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Phil Ravitz: My name is Phil Ravitz.

Interviewer: Thank you, Phil. In what capacity are you involved with Stevenage Football Club?

Phil Ravitz: Presently, I am involved with Stevenage Football Club in no capacity, other than being a season ticket holder.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you had any other involvement with the club in the past?

Phil Ravitz: Yes. I've had a long involvement with the club as a press journalist. I was the founding Sports Editor of the Comet newspaper, which is the town's newspaper when it was launched in 1971. Covered the club directly, probably, for something like 27 years, although I wasn't based locally for the last 6 or 7 of those 27 years. The sporting content of the Comet newspaper was still my responsibility even though I was based elsewhere in the area.

Interviewer: If we may go back to when you first became involved with the club. That was as a journalist?

Phil Ravitz: It was as a journalist. It was in the summer of 1971. I moved to take over as Sports Editor, the founding Sports Editor of the Comet newspaper, which has only been launched about two weeks before I became a member of the staff. Stevenage's football club, in those days, was Stevenage Athletic. They were playing in Division One South of the Southern League and were between managers in the summer of '71 when I arrived in the town.

Interviewer: What was the state of the club like in those days, on and off the pitch? A bit of a broad question, I know.

Phil Ravitz: The club was in a bit of disarray playing wise. I recall my very first visit to the ground was to meet the Club Secretary. A gentleman, now passed on, the late Ernie Ward. I couldn't meet the manager because they didn't have one. A gentleman called Brian Boggess had resigned earlier in the summer. He was Cambridgeshire based, somewhere in the Wisbech area, I believe. He had taken something like seven of the squad with him to join his new club in the Wisbech area.

The club was very sparse on players. Had finished fourth from the bottom of the Southern League, did oneself the season prior to my arrival. It was a bit of a state of flux. Also, it was run off the field, by a management committee of volunteers, which as I say, Mr Ward was the Secretary. The prime one from the club is a gentleman whose name is fairly infamous in Stevenage football history. A gentleman called Sid Stapleton,

who was the President of the club, but basically bankrolled the club.

He was a tyre magnet, you might say. He had a string of family exhaust and tyre businesses, in and around Stevenage and North Herts.

Interviewer: At that time you say the club was in a state of flux. How did the club, in effect, run itself with a committee of volunteers? It sounds, perhaps, a bit haphazard in some ways.

Phil Ravitz: I got the impression, having been involved in non league football in the north for about four or five seasons prior to coming that it was a bit of a haphazard set up. They managed to cobble together a team in time for the season that began about month to six weeks after I arrived in the area. They managed to appoint a manager, who was a very decent fellow.

A guy called Tony Gregory, who was best known for playing for Luton Town in the 1959 Cup Final and has also played at Watford. Somehow, maybe he was just looking for a job, but he took the job on. He was a very nice guy to deal with. Was very honest and very upstanding and was a very decent fellow. But, unfortunately, there was not a lot of money to play with to recruit a better side than Boggess had left behind.

After a fairly indifferent season, they finished the '71/'72 season in exactly the same position that Boggess had left them in, fourth from bottom. They narrowly avoided going out of the division as they had the season before, but there was no real improvement.

Interviewer: How did the club field a playing side with such limited resources?

Phil Ravitz: Gregory managed to recruit players round and about. They had one outstanding player, the only locally born player or locally produced player of that time, who many fans of Stevenage football might remember, a guy called Josie Wishaw. Who then went on to play for them for another four or five seasons. He was a Stevenage boy born and bred. He's best known now for being the father of the famous actor Ben Wishaw who appears on television fairly regularly. He is a member of the Shakespearian Company at Stratford.

He was about their best player. Apart from that it was local amateurs and a few guys on their way out. Tony Gregory's tenure at the club only last for a season. As I say, during which time he didn't really improve their footballing stick from the season before.

Interviewer: What was the support like in those days?

Phil Ravitz: The support was always good. A bit disgruntled, understandably, because Stevenage was a growing town. The support was good and obviously a lot of potential. That leads to the next story really, which was in the following summer, '72/'73, because of Stevenage's potential as a town and obviously being the only football club in the town, another rather infamous character, a guy called Bill Caldwell, took over as manager/owner of the club, buying it off Sid Stapleton.

