

**File: BMG Steve Watkins.mp3**

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START AUDIO

Interviewer: I'm joined by Steve Watkins, he's normally the gentleman saying that kind of thing, but Steve is of course the long time voice of Stevenage football club, rather than the face of the football club obviously. They don't trust him to show his face. He's the man of the radio. He's the long time voice and all things Stevenage, so we're going to talk to Steve about how he got into his media work and we'll just have a conversation as we normally do I think, Steve.

Steve Watkins: Yes, well, first of all, thanks for the introduction. I've never been introduced like that before; it's a real pleasure.

Interviewer: So tell us Steve, how did you come to Stevenage Borough football club as it was then?

Steve Watkins: Well, I started a long time ago, but not as long as some. I was brought up playing rugby and I played an awful lot of rugby during my youth and early manhood, if you like, and then ankles gave in and family came on the scene and everything. I ended up drifting away from that and doing nothing and obviously there was an awful lot going on at Broadhall Way at the time.

I just came down and started watching from the Terrace, just to see what was going on and gradually as things went, my attendance became more and more and I started taking an interest in the match programme. I offered my services and started doing some work for the programme, then the website came along and I set up my first unofficial website originally and then the newspapers got interested. I was writing for both The Comet and The Mercury at the time.

Occasionally Darren [Istead 0:01:55], if he weren't around, because he was the main voice for Three Counties radio as far as Stevenage was concerned in those days, they'd ask me just to come in with some updates. Very nervous and it was pretty nerve tingling in those days as well, it was a real eye opener on a tin can and a bit of string. Things have changed a little bit since then. Darren eventually said that he couldn't do it anymore and I took over. Of course in those days it was all updates every ten minutes or so because Stevenage were only in the Conference at this time. There wasn't the online presence that we've got these days, so there was no commentary, it was just all updates.

We then had the big breakthrough of course with the internet and Three Counties were able to offer online commentary, so naturally I took that over and it's just grown from there and here we are today. It's really been quite a journey; I have to say, along that time as well.

Interviewer: So not planned at all then, you never planned to be a radio star?

Steve Watkins: A radio star, come on. No, it's certainly not been planned. If I was completely honest, when I first started doing it, I really

hated doing the radio work. I'd much rather sit there and take notes and then go home and write up a match report for the papers or a website or whatever. The radio stuff, I found it really difficult, I have to say, because you've got to be of a type to just go in and take it on and sound good. I've never felt that I'm that, to be honest.

It's just something that with experience I think you tend to take things in your stride and that's the main thing for me. I've just grown into it more than anything and there's still a long way to go, I'm sure, a long way behind your Alan Greens and John \_\_\_[0:03:59] but it's good fun and I thoroughly enjoy what I do.

Interviewer: That's good. What year would you think was your first time on the East Terrace? Do you remember your first game or can you remember the time of when it was?

Steve Watkins: Do you know, I can't remember the first game actually? I remember it was a Monday evening game when we came in through the corner there on Broadwall Way and stood on the Terrace. In fact, the game had already kicked off. I came in with my brother and a couple of other lads from the rugby club, as it happens. As soon as we walked in the corner a player just came across to the corner of the pitch we were at and we looked up and we saw the referee and it was Mr Mark Halsey.

I don't suppose many people would know it, but Mark used to play rugby in his day. He was a good goalkeeper of course, but had to pack that in for injury and then took up rugby, which I could never quite understand. Play came over and of course my brother and myself, "Oi Halsey," because it was exactly what he'd do to the referee on the rugby pitch, which was

frowned upon. We got a little wink from him and that's my memory of the first game. I can't remember whether they won.

Interviewer: Was that a Conference game?

Steve Watkins: Yes, it was the first Conference season. It was just great atmosphere. You had the shed over in the halfway line, which is now the East Terrace, which was always packed with the lads, the barmy army of the day.

Interviewer: And still is, of course.

Steve Watkins: Absolutely, yes.

Interviewer: Even at quarter to two it's filling up nicely over there today.

Steve Watkins: Yes, it is and it's just been great that that's been kept on isn't it? Obviously the grounds is much changed, the East Terrace over on that far side is a lot different to what it was on that first night that I came into a Stevenage game. It's nice that that little thing has been kept really and they won't move either. They've been offered the chance to move to somewhere where the acoustics are better, but they're not interested in that.

Interviewer: Despite the chairman's advice, but no, no, that's where they've stood for 20 years, some of the old boys over there. When you

get to my age though you have to sit down, Steve, unfortunately.

