which don't quite come to mind, but they're all good games.

Interviewer: They might come back in a minute.

Michael Welch: They'll possibly come back, yes. I mean, Slough was one of them, which was a highlight for me, you know, because- but the one at Dover was we were quite high in the league at the time, I don't know if that's a time when we won the Conference under Paul.

But that was one of the games and then the other one which comes to mind was the evening we won the Conference.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Michael Welch: Well, the game when- I think- I mean Paul's here he'll tell us more. I think we had 88 points and we needed 3 really to really wrap up the league. And our daughter, she was 14, and I took her with me and we were- went all the way to- evening kick-off again and she was- the first game I took her too.

And she stood there shaking, because we scored a goal, a bloke called [Treville 0:33;31], I think he's here today, scored this goal from 30 yards. It hit the crossbar and went in with about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an hour to go. And they added on 5 minutes' extra time and our daughter was shaking, saying, "Come on, blow that whistle, blow that whistle." Because if we got the 3 points, we were champions.

And we held on and held on and held on and in the end, the actual referee blew his whistle and called the game to an end and we won 1-0 and Paul came over to the goal end, Paul Fairclough, and he went absolutely ballistic. Hands in the air and shaking his fist and said, "We've won the promotion."

And I stood there and thought, "At last, before I die, we're actually in the League." And then we were stopped from going up by the FA. That was heart-breaking for me.

Interviewer: How did you find out that that had happened?

Michael Welch: Well, it came through the grapevine. Sort of our ground wasn't up to standard and after the work that Paul put in, the team put in, and to be denied going up into the football league after the hard work and the money and the traveling that we'd done all

over the country to win that league and then we were denied to go up by the FA. It was heart-breaking. It was heart-breaking for Paul, I imagine, and me as a supporter. But that's how it went.

And I never expected us to get in there again.

Interviewer: Had to start again?

Michael Welch: Had to start all over again and get where we are. But that was—that was the one at Kidderminster.

Interviewer: So you talked about going with your daughter to that match. Did you normally go with a group of mates? Was there a group of you who went together?

Michael Welch: No, only a couple or three of us used to go together. Mostly by car. Like Dover when we were in our own cars. And it's quite expensive to go and watch these matches, but you know, it's our club. And somebody's got to do it.

Interviewer: And what happens when you win? I mean, does everybody—you said about Paul Fairclough punching the air and...

Michael Welch: Yes, even down there, I mean, you know, it was a great achievement to get three points after being a goal down at half time. Although as I say, we actually dominated a whole game

and we couldn't believe that we were a goal down. But we were.

And we came back in the last ten minutes to win the game. And we got the points, you see, the three points. Which is important when you're winning leagues to win matches away from home.

Interviewer: So what were the supporters doing?

Michael Welch: Well, a lot of them where- there were about two coaches that went down and so they were on the coaches. I don't know how they were. But I know I was elated coming back. Singing and turning the radio up and hearing the score come up on the radio, Stevenage beat Dover. That's good.

Interviewer: And is there a sort of- what does it feel like standing in the stadium when everybody's around you, all the other supporters are around you, all the other supporters around you?

Michael Welch: Well, everybody goes. I mean, you know, quite a lot of their supporters go and there's us standing there. Sometimes they hold us back, so we're last coming out of some of these grounds. But no, that was a great feeling to beat them.

But now- most of the highlights are games which- because now I'm 70 I can't really remember most of them. There are certain games, which stick in my head, and the other thing, I was talking to this winger and he said to me, "The only way Stevenage will win the Conference again is if we go fulltime."

And we did go fulltime. And that's why, I think, we've done as well as we have, because we went fulltime, from where the players are not working and coming home from work. Plus they can train, you see. You can train better.

Sometimes you go to training sessions when you're playing for Stevenage and you just don't feel like training, if you worked all day. And I ___[0:37:44]. I mean, I was up on building sites and up scaffolding and when I come down, I've got to train and come here to play for Stevenage. But you just get it in your head you've got to do it and that's it.