And proceeded to manage the club and improve the side over the next three seasons, '72 to approximately '74/'75. But

unfortunately, as is probably very well documented in Stevenage footballing history, associated himself with a lot of what you might call undesirable elements, including a gentleman called Javier Revuelta. Who was the man who actually ruined Stevenage Athletic Football Club. I'm trying to wrack my memory now. When an application to have a Sunday market on the ground failed and they didn't get the support of the borough council for the plan, as he owned the leasehold of the ground having bought it via an arrangement with Bill Caldwell, he promptly ploughed the entire pitch up.

Dissolved the Stevenage Athletic Football Club and that began the two or three years when there was no active football in Stevenage on this ground or on any over. Which was the sad tailpiece to the short, but very controversial Bill Caldwell management history at the club. That all ended very, very suddenly with the club going out of existence, Stevenage Athletic, the ground being ploughed up and Stevenage Borough having to start from scratch two or three years later on a playing field.

Interviewer: Who was involved in the new club, in effect, rising from the ashes?

Phil Ravitz: The very first person I met was a gentleman called George Clark, who became the first Chairman of Stevenage Borough. He approached me through the Comet, in my capacity as Sports Editor, to give publicity to this plan of founding a new club in 1976, I believe it was. Where a gang of club supporters and volunteers who wanted to launch the new club. He became the first chairman of the club.

Present day people like Keith Byrne who is chairman or secretary of the Supporters' Association was involved, as was his late father Ron, who became the first club secretary at that time.

Basically, it was a group of enthusiasts and just people who keen on having a football team again in Stevenage who founded the club. They launched it from nothing. From a standpoint of having no players, no ground and they began playing on King George V playing field. They recruited an ex professional that somebody knew, I'm not quite sure how, called Derek Montgomery. He was the first Stevenage Borough manager. Who played at Leeds United, had a handful of games during the post Riva era at Leeds United.

He became the club's first manager. One of his ex teammates from Luton, who became a guy whose career spanned 20 years with Stevenage football. A guy called Paul Petersen. Petersen became his number two. Derek Montgomery and Paul Petersen, initially, had a team playing on King George V playing field in the Chilton Youth League for a season. They were obviously far too good for that. So they then moved into the United Counties League.

My first real coverage of the club was during their inaugural seasons in the United Counties League, which was quite an experience and has some very fond memories for me.

Stevenage, obviously, were a team on the up, but they were in a league which had lots of work's and village teams, particularly in the Northamptonshire area. They used to travel for 30 to 40 miles up the A1 to play their games. These teams all had a handful of supporters.

But it wasn't unreasonable for Stevenage to take between 500 and 800 people away with them. They were playing in the United Counties League, Division Two against teams I don't

even remember the names of, going back 30 odd years. Owen Chenicks and British Timkin Dustin, and people who just had a handful of officials and maybe about ten supporters. Then they'd play Stevenage at home and Stevenage would descend with about 800 supporters. They just couldn't cope with it.

As a result, Stevenage was obviously, completely out of their class in that division. They were obviously playing well below their potential. Within a season or so, they got promoted to the United Counties top division, the Premier Division, where they never actually won the title. There was a change of manager. My late, great friend Frank Cornwall took over from Derek Montgomery as manager and had two or three very successful seasons in United County's football, but never actually won the title.

They were always stymied by the big two of United County's football in those days. Stamford from Lincolnshire and a team called Earthling Boy Diamonds, who have subsequently become Rushton and Diamonds, who obviously were in the Football League until about three or four years ago now. Are dropping down, but on the back of some money, were at one time a fledgling Football League team.

Stevenage's best finish, as I recall, in the two or three years under Frank Cornwall's management was probably about third. But then the committee, in which I actually joined as press officer/ programme editor by then... I used to go to all the away games in all these far flung places in Northamptonshire. Desborough, Rothwell and Raunds and God knows where, along with about 800 to 1,000 supporters. The gate would be something like 1,100 and Stevenage would bring 1,000. Raunds or Desborough or Rothwell would have 100. It was just ridiculous.