Steve Watkins: Absolutely, but you go back to that team in that day of course and that was a great team in itself wasn't it? Am I allowed to say Venables? It's not Mark Venables of course.

Interviewer: Dave Venables.

Steve Watkins: Dave Venables, Tony Lynch.

Interviewer: Paul Barracliff in the middle.

Steve Watkins: Yes, Steve Berry.

Interviewer: It was a cracking side wasn't it? You had Richard Nugent, Rudi Hedman back in those days and although they didn't hang around too long at the Conference level, it was still a great time at the club then.

Steve Watkins: Yes, of course and there was Mark Smith and Barry Hayles, how could we forget names like that, \_\_\_\_ [0:07:14] who I don't know if we're going to see this afternoon?

Interviewer: He's older than us though, Steve.

Steve Watkins: I think you're probably right there actually but don't tell him that. Whenever we used to see him after he'd left Stevenage we'd say, "How old are you?" and he said, "21."

Interviewer: Still.

Steve Watkins: Yes, but it was the brand of football they played as well, which was just probably unseen in the Conference in that day. Paul Fairclough had them playing some great stuff and it was just a pleasure watching. I mean how many times did that side score three, four, five goals in a game, even eight or nine?

Interviewer: At Runcorn for instance, yes.

Steve Watkins: It was just fantastic.

Interviewer: Even at 0-1 down at half time or something like that, it was no drama scoring three or four in the second half was it?

Steve Watkins: Well, you never panicked did you? They'd be down at half time. I remember a Morecambe game where I think they were 0-1 down at half time and ended up winning 3-2. You just knew they were going to win it.

Interviewer: Yes, I think Hayles came off the bench that day didn't he?  
Barry Hayles came off the bench and scored a late winner.

Steve Watkins: Yes, he did. I think he might have scored one or two, he might even have got a hatrick, I'm not sure.

Interviewer: I think you might be right.

Steve Watkins: Yes, but that was just the trademark of that side. They never panicked and neither did the fans. They all sort of knew that it was an inevitability that they were going to get something from the game.

Interviewer: Going back to your radio, who was the first manager you ever interviewed?

Steve Watkins: Paul Fairclough. What a gent, absolute gent. My son has just walked past, he's a big lummoX at the moment now, but in the day he used to follow me to home and away to Stevenage games. As a four year old he used to come into the press conferences in the room behind us and Paul Fairclough, before anybody had started, would say, "Right, just hold on," and Daniel would be pulled forward and he said, "Right, young man, any questions." The press conference would start with Paul Fairclough being interviewed by a four year old.

Interviewer: Excellent.

Steve Watkins: That is just the measure of the man. Whatever he's done on the pitch is down in history and everybody knows that but people perhaps don't know a lot of the background. I guess a lot of them probably do, the itchy brown jumper and the legendary nights in the clubhouse, always there with a smile and for a chat with people. For me, absolute gent and he's just somebody I hold in highest regard and would thank him from the bottom of my heart for what he did for Daniel and me in those days.

Interviewer: Even now if he comes back to the ground, it takes him 20 minutes to get to his seat doesn't it because he'll never not talk to anybody. He's just one of those true, as you say, gents of the game.

Steve Watkins: And quite rightly so because that sort of character is tending to fade away from the game now isn't it? You see managers coming in and they're not part of the fans like Paul Fairclough was and other managers that have followed him as well.

Interviewer: Having said that, we've got quite an amiable chap at the moment haven't we in Gary Smith? He's quite receptive to your difficult questioning isn't he?

Steve Watkins: I don't know, difficult questioning with Gary Smith I'm not sure because you can get six or seven minutes audio out of him with three questions, which is fantastic. He is a breath of fresh air. I know he had a sticky start to his tenure here and the fans



probably took a while to take to him, whether they have or not yet I don't know. Perhaps he's still got to win a few over.

Interviewer: He's probably got about three hours to decide that hasn't he?

Steve Watkins: Yes, but it's great because it's a completely different kettle of fish to Graham Westley, our previous manager of course, who was known to be rather difficult with the press. In fairness, Graham was good with us and I always got on really well with Graham, but it had to be on his terms.

Interviewer: If he wanted to give you a one word answer, he'd give you a one word answer wouldn't he?

Steve Watkins: Yes and you'd have to be ready to bat it back as well or move on.

Interviewer: Or dodge the pizza that was coming out of his mouth.