You know, sometimes you'd run from here to Aston and back, training. You'd just run and run and run and up and down these- it was then an open stand. We used to run up and down, over the bars and back down again. That was the training was used to do after work.

But now, of course, the players today, they train nearly fulltime and...

Interviewer: Has that changed the relationship for the supporters?

Michael Welch: That's changed the atmosphere. It's changed everything for us.

I mean, to have people training fulltime, training as hard as they do here, from what people tell me, it's amazing, amazing.

But you know, there's a lot of games which I can go back to. I mean, Orient we played in the FA Cup, Leyton Orient, when they had a bloke who played in goal for England who brought down Barry Hayles in the first half. Shilton was playing in goal for Leyton Orient that day. A bloke called Peter Shilton.

And he brought down Barry Hayles just outside or just inside the box and we all shouted that he had to be sent off, because it was a terrible tackle. But he wasn't sent off, but we still beat Orient 2-1. That was one of the games we- I travelled up to Birmingham, I think we played Birmingham in the FA Cup.

Interviewer: What was the furthest you travelled to support Stevenage?

Michael Welch: The furthest I went was last year, when we were in the League Two playoff final. We travelled all the way up to Manchester, obviously. We won the game, but driving up, the M1- the M6 was completely shut with a bad accident and all the coaches went all the way around villages and little towns. I don't know where they went.

But the coaches, I think there were about 16 coaches. They all went in all different directions to get to Manchester for kick-off. And we eventually got there about- ours was the first coach there and we said to them, "Well, you can't start the game, because there's another 16 coaches on the road somewhere."

And they held up the game for ¼ of an hour, so that most of the coaches got there in time. And everybody could give us no hope against Torquay. But we did- as I say, we actually won the game and I couldn't stop crying.

I cried and cried and I stood next to a lady, I don't know who she was, a complete stranger. She put her arm around me and said, "Why are you crying?" I said, "Well, I've supported this team for 56 years and never expected to do this. Never in a million years, it's breaking my heart."

And even now, I can cry now, because it's- it was a great achievement. But I mean, there were lots of games before that.

We went to Stoke City and we also went to Aston Villa. I can't think what trophies they are. I tried to think, I mean, some of them were the FA Trophy. And I know when we went to Birmingham, I think that was the play off final, which we got beaten by Carlisle 1-0 when we should have won.

So all these games- we sometimes come away from games crying, because we've lost. Not crying because we've won. But these are the games that I've been to. Aston Villa, Kidderminster twice, because the first time was when we won the Conference under Paul and then the second time we went and won the Conference under...

That was quite funny, that, because we'd won the Conference under Paul Fairclough 10 years I think it was or 11 years before and we went back to Kidderminster to win the Conference again. That was brilliant. That was a marvellous day as well.

That was another great achievement for me personally, because at least- you know, I've always dreamt of us playing in the football league and it's come true. I thought I'm not here now, but I'm still here and I'm still enjoying it. I still go to home and away games when I can. I can't do too much, because of the illness that I've got at home. But you know, I try and get to as many games as possible.

Interviewer: One thing I was going to ask you, you said earlier that you always prefer night games and I wonder whether you'd like to explain a bit what it is about night?

Michael Welch: Well, I think to start off, I like any game away from home, because we go away from home- I mean, last year we went to

Grays again. This was when we were in League Two. No, was it in the Conference? No, it must have been the Conference. Yes, it must have been the Conference.

And we went to Grays and I said to my grandson, "Do you want to come to Grays?" He's only 13 and he said, "Yes, Granddad, let's go and watch Stevenage at Grays." So we get in the car and off we go.

And I said, "Where are we going?" He said, "I don't know." So luckily I've got a satnav and I put the satnav on and I don't know if anybody's been to Grays, but it's all one-way streets and God knows what.