They just took over the ground. Every game was like a Stevenage home game. Then the committee took the decision to, what they call, cross the pyramid. George Clark was still then the chairman. He decided that pyramid as it was, the football pyramid, had been introduced. If you won the United Counties League you then got a place in the Southern League. George didn't really want the club going into the Southern League.

So he cross pyramid in the last season that it was possible to do that. It was round about 1984, if I remember correctly. I may be wrong. Stevenage switched from the UCL as a feeder league to the Southern League, into the Isthmian League and was forced to play in Division Two North of the Isthmian League. But within two seasons, they were always in contention of the top six, but couldn't quite get promotion under the late Frank Cornwall.

As a result, in about 1985/86 took the decision to appoint Paul Fairclough. Who, the season before, had taken the Hartford Town to finish up, I think, a position one place above Stevenage. Stevenage had Broadhall Way now as their home ground. Had, probably, well over 1,000 regular gates. Hartford had none of this. Yet, on a shoe string budget and with a very poorly support club, Paul Fairclough had taken Hartford and they'd finished higher than Stevenage.

There was, I think, a manager in between for a season called John Bailey, who I knew when I was press officer and programme editor of the club. But he didn't last very long. After Frank had stepped down and John Bailey had been tried and failed really, the club decided to appoint Paul Fairclough. That was the beginning of his first spell at the club. Obviously, he achieved four successive promotions, very memorable seasons.



The club went from Division Two North into the Premier Division of the Ryman League and then kept that... I think there was season in between they didn't win promotion. But four out of five seasons they did. They went from Division Two North to the Football Conference inside five seasons with Paul at the helm. They were great days. Ultimately, I think, was it their first or second season in the Conference, they won the Conference title with a team that people still look back on as, possibly, the best English team ever.

That contained the likes of Steve Berry and Efe Sodje and Barry Hayles and Gary Crawshaw and Dave Venables. I'm trying to think who else. Des Gallagher, Denny Tyler and these people. That team won promotion, but wasn't allowed to go up because of the row that Victor Green, who had then taken over as chairman, had had with the football authorities. Victor's stance on the whole thing was that Stevenage, who was top of the Conference, just a little later than we are at the moment, in October. It was somewhere around about late November, beginning of December.

The Football League authorities were asking him to make the ground changes that would make Broadhall Way permissible to be used as a Football League ground by the end of the year. He steadfastly refused to do so. What he actually said was, which I thought had quite a lot of common sense, I've got to be honest, was that if by the of the end the season, or very close to the end of season came and Stevenage was still in the same \_\_\_[0:16:52] position of being top of the table or a in a promotion slot, he would then affect the changes then.

He gave a guarantee, a personal guarantee that the day football stopped being played at the end of that season on Broadhall Way, the bulldozers and contractors and everybody else would move in. He gave an undertaking to get the work

complete in time for inspection at least a month before the next season kicked off. Once he knew Borough's promotion was assured. That wasn't good enough for the Football League. Therefore Borough became one of, I think, four teams at that time... Macclesfield fell afoul of those rules twice. I think Wickham Wanderers and Borough were the fourth occasion of three clubs, fell afoul of having to do that.

Then within a couple of years of those four occasions, the Football League revised its rules. So, subsequently, in later years any team has now until the end of the season in which they're playing to get their facilities in order. I've often wondered had that Stevenage team of their Conference winning season in '96, had they been promoted, how they'd have fared in the Football League.

I would have thought, in view of their FA Cup pedigree, and the way they've fared against Football League teams in other cup competitions, I thought they'd have done very, very well.

Interviewer: How do you think the League denying the club entry into the Football League, how do you think it affected the club and, in some other respects, the town as a whole?

Phil Ravitz: It certainly was a setback for the club. Unfortunately, in terms of this interview and, if you like, my support of Borough, that happened in '96. Paul Fairclough stuck around for another season, as I did. But in 1998, professionally, the company I worked for who owned the Comet, was sold and I was offered a transfer to work in our London office, which I took. Really had to take and I took.

So I was out of touch a lot where Stevenage football was concerned for the next 11 or 12 years really, apart from seeing the odd game when I was at home midweek. But I saw very little Stevenage football between 1998 and 2008/2009. For about 11 years I really wasn't that au fait with the club. Certainly, Paul Fairclough's reign ended in 1998, just about the same time that I moved to work in London.