Steve Watkins: Yes, that's something that's often been pointed out to me. It's not something that I've been able to really say too much about. It's one of the unfortunate aspects of Mr Westley was his interviewing and coming out with a cup of tea or pizza or a sandwich or something and he wouldn't be afraid to take a bite mid interview.

Interviewer: You've seen a few over the years I suppose, after Paul there was Wayne Turner wasn't there and from Wayne there was Richard Hill. Did he come before?

Steve Watkins: Yes, I think it was Paul Fairclough, then Richard Hill took over from him, am I right? Steve Wignall was in there as well somewhere along the lines, Wayne Turner of course. They're all really good guys; don't get me wrong, but all so different. Richard Hill, you'd stand there and interview him and he scares the living daylights out of you just by looking at you. He doesn't have to say a word. You know whether you've said the right thing or not or asked the right thing or not. That is what comes with the territory isn't it and it's the beauty of the sport really?

Interviewer: See I don't remember too much of him because as you say, going back to what you said earlier, you didn't ever see the interviews did you? You heard snippets of them on Three Counties on a Monday morning and that was your lot. If you didn't catch it on the radio, there were no cameras; there were no pitch side interviews. If you missed it on Monday morning at 7:30 you had to wait till 8:30 to the next bulletin didn't you?

Steve Watkins: Yes and that's where it's all changed now with the Internet. It's how things have changed and pretty quickly as well, of course not only with the radio but with the club and their Borough Players service. It's visual now as well and you can actually see the man who is being interviewed. Sometimes you can see the interviewer as well, which is not always the nicest of things.

Interviewer: No, well, that's the reason we don't put you in front of the cameras very much, Steve. Let's come a bit more up to date then. We've got some stats from last season because isn't it fun – I suppose going back to August when the fixtures came out, you always look at the first game of the season, the Christmas fixtures and then the last game of the season. Bury came out as the last game of the season and they were here last year. We've both done a little bit of homework and I had a look last night and listened to a couple of snippets of our podcast from this time last year. Coming in to today's game 12 months ago, we came off the back of a defeat at Northampton.

Steve Watkins: Oh, remind me.

Interviewer: Okay, where we had two of our players sent from the field of play and we lost 0-2. We only won one of our last six last season; I was really surprised to see. There were a couple of draws in there and a Southend and a Northampton defeat. We needed to come in and better Gillingham's result I seem to remember. I think we were in very much the same position, but there were five goals between us, so if we won 1-0 and Gillingham won 6 or 7-0, Gillingham would have got in. Is that how you remember it?

Steve Watkins: I was trying to wrack my brains to remember the permutations but I think if I remember rightly, we went into it and Torquay had the upper hand didn't they? But there were two spots for the three sides.

Interviewer: For three teams, yes.

Steve Watkins: I think you're right; we just had to match or obviously do better than Gillingham did on the day, which somehow we managed to do that. I can't even remember who Gillingham were playing but obviously we were playing Bury who themselves were still in with a chance with winning the title as well, depending on how the Chesterfield result went and what the score line would have been. They probably fancied it, having beaten Stevenage 3-0 earlier in the season up at Gig Lane. You've got to say what a good side Bury were as well in those days. They were a real joy to watch and they certainly played that day as well.

Interviewer: Gave us a fright didn't they, to say the least?

Steve Watkins: Well, I don't know if it was a fright or not because-

Interviewer: I was frightened.

Steve Watkins: Yes, you kind of went into the game thinking, "Well, this is really tough. It's going to be a tough one," because they were a good side, they had not got automatic promotion by accident and they were quite capable of scoring goals. I mean it's not many sides that will score three goals against Stevenage and they did it twice last year of course.

Interviewer: Yes and I remember quite early in the game Craig Reid scored didn't he? Was it Craig that settled the nerves? Oh, it was Scott Laird.

Steve Watkins: It was Scott Laird, the first one.

Interviewer: Yes, Reid scored a penalty didn't he? It was quite early wasn't it?

Steve Watkins: Yes, it was eight minutes on the clock when Scott Laird scored his goal and what a good goal it was as well. It was from just outside the area and just a low rifle shot on a loose ball and the ball ended up in the back of the net. It was such a good day, I remember the weather was great and it was one of those days when Bury weren't going to lie down because they knew they had a job to do if they wanted to win the title themselves. They still had the squeak of it of course and Stevenage twice took the lead and were twice pulled back quite quickly by the Bury side; it was just that sort of a game.

In the second half then Bury actually took the lead with a stunning goal from Stephen Schumacher.