But I looked at the satnav and the satnav took me straight to the ground, without any problems whatsoever. And we got there and we looked at the pitch, it was all rutted and hard and no grass on it. And we wanted three points, obviously, to actually keep us in play-off contention. Or even to win the Conference.

And they scored and we were losing 1-0 and there was hardly anybody there. It was empty, the ground was empty. And I walked around the ground and I said to the coach, ____ [0:44:06]. "What the hell are we doing? We're not playing," I said, "and they are rubbish. We've got to get points here."

He said, "Well, how can you play on a pitch like that?" This was just after half time. He said, "How can you play on a pitch like that? The ball's bouncing all over the place. But I've instructed them to go down the touchlines and get the ball into the box as quickly as possible."

So he said, "Perhaps you'll see a different game in the second half." And in the second half, we went down the wing twice, crossed the ball, scored two goals, came away from Grays 2-1, three points, thanks very much.

But you know, again, you drive back from Grays after winning three points in the Conference when you- I think we were about 2nd or 3rd from top. And we think that's another three points to head towards the Football League.

But oh, it was a bad night. It was cold, it had rained and there were hardly any supporters there from Grays. I think there were only about 160 and there's about 500 from Stevenage there.

There were twice as many supporters for Stevenage there than what there was Grays.

Interviewer: Do you think Stevenage supporters are particularly loyal or..?

Michael Welch: No. Stevenage supporters away from home are brilliant, they're absolutely brilliant. It doesn't matter where we go, we're all together, we're all singing songs and we've got our drums there and the drums are banging. And we made more noise away from home, that's why I like going away from home, because we're all together and we all sign the same songs. And we get- it's just a great atmosphere.

I mean, last year we ended up at Barnet and we beat Barnet 3-2 in the Conference again. No it wasn't, that was League Two, I think.

Anyway, we beat Barnet 3-2 last year, a good game. No we didn't, 3-1 I think it was or something. Anyway, their manager was a bloke who used to be in charge here. He's now at- again, I can't think of his name. And we were- there must have been 1,000 of us there, over 1,000.

And we were all singing to their manager, "You're going to get the push in the morning, you're going to get the sack in the morning. You're going to get the sack in the morning", Because he was here, see, and he left here and went and took another job up away from here.

And none of our supporters sort of liked him and he was- oh, that was a bloke called Mark Stimson. And Mark Stimson was our manager here until he went to Gillingham and took half the players with him. So we didn't sort of like him.

We were hammering Barnet away and all of us were saying, "Stimson, you're going to get the sack in the morning, the sack in the morning," 1,000 of us all pointing to him and getting the sack in the morning.

It was only about 3 weeks later he did actually get the sack. It's nasty, but that's the atmosphere that you get away from home. It's brilliant.

Interviewer: So what other- what other songs? Some of them are made up for the occasion?

Michael Welch: Oh, some are made up. Boom, boom, Borough, Borough, boom, boom, Borough, Borough. It's all a game, it's not just five minutes. It's perhaps $\frac{3}{4}$ of the game. Borough, Borough, boom, boom, you know. It's- the atmosphere away from home is twice as good as it is here. I don't know why, because most of the supporters are here, but no. Always go away with Stevenage, it's an experience.

Interviewer: And singing happens here?

Michael Welch: Oh, it happens here, but you're more spread out, you see. Some people stand there, some people stand up there. But when you go away from home, you're in a certain area, so you've got to stick to that area. You can't spread out. So you're more or less all together.

Interviewer: Can you think of any more songs you sing?

Michael Welch: No, not really. There's such a lot that they've got, you know, under their belts which they sing. Again, we went to the Empire Stadium, Wembley with 30,000 people. And we went there and beat Kidderminster 3-2 after being 2 goals down.

Again, that was another great achievement. I even took the wife to that game, because it was at Wembley. I took the wife, she wanted to come to Wembley. And there's 30,000. Their home games would get 3,000.