Obviously he never was able to replicate what he had achieved in 1996. The club then had, for the first time really in its history, a succession of managers very quickly. People like Richard Hill, Wayne Turner. I can't remember... Steve Wigner was meant to come here and he never came or he came for about two weeks and left. They went through a lot of managers. None of whom were able to replicate the success that Paul Fairclough had managed.

He even, in fact, came back for a second spell while I was away working in London and again, wasn't as successful, like many managers in the past, as he had been in his first spell. It wasn't really until Graham Westley took over as manager, probably the best part of 15 years after Paul had achieved his first success, that the club really... It must have had a detrimental effect. It wasn't something that other managers or Paul himself, given a second bite, could replicate.

Obviously, I think the town must have got very low about the fact that they have achieved this, as had Macclesfield, as had Wickham. The difference really was that Macclesfield and Wickham got in the Football League quicker than Stevenage did. They didn't have as long to sort of regret the fact they had been denied promotion first time around on facility grounds. I'm certain it must have a detrimental effect that probably lasted the best part of 15 seasons afterwards.

Interviewer: The name Paul Fairclough it still spoken with great reverence among people associated with the club. Can you give any idea as to, not just the success he built on the field, but did he have anything to do with the makeup of the club off the field in the way the club was run? Did he have any input in that which, perhaps, may well have led the club to become more professional, in a way?

Phil Ravitz: I first met Paul when we were both 17 and 18 years of age on Merseyside. I was telling somebody only about this yesterday. My first journalist jobs were on Merseyside. I worked for the Liverpool Daily Post and Echo Group. After a couple of years I became Sports Editor of a newspaper on the Wirral called the Wallasey News. Paul, in those days, was a student. Had been rejected by Liverpool Football Club, even though he supported Everton, but that's another matter, and was playing non-league football in and around Merseyside.

I was covering a team in those days that were in the Old Chester County League before the Northern Premier League was formed, called New Brighton. Which is a holiday resort which is part of the borough of Wallasey. He joined New Brighton round about 1968. He was a young player when I was a young journalist. We knew each other, probably, for two or three years until I came and took the job down here in Stevenage.

Two years, three years after I came and took the job at Stevenage, I came across a guy playing for Hartford Town, or was it Hemel Hempstead Town, one of the two, he played for both and called Paul Fairclough. I went to watch him one night wondering if it was just a quash of names. It turned out to be one and the same guy. I knew Paul a long, long time before, and his family. His father Eric and his mother Diane. A long,

long time before he became manager of Stevenage Football Club.

He was always a very cerebral man, even as young man, as a young footballer on Merseyside in the late '60s. He was a student. He was at teacher's training college at a place called Padgate near Warrington, even when I knew him as a teenager. He was always a very thinking manager. He always was one of these managers who would always associate and enrol himself on football coaching courses.

I remember he used to have loads and loads of books about people like Howard Wilkinson. All these Football Association approved coaches teaching you coaching techniques. He used to surround himself with manuals about coaching and teaching when it wasn't really very fashionable to be as highbrow and as cerebral as all that. It didn't surprise me that when I latterly met him six or so years after we'd first known each other that he was looking to move into coaching. He was a reasonable player, but I suppose he would admit himself, he was a fairly ordinary player by professional standards.

But he always had a bent for coaching. I think he just needed the platform to really vent his coaching spleen, as it were. I think he really needed a club where we could put all his fairly ambitious and fairly radical ideas into practice. He couldn't do it at Hartford, not a big enough club without enough potential, but he could certainly do it here. It was a bit of a marriage made in heaven really, Paul Fairclough and Stevenage Borough Football Club as it had become by then. I think they were just made for each other, quite frankly.

Interviewer: Could you describe some of those radical ideas? \_\_\_\_[0:25:25]  
the way he decided to bring to the club.

Phil Ravitz: He was always very fond of playing 4:4:2. His best team, the team we've talked about, the title winning team, was always a very, very rigid 4:4:2. He was lucky. He was lucky and maybe not so lucky in that he got players that fitted the way he wanted to play. He clearly wanted to play with two wingers. He clearly wanted to play with a main striker, with a support striker playing off him. He did that with a guy called Corey Brown, with Barry Hayles feeding off Corey Brown. That worked very, very well.