Interviewer: It was a screamer wasn't it?

Steve Watkins: Yes, it really stunned the home crowd, but of course, again, the lead only lasted two minutes and then Ben May popped up to score.

Interviewer: That will be in legend status no matter what else he does if he comes back to us, obviously on loan at Barnet at the moment. I

thought he just stuck his leg out and it hit him but it was a really well taken goal for the third equaliser wasn't it?

Steve Watkins: Oh, it was. It was only when you looked at the game afterwards on the replay, beauty of the Internet and everything of course as we've just been saying. I thought it was a bit fortunate initially, but no, when you see the way he turned and dragged the ball back and finished it, it was pretty impressive stuff from the big man. Of course he was on as substitute and got injured in the process of scoring that goal and promptly went off.

Interviewer: He went off again didn't he?

Steve Watkins: Yes, he certainly played his part that day.

Interviewer: As a commentator and you're obviously live on air and listening to people on the internet around the world, you've got live league tables, I mean I think we were down to eighth at one point in that second half weren't we?

Steve Watkins: Do you know, I can't remember? It's been like the last five or six seasons now, going into the last game relying on results elsewhere and just keeping an eye on things. It's going to be much the same today of course, we're going to be looking at scores elsewhere and we get the feed from the studio because obviously while we're commentating, they're talking to us, as you know, and that is probably the quickest feed because they're getting it straight off the wires and straight to us. We're

perhaps the first people in the ground who know what is going on elsewhere.

Interviewer: Back in the Conference days, back in '96 - you were relying on mobile phones were about then but text messaging wasn't too clever and you were relying on someone that you knew or a mate knew at another ground to tell you what the score was when you were in the ground weren't you?

Steve Watkins: Yes, I mean you'd be relying on somebody sat at home watching Teletext or something like that. I have to say; it doesn't always go right even now though. Do you remember a couple of seasons ago, the last season in the Conference when we went to Mansfield? Stevenage of course had won that game 3-2, coming back from 0-2 down with a player sent off as well and the score was reported as Mansfield winning 3-2. That was one of those situations.

Interviewer: Even in some of the Sundays the next day wasn't it? It appeared in one of the papers as a home win rather than the actual score.

Steve Watkins: Well, that's right because all the information is supplied by outside agencies and I had the situation where I was talking to the studio who hadn't picked up on my scores, because we were doing internet commentary on the day. They thought the score was 3-2 to Mansfield.

Interviewer: I remember listening to it in my car, Luke Astley was reporting.

Steve Watkins: I was having a conversation with Luke and midway through I'm thinking, "What's he saying?" because he said, "Are Stevenage disappointed?" and I said, "No actually Stevenage are over the moon, they won the game with ten men," and it didn't even dawn until after that interview what had actually happened.

Interviewer: How times change, hey? So today, what do we say about today? It's another chapter just about to be written in this amazing history of this amazing football club.

Steve Watkins: Well, it's either a chapter that's going to be signed off I think because if for some reason Stevenage don't make the playoffs, I think the likelihood is that there's going to be several players that won't be here next season. It's going to be emotional on that end because they've been through an awful lot with the fans and everybody else as well. But we're hoping that's not going to be the case and Stevenage do enough today to make sure that the season's extended and we're going to have at least another two games out of them. Mixed emotions really, part of me is thinking, "Do you know, I don't really care?" It's just been such a ride; we're here now, playing on the last day of the season. Again, if it doesn't go our way, so what? It's been a fantastic season.

Interviewer: I mean you can talk about Premier League titles and FA Clubs, but out of the other 92 league clubs that are in this league, you wouldn't really want to follow another one would you?



Steve Watkins: Oh Dean. People get bored of me saying it, but you cannot believe what it's been like for myself who has been doing something that I love doing and the team that you love watching have been through so much with Wembley appearances, Old Trafford, all that sort of thing going on. It's just been four or five tremendous seasons and we all know it's going to come to an end at some point, but you don't want it to of course.

Interviewer: Is there a part of you that'd like to be over there today on the East Terrace?

Steve Watkins: Yes, I mean I miss the days you were stood there; I used to have my own little spot over there. I wouldn't miss what I'm doing now, I feel lost sometimes now if I'm summarising or something I tend to drift away because I'm out of my comfort zone not doing what I've been doing for so long. It's difficult just turning off and watching the game now. It's something – you just look across every now and then and you see the fans over there and they're having fun, they're enjoying what they're doing and what they're seeing on the pitch and that is just fantastic in itself.

END AUDIO

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