Interviewer: How does that feel? Because you're- you're very close to the pitch here, aren't you? What's it like when you're at Wembley?

Michael Welch: Well, at Wembley it's just- I mean, there were quite a few supporters there. The worst was when we went up and won the play-off final last year, up at Old Trafford. Because that holds 70,000. I think there were only about 15, 20,000 there. It's empty. No atmosphere.

And I think that was why most of the supporters came out of Old Trafford not realising that we'd gone up into League One. You know, because there's no atmosphere.

There should have been a lot more cheering and everybody should have been over the moon, but they weren't. They came out of there, I think everybody was shell-shocked that we were in League One. Nobody could believe it. I couldn't. I couldn't.

I just cried, because I thought, "Christ, look at the teams we're going to play next year." Charlton, you know, Sheffield United, Sheffield Wednesday, top teams. How are we going to cope with that? But they are, they're coping with it well.

And it annoys me that if we had got two more players, we would be in the play-offs by now. Even in League One.

I think, me personally, and I've played a lot of football, and I think if they had a striker, went out and got a quality striker and a quality midfield player to push the balls through to a good striker, we could go even- even go through this league and on.

I think we could actually get to the play-offs of this league as well, me personally. And I've played a lot of football.

Interviewer: Have your ambitions moved on?

Michael Welch: No, no. I can't get to as many games as I'd like to, because of the wife. But no, I mean, if I take her out in the car, because I have to take her everywhere, if I'm in the car on a Saturday and I can't get to a certain game, then I've got my transistor radio and earphones in, walking around say British Home stores with her in a wheelchair.

And I've got these earphones in and she says, "For Christ's sake, take those earphones out." I say, "But I can't hear the score for Borough if I take my earplugs out." And I'm walking around British Home Stores or Marks and Spencer's with earphones in, especially when they're not at home, so they're away from home like they are today.

They're away today and if I take her shopping this afternoon, I've got earphones in and she says, "For Christ's sake, take those earphones out, I'm talking to you." And I say, "Shut up, shut up, they've scored. They've scored." "Oh, they lose." Something like that. But that's me, because I'm a Borough man.

Interviewer: So you were hoping that the- you were just saying about how emotional it was when the team went up. Do you think it- and you were saying you thought now it's playing these big teams, do you think it might go further?

Michael Welch: As I say, I'm optimistic. I mean, looking at the team, defensively we've got no problems. Not in League One. Not with the defence we've got.

The only problem which I think we've got is if we did go down is the fact that we're not scoring enough goals. In any league, A- I mean, when I was in- when I played under George Curtis, his philosophy was- George Curtis who was manager in the 60s. First of all, you don't give away a goal.

Then you go up the other end and score away. If you score one and don't give away your goal, you win the game. As simple as that.

And he said, "The three finest players you've got to have to win a league is your goalkeeper, your centre half and your centre forward." He said A, your keeper keeps the ball from going in the back of the net. The centre half stops the balls coming through the middle of the field, so they can't get the ball in the back of the net. And thirdly, the striker's there to score goals.

That's why Hayles was such a great player, because we've never- with all the strikers we've had, we've never had a striker like Hayles, in my opinion. That bloke could do anything when he was on his prime.

I mean, one game which- I'll go back to another game here, which has just come to me. I think we played Bromsgrove Rovers and they were rubbish. And we were losing 2-0, at home. And we were playing Bromsgrove in the Conference and he had actually been injured.

And he was on the touchline and he came on at half time. We were losing 2-0. And he scored three goals in the second half, Barry Hayles on his own and won the game 3-2. That was how important a striker is.

If Barry Hayles hadn't have come on that particular game, we'd have lost that game. You know, this is why I say now today, there's 3,000 people standing over there every Saturday, right? I'm not being critical now, but it's something which I think is in my heart, so I'm going to say it.