Then he had Gary Crawshaw. Gary wasn't the archetypal big beefy lamppost of a forward. He was quite a cute player. He was always very much... The players used to tell me that. He always was very much a blackboard sort of coach. He was one of these guys that wrote everything down. You never ever saw him on the sidelines gesticulating. He was always a clipboard man. He was always there with a clipboard and the pencils jotting everything down.

He wasn't one of these guys you see, even nowadays obviously in the top four of the country, raging and ranting and waving their arms around like a windmill. He was never like that. He was always a guy who, alright, would shout encouragement at me, but he always was very much a blackboard and clipboard sort of coach. Stevenage Football Club needed something like that in the early and mid '90s. They needed someone to give them a little bit of a purpose to the way they played.

Interviewer: Thank you. Obviously, Paul Fairclough seems to have set the stage, as it were, for the club's recent success. Can I ask you about the current manager, Graham Westley?

Phil Ravitz:

Yes you can, with pleasure. I'm not really the best person to ask because I've never met Mr Westley other than to nod and shake hands. I appreciate what he's done. I don't know him and I'm merely a supporter nowadays, so I don't really get to know him. He clearly has his own way of playing. He clearly has his own group of players that he depends on. I know that it's very important.

I worked for a football club myself for three seasons as their press officer, a Football League club. I know that the manager there was very loyal to certain players. Like anybody who ran a football team, if you or I ran a football team, you'd have players that you knew you could depend on, who would be your personal favourites. There would be other players that you could take or leave. You think, "They're okay, but if they left me tomorrow I wouldn't really lose any sleep about it."

Graham Westley, obviously, has stuck with a group of players that have got him through two promotions in recent seasons. He hasn't made wholesale changes. A lot of the players who played for in the Conference are still wearing the Stevenage shirt in League One. So he obviously knows he can depend on them and he obviously knows their capabilities. As I say, I couldn't comment about him as a man, because I don't know him as a man.

I would have thought, if the current team lacks a little bit... I'm very impressed with the defence, they don't give any goals away. They've obviously got a very useful goalkeeper as well. Very dependable, very reliable. If they lack anything it's probably a little bit of guile and creativity in midfield. Now, they're in a division where there are some huge clubs with huge stadia who can have 20,000 people watching their home

games. Obviously, Stevenage are playing on a level playing field.

Obviously, Mr Wesley feels that he has to devise a system whereby he can nullify his opponent's best assets and give his own team a chance. That, obviously, I would think is the reason maybe that his team is maybe not as creative as some. But nevertheless, is a very effective, very efficient team that is very, very hard to beat.

Interviewer: You've spoken about the relative success that Stevenage has enjoyed in the last couple of years. There have been some fantastic FA Cup ties that are remembered fondly by many, many fans. The game I would particularly like to ask you about would be the 1998 game against Newcastle. Can you describe the time leading up to that game? What role you took, if any, at the club? The outcome, what you thought of it as a fan.

Phil Ravitz: I was, if you like, I no longer worked for the club. I ceased to work for the club when the chairman changed. I was only really press officer and programme editor during their UCL and lower Ryman League days. When that FA Cup tie with Newcastle, the first FA Cup tie, not to be confused with the one they played last year. I was recruited, temporarily, by the then vice chairman of the club. A guy called Mike Palmer, who had a background in PR, to assist with the press arrangements for the day.

It was a major undertaking because I was still working as sports editor with the Comet. It was not long after that that I actually left working on the Comet. But it was in the last season that I worked on the Comet purely as their sports editor. It was probably one of the most hectic three week spells I think I've



ever had in my working life. Not only were we doing a lot of supplements and additional pieces of interviews. I remember going all the way over to Luton at something like 11:30 or midnight to do an interview on the game for three county's radio at some unearthly hour in their Luton studios. It was pretty crackers.

I had phone calls from any number of national newspapers. Myself and Mr Palmer had to make the press arrangements to accommodate about nearly 50 journalists, as I remember, from not only every national newspaper and every regional newspaper in the northeast and elsewhere, but also worldwide. There were soccer magazines from all over who were really, really interested.

The interest grew, as people might remember, because during the period between the draw being made and the game being played, there was again a war of words between Stevenage and Newcastle over, first of all, where the game was would be played. It was fairly commonplace in the mid '90s, that if a small club could drawn at home to a big club and the big club or the police or any other authority were not happy with the small club staging the game, then in return for a financial inducement, the little club could swap venue. And the tie would be played at the home of the big club.

In fact, Graham Westley was involved with a very famous aspect of that when he was the manager of Farnborough when they drew Arsenal. Stevenage had a similar thing whereby Newcastle came and took a look at the facilities here at Broadhall Way and pronounced themselves none too pleased with what they saw. They obviously saw a certain amount of discomfort they would have to suffer and they obviously saw that their chances of having obviously been shocked many

years before at Hereford in the very famous FA Cup defeat that everyone remembers.

They obviously saw that there was scope for a similar thing happening against poor old Stevenage. They strove mightily to get the game switched up to St James's Park. Victor Green, the then Stevenage chairman, fought vehemently against that. There were wars of words between Kenny Dalglish. Between the chief executive, a guy called Cushing from Newcastle, and Mr Green who was sole spokesman on behalf of Stevenage Football Club, in the capacity as a rather self seeking, self \_\_\_[0:34:17] type chairman.

The more this storm brewed. The more national, international newspapers, everybody was terrifically interested in all this. With the upshot that we had more press and media people at the first tie here than we could cope with. A large section of the main stand held to be secured and used as press seating just for the day, to the annoyance and chagrin of a number of season ticket holders, I can remember.

But nevertheless, yes, it was a very hectic three weeks. We were pretty glad... It was a very long day as well, that particular Sunday when it was played, because it was shown on Sky TV. Pretty glad when it was all over, quite frankly.

Interviewer: You spoke about some of the tactics that the Newcastle people used to try to get the game switched to St James's Park. You spoke about financial inducement. Could you go into any more detail about some of the things that went on behind the scenes there?

Phil Ravitz: Not really. I wasn't privy to that. I just knew that Newcastle was leaving no stone unturned trying to get the game switched and played at Newcastle. But they failed because, in the end, the smaller club had to agree to any switch. Even if the police said that your ground, whoever you were, was not suitable to stage such a game and if you said, "We're not going to play at Newcastle," they even went to look for a neutral ground. You had to play halfway between Stevenage and Newcastle, or wherever the two clubs were based.

In this case, Victor Green wouldn't [count in on 0:36:08] any of this. Victor Green demanded that the game be played at Stevenage. Gave undertakings, as he had about the facilities when they failed to get in the League that they could cope with everything. Have extra seating, temporary seating put in. Every criterion got extra turnstiles fitted on the ground on a temporary basis. And got the game played. He was just convinced that to maximise Stevenage's chance of getting through to the next round, that that had to happen at home.

He, subsequently, was proved right, as it turned out.

Interviewer: Can you share any memories of the match itself at Stevenage?

Phil Ravitz: It wasn't a great game, I don't think, from memory. Newcastle took the lead, I remember, just before half time. Everybody got pretty deflated. Thought, despite all the efforts that everybody's made, alright we've made a fair few quid, as you would do with SKY TV and the number of people you crammed into the ground. Then Giuliano Grazioli got the goal that he's been living on ever since. With a header about eight minutes from the finish to a replay. Which, I think, Victor Green was very

delighted about because, obviously, it was a second payday for the club.

They'd live to fight another day. At least they'd be going to St James's Park, not because they conceded the home advantage, but because they'd actually earned the chance to go to St James's Park. I think, although everybody dreamed of Stevenage winning the first game, I think they were pretty satisfied. They'd managed to give a very good account of themselves in front of the TV cameras and to snatch a replay.

Particularly as it been Newcastle that had been in front and they got the equaliser eight minutes from the end, not the other way round.

Interviewer: Did you make it to the game at St James's Park?