If 3,000 odd people come here on a Saturday and 3,000 are saying to the club, "We want a striker to score a few more goals, because we're not scoring enough goals." And yet, I'd love- I know it's money, everybody wants strikers. They're hard to find. But we've got to find one.

If we find a striker, we could end up in the play-offs of League One. With no doubt in my mind whatsoever, because

defensively we've got a team good enough to get in the play-offs. But attack-wise, we haven't.

We want two players, a midfield player and a striker. A good midfield player who can pass the ball on a sixpence and push the balls through to the striker and a striker. That's my opinion.

Interviewer: That's great.

Michael Welch: That's my opinion. But you can't take it away from them, the achievements under Paul and now under the bloke we've got now is incredible. They've both done incredible jobs for this club.

Interviewer: What made Fairclough such a brilliant manager?

Michael Welch: Paul was- even now, I mean, I've just been talking to him and I haven't seen Paul for 10 years, but he knows me. And he brought supporters around him, never frightened to- I could come down here on a Sunday morning, for instance, and we'd sweep the stands. Because somebody's got to do it.

They call it the A team. All the old boys used to come down there on a Sunday, not get paid, but they used to come down there. I didn't come down particularly often, unless I was on my own at home. And I'd come down here on a Sunday morning with the A team, they called it.

Now, some of these- the A team, there's only one steal living of the A team who I used to come down here with. And he's in a

chair, he's perhaps here today. I can't think again what his name is now. Briscoe.

He's another legend of this football club. I mean, he's in charge of the youth- the little what are they called? Baby Borough. He's patron of the Baby Borough.

Now, he used to come down here and help us sweep. He's done painting, he's done sweeping, he's done everything at this club. And another one, he's like me. When we didn't win promotion to the Conference, he was heartbroken.

Mr Briscoe was heartbroken and I tell you that, because I know him very, very well. And he must be elated seeing them in the league now, because he's the only A team who's still alive.

All the A team wanted us to be in the league, but it didn't happen. And that's why I'm sitting here now, I just still can't believe that I'm still alive and I've seen my club in the Football League as high as they are. It's absolutely out of this world, to me anyway.

Interviewer: So the supporters do lots and lots of things to keep the club running.

Michael Welch: Yes, well don't forget that after matches, most of the terraces are covered in paper and cardboard and teacups. And what you have to do is you have to start from the top and sweep down and down and down to the bottom and then go to the bottom and pick it all up in bags. That's got to be done by somebody.

You know, and a lot of our supporters don't realise that when they walk out of that gate, especially if there's a game on a

Tuesday night or we used to play Monday nights, then all of this has got to be swept before we start playing on a Monday.

And we used to come down and do that on a Sunday morning. And we used to sit in the hut and have a cup of tea and talk about the game yesterday or talk about the games coming up.

We used to stop for half an hour and have a little chat about the team and what they were doing and do you think we're going to do this? Who are we going to sign? Who are we going to get rid of?

It's a club like that, if you know people involved. And Paul was one of those that would always come over on a Sunday morning when we'd swept the ground and thank us for doing it and talk to us about different things.

That's why Paul Fairclough is a legend to this club, an absolute legend. He really is.

Interviewer: And what do you think the team has done for- in terms of its relationship with the town? What's the connection? How important is the team to the town and the town to the team?

Michael Welch: Well, it's disappointing. I'm- it's very disappointing for me to see the small crowds that we're getting for League One football.

I know we're near London, but it's not a good town really for anything, when you look at it. I mean, all the schools are struggling, all the youth clubs are closed down and nobody's taking a lot of- you know, I think the town is not a good town for socialising with one another.

I think there could be more- I think the club could do a little bit more on the socialising of the club. Put a few more posters around the town to get- with the games that are coming up.

Another thing, which I think stops a few people, like me, I'm an old aged pensioner, and I have to pay £16 to come in to watch a game in the league. We're only on, you know, old age pension, £16, especially if you've got two games a week, we just can't afford the £32.