Phil Ravitz: I did. We stayed overnight. A friend and I stayed overnight. That was always shrouded in controversy. Newcastle took a lead and then went two up with a highly controversial goal. You might recall, when Alan Shearer got a red kick in or something and Mark Smith, who also was one of the great mainstays of Paul Fairclough's team, got it off the line and subsequent slow motion replay showed he did actually clear it before the ball crossed the line.

But the referee being a bit trigger happy, went and awarded the goal without really consulting on it. Stevenage, 2 - 0 down, did get a goal back before the end. Again, about 10 minutes from time when Gary Crawshaw scored. Lost very valiantly and very creditably 2 - 1. They have had two very good paydays out of the ties. It was a great, great experience really.

Interviewer: Following on from that. I see the club, at the time, still in the Conference applying their trade there. Had there been any moves at that time to try and make decent bedrock for attaining League status on and off the field?

Phil Ravitz: I think so. Very soon after that - that must have been in the February of that year, because it was obviously the fourth round of the FA Cup, wasn't it? - I left working in the area. Stevenage saw the end of that season out, did reasonably well in the Conference. Weren't in any trouble. I then left to go to work in London that summer of '98. Paul Fairclough, subsequently, left the club very early at the start of the following season.

Victor Green feeling that maybe he'd taken Stevenage, Paul Fairclough that is, as far as he could. I remember I'd only been away from covering Stevenage, probably two or three months, when somebody rang me up and told me that Paul, in fact, had left the club. My guess is he left about September/October of that same year.

Interviewer: When you went down to work in London, did you follow Stevenage? Did you miss it here at all?

Phil Ravitz: I did, to start with, but then I got embroiled... My management for the company I worked for, which was the same company who owned the Comet, but I worked for a different division. Because we sponsored to cover Dagenham and Redbridge, after a season of covering Dagenham and Redbridge, I got rather taken up with covering them. They did play Stevenage a

couple of times in the early days. I had mixed emotions about that.

I think the first two games they played Stevenage, one at Dagenham and one here, they were both drawn. So I got away with not having to come down on one side. I stayed down in London and covered Dagenham for none seasons and then for the last two years I was their press officer. I worked down there until I retired in 2009. Always living in Hertfordshire, I would point out, so I never actually lived in East London. I travelled down daily.

When I stopped working on a full time basis, it happened to coincide, very conveniently, with Stevenage getting promoted to the Football League. So I became a season ticket holder.

Interviewer: Fantastic. You've been involved in football, in one capacity or another, a fan and in your working life for 40 years.

Phil Ravitz: For 40 years.

Interviewer: I would imagine you've seen some pretty drastic changes in all areas of the game. For example, player's fitness and professionalism. Can you describe how it was when you first became involved in football to how it is now?

Phil Ravitz: If I take Stevenage as an example. I covered football for about four years prior to, maybe nearer five, before I can to Stevenage in '71. As I say, when I first found the club here, when I first came to work in North Herts and we first launched the Comet, Stevenage were a bit of a shambles of a football

club. Hitching Town were much the more organised and much the more recognised big guns around North Herts. Hitching, even though it was a very small town, because it had a bit of a history in Isthmian League Football, were always seen as the well run little club.

Stevenage was always seen as being a bit of a shambles to be quite honest. I couldn't disagree with that with what I found in '71. As I say, when I arrived in the town, they were between managers. They had a despotic president running the club who had a committee running it, but virtually, what he said went. Their previous manager had taken about seven or eight of the previous squad off with him to join his new club. They were a bit of a shambles.

Bill Caldwell was the first really professional manager I came across in Stevenage, two years after I came here. He was, again, a bit like Paul Fairclough, a bit ahead of his time. He was a big, big man who was full of big ideas. Some of which people used to scoff at because they thought it was way above Stevenage's compass. Unless we're clairvoyants, 40 years later, everything he wished for Stevenage, back in the early 1970s has come to pass by 2012.

Maybe these people are visionaries and not such idiots as they looked at the time. Players were, obviously, not as fit. A lot of players in the standard of Stevenage Athletic and the early days of Stevenage, were part time. They were in a semi professional league and they were semi professional players. You'd find a guy who worked at BAE or work as a brewery driver or drive a lorry or something, and then come rushing for training. Quit work around four or five o'clock. Come rushing for training two nights a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays and play on a Saturday. That's what being a part time footballer was.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Coming back, straight up to date now, you're now a season ticket holder.

Phil Ravitz: I am.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that the current side? They're obviously League One, the third tier of the Football League. Do you think they deserve to be there?

Phil Ravitz: Yes. Any team that wins promotion... I'm very keen on clubs with big potential. I like big city teams to do well. I'm not talking about London and Manchester necessarily. I think this team... Football doesn't work like that. Managers look for clubs with potential. Stevenage is a town and a team with vast potential. But it's only in vast potential, if you like, now it's Division One they're in with some amazing places. They're in with two teams from Sheffield. Sheffield must have almost a million people in it and Stevenage's population isn't even 100, 000.

That puts things in perspective. They've got teams with the history of Preston Northend playing in the same division. They've come a massive long way and they deserve... Any team that wins its division to get promotion, they won through the playoffs. I think they will do okay. If you ask me if they'll win promotion, I think it will be a minor miracle. I don't think it would happen. I don't think they'll be in trouble either.

I think, possibly, mid table consolidation. The team is good enough to consolidate because Graham Westley, obviously plays to a system that enables his team to be very hard to beat. As a result of that, they can minimise the prospects of defeat almost all the time. I would think if they can consolidate



and establish themselves as a Division One team, then that's probably the best they can manage, because, Stevenage, after all is only a town of 90,000 people.

Which might be a very large by Hertfordshire standards, but if you look at the size of towns who have teams in League One and you look below to some of the places who have teams in League Two, then probably established as a Division One club is probably as good as Stevenage Football Club can get, I would have thought.

Interviewer: With regards to the style of play, some might say that it's not as attractive as Stevenage teams of the past. What would you say to that?

Phil Ravitz: I would say I quite agree with that. I don't think it is. But then, the present manager does what he needs to do to keep his team in contention in the present division. I would think because they're in a big league with big clubs now, they haven't got the wherewithal to have a team of strolling players. If they did, judging by some of the opposition they play, they'd probably get found out very quickly. I think it isn't the most attractive Stevenage team I've ever seen, I will agree.

But it's possibly one of the most efficient Stevenage teams I've ever seen.

Interviewer: We've spoken about the recent success and the rapid rise through the leagues. Would Stevenage be able to sustain a Championship status season, a couple of seasons in the Championship, if they were to get there at this moment in time, do you feel?

Phil Ravitz:

I think they'd probably suffer in the same way that clubs like Scunthorpe. I'm thinking of Scunthorpe because they've just come down. As a pat one word answer, no. I don't think they would because if you look at the teams in the Championship and the places they come from, then the Championship, the size of cities and stadia and support in the Championship... Probably two thirds of the teams in the Championship would probably have a claim to be in the Premiership.

Because, when you weigh the Premiership sides up, five are London teams and six are from the North West. Three of those are really struggling. Basically, you've got two teams from Manchester, two teams from Liverpool and five teams from London. You've got huge cities like Newcastle with one team. Then you've got Stoke, which is a moderate sized city and then you've got Aston Villa and, to a lesser extent, West Bromwich.

Then even places the size of Wolverhampton has got teams that are struggling. If you look at the Championship, there are teams from colossal cities who ought to be in the Premier League if your criterion was not playing ability. If your criteria were stadia support and potential, you'd probably take half the teams out of the Premier League and replace them with the ten teams out of the Championship.

Because, maybe some people don't know, but cities like Leeds and Hull and Bristol and Cardiff, I'm struggling even to think of now. These sizes of places are phenomenally large places. They've probably got more people in those cities than we've got in the whole of Hertfordshire and their team is in the Championship. I know that's not what dictates which division you play in, but for a place the size of Stevenage... They would struggle like Watford is struggling in the Championship, if that's the best analogy I can give you.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Do you think that the club would be able to stay at the position they're in and perhaps build for the future? Would you say that's a realistic target?

Phil Ravitz: I would hope so. I would hope so. With the right management, which they obviously seem to have and they're building a brand new training ground at Bragbury End, yes I would think probably their maximum achievement at the moment is to establish themselves as regular members of Division One. And establish themselves in that division. Yes. That would be a fine achievement.

Interviewer: Fantastic.

END AUDIO

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