Interviewer: Have the prices gone up since the promotion?

Michael Welch: Oh yes. Yes. I mean, they've gone up, which is understandable. But at the end of the day, if Stevenage have got two home games, I can't watch both games. I just can't afford- especially how it is at the moment with gas, electric, water. I just can't afford to come and support them twice in one week.

So I pick which games I want to come to and then I say, "Well, I'll go to that game, but unfortunately I'd love to go to the other one, but I won't be able to pay for food, I won't be able to for anything.

I think the prices for old aged pensioners in particular are a little bit high.

Interviewer: Is there a discount for a pensioner? But not much of one?

Michael Welch: Well, there is, but not much. I mean, but I can understand the club. I mean, they've got to run a club and I think they've got to run it to certain prices, you see, what the Football League...

But the annoying part about some of these games you go to, I mean, I went to Barnet and I took 3 under 14s, right? And I had to pay £19 for 3 under 19s. In fact, I had to borrow money from a bloke behind me, because I hadn't taken enough money with me.

When Stevenage won 3-2 at Barnet, they were charging £19. In fact, I complained to Barnet about it. And they said, "Well, you should have got tickets before the game." How did I know?

I mean, I'm an old aged pensioner, I can only go to games if I'm feeling well. And that particular night I felt very well, I had a good day, got in the car. I took my 2 grandchildren and his friend, all under 14. I couldn't believe it. I had to pay £19.

Interviewer: Do your- do your grandchildren support Stevenage? Has it become a family tradition?

Michael Welch: Well, my grandchild- I'm learning. He's actually playing for ___ [1:02:02] at the moment. He's only- he's 16 and ___ just picked him up. He's playing for ___ Reserves at the moment. But I'm with him out there, coaching him a bit and he's doing very well. They're quite pleased with him, because he's only been there 8 weeks.

They heard that he was a reasonable player so they contacted him, like me, and they've taken him to ___ and he's playing for the ___ Reserves. And I've been and seen him a couple of times at night, when they're playing at night. No, he's doing

very well and ___ are quite pleased with him, so let's hope he carries on and gets further up.

Interviewer: And does he- have you told him your stories of being..?

Michael Welch: Oh yes. Well, he's like me. He comes to my house and gets straight on my computer and I say, "What are you looking at?" "Stevenage Borough." On the computer, straight to Stevenage Borough site, website. And I said, "Get off my computer, I want to look at that."

No, he's on the computer, Stevenage Borough website. He went- I couldn't go Tuesday, but he goes to most away games. He went down there Tuesday night when we beat Brentford 1-0 on Tuesday. He went there.

I wanted to go, but as I say, I can't leave the wife too long, otherwise I would. But no, he's doing well. He's doing well.

And as soon as he got back, he got on the phone to me, because he went down on the train to Brentford and he saw a mate of his who's got a car and he said "Don't go back on the train, come in the car." So he got home by about quarter to 11.

He's straight on the phone, "Granddad, Granddad, we won." I said, "Yes, I've seen it on text." And he was telling me all about the game. He's mad on Borough too, just as mad as me. Other than that he's all right.

Interviewer: There we are. So you've got a photo here from- do you remember when you took that?

Michael Welch: I took photos when a bloke called Mr Green was chairman, this one, because he was walking around the ground. I don't know if that's him there. I've got more photos at home, but I couldn't find them. I'm hunting for them still now.

I've got photos of the actual- looking at it from the pitch back, all of the seats and all of the scaffolding somewhere at home, but I couldn't find it. But I just took this photo of the Newcastle game. Obviously this has all changed now, because the roof is on now. It's not changed much that end, has it?

But when I played at Stevenage, the changing rooms were a wooden hut in that corner. And they didn't- and the entrance was from Broadhall Way. That was where the entrance was, so you were coming in and out of Broadhall Way at the time, into this hut, which had a bar in it and changing rooms. Not particularly good changing rooms.

And then the players came out at the back of the goal, where the little stand is now which is called the North Stand. The players came out from the side of the North Stand when I played for Stevenage, because I played for a couple- well, I played quite a lot here in goal. Both of these goals I've played in, when I played for Stevenage Reserves that was.

And you'd just come from there to there or walk all up here. But I mean, obviously now- I always had my heart set on...

See, when I played it was just a grass bank along there. It was a high bank with bits of wood in it to hold people up, so they didn't fall down. That wasn't built, of course when I played, only the bit in the middle.

That was where we used to train, we used to train up and down that. That was only half that size, if half. Quarter, perhaps. But it's the same ground. The only difference was this big trench was dug right through the middle, as I say.

So that was- I couldn't play on it or we couldn't play on it. They couldn't play on it, put it that way. But that is the picture I took just before the Newcastle game.

Interviewer: So what was that- what was that like when the Newcastle fans and supporters arrived?

Michael Welch: Well, everybody wondered where they were going to go, because obviously we were undecided where we were going to put a few thousand Newcastle supporters. And then this- Victor Green had this idea about putting this big scaffolding up. I mean, it's a marvellous structure.

It was- it had to be, because it had to be checked by everybody, make sure it was safe and make sure it came up to the legal requirements. So it was a big, big project. But once the ground was full for that particular game, I mean, it was- I always dreamt afterwards of having a stand in its place, you know, because I supported them for so long.

I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a nice, big stand that end?" And it's here now. So all the dreams I've had are gradually coming true. The ground's improved, the team's improved, the stand's improved. We've got a scoreboard, we've got a good side and we're going places. As simple as that.

Interviewer: So when you said you've now got a scoreboard, what happened before?

Michael Welch: Well, there wasn't anything there. I mean, I forget where they got the scoreboard from, I know it was somebody else's who we purchased it off of. Somewhere down the south, I think it was.

I mean, they've put another one now, but no, there wasn't a scoreboard. This was just open terrace when we were here. And then you could go from end to end and what we used to do was go one end and if Stevenage were kicking that end we'd go that end. And if they were kicking this end, we'd all walk around at half time and come up this end, so we could see the scoring goal.

Interviewer: And when- do you remember when the floodlights went in and what difference that made?

Michael Welch: Well, there is a story about the floodlights. It's quite a long one and I don't know whether I'll be able to tell you that. But when a bloke called Hammond was here, a great friend of mine, because I played- I actually played cricket for Stevenage first team as well.

I played cricket for Stevenage first team and Stevenage second team when I- a few years ago now. And I'm still a groundsman of a cricket club, but that's it.

When I was a player and training here and when I was 18, I was a spark, I was an electrician. And we had these big floodlights, big, square floodlights. They were about 75 foot high, with a ladder going up on the outside and Hammond said, "No, we've got three floodlights out on that pylon. Go up and do them."

So I said, "All right then, put them on a piece of string in a box, tie them on a string, I'll climb to the top and I'll pull them up, screw the bulbs in. Everything will be all right."

So I came in here one Sunday morning and Cyril said to me, "There's two or three lights out on that pylon, we've got to do them, because they're the bits that go to the edges of the pitch." So I said, "All right then," and I had a splitting headache at the time.

And I started climbing the pylon and I got halfway up and I daren't go up or I daren't go down. I came over giddy and luckily it had a bar, a roll bar they call it, at the back of it to hold you, if you want to hold on. And I stopped halfway up this pole and I was up there about 20 minutes, I daren't go up and I daren't come down. And I've never ever gone up there again.

I was shaking. By the time- I'd managed to come back down again, but I'd never do it again. And ever since then I won't climb a ladder.

But I used to change all the bulbs on the lines without any problems when I was younger, but this particular Sunday morning, never again.

You could see right down- on this one in the corner, you could see all the town centre and everything from up there. It was lovely, yes. Beautiful view. Never again. Scared me to death.

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