

Under pressure?

He was recently described by Chairman Steve Gibson as the 'diamond in our crown' but is attacked by many Boro fans, upset at poor performances and results, so **SHAUN KEOGH** went to the Hurworth training ground to meet **BRYAN ROBSON**

So, here we are. The annual Robson Bashing Season is now officially open. All welcome, especially the southern press. On the terraces, the 'Walking In A Robson Wonderland' chant has been consigned to the bin of history along with 'We've got Willie Willie Willie Whigham in our goal' and, more contentiously, 'Zeeegaaa'.

How enviously every team manager in the entire world must look upon Bryan Robson. Six years, virtually unlimited funds, no interference from the Chairman, probably the best training facilities in the UK, magnificent stadium, and, until last season, pretty much 100 percent support of the fans. If the next Boro manager is offered half of the time, money, facilities and support that Robson has enjoyed, he will think he has died and gone to heaven.

One thing is for sure. When Bryan Robson does eventually leave the Boro – be it under a cloud or, as is looking increasingly unlikely, on

the back of a 'Don't Go Robbo' campaign – the Boro will be deluged with job applicants. Hell, I might apply myself.

So, a simple question: is Robbo a useless manager? Of course not. Three Wembley finals and two promotions at the first attempt is pretty impressive. A much better question would be: "Is he the right man to take Boro forward to the next stage of development?"

Theories about the problems at Boro are not exactly thin on the ground. Many fans do back him, but question the effectiveness of Gordon McQueen and especially Viv Anderson. It is the coaching of the squad that seems to be questioned more than anything. We know that we have good players, and all credit to Bryan for that. However, when he passes these players onto his coaching staff, that is where the problems seem to start – anyone who witnessed the appalling organisation, passing and understanding between the players in the four games starting with the cringeingly embarrassing televised Newcastle ▶



Picture taken by Shaun Moyn. Processed by Tim Hetherington

► match could hardly disagree.

However, I was unable to question Robson about these games, as the interview took place on Friday 13th October – three days before the encounter with the Geordies.

I arrive early at Rockliffe Park, and am greeted by Robbo's friendly PA. I am shown to a seat in the vast reception area, watching players come and go...

For somebody who does not smile much on the pitch, Hamilton Ricard appears a very outgoing character. He is talking to a journalist who he clearly has not seen for some time, and they are both laughing loudly when recalling a previous meeting (Apparently, it was in Paris. Ricard was so drunk he could not remember which Hotel he was staying in. In his drunken state, the most sensible thing he could think to do was to phone his Nan on the other side of the world in Columbia, to ask her if she might have any idea of the name of his Hotel).

Karembeu slopes into reception like a little boy lost. In his broken English and with a downcast look on his face, he asks one of the girls why his mobile phone won't work. Pah. Namby pamby mollycoddled footballers. He lifts his arm to pass the phone to her but it lands four yards away. (All right, I made that last bit up).

Keith O'Neill comes backwards and forwards, throwing the reception ladies a few jelly beans with every pass, to their squeals of delight. I overhear the receptionists talking excitedly about the imminent arrival of the UPS delivery man, who they all clearly think is a bit of a hunk. Unfortunately for them, Colin Cooper, who is lurking nearby, overhears them and on cue, the UPS man enters, to be greeted by smiling, but professional ladies, giving no indication that he is anything but another delivery man. At this point, Coops steps in and says to the delivery man words to the effect of "I don't believe this lot, they were just saying how much they fancied you, and now they treat you like just another guy." The poor bloke is deeply embarrassed; the girls are absolutely mortified. Coops spends the next ten minutes offering apologies that become more and more grovelling (and witty).

This is a very happy place of work. Certainly a lot more entertaining than being at the Charlton away game.

I sit in on the scheduled 2pm press conference, and immediately after the journos leave, it is just Bryan and me. I ask him if he reads MSS. He smiles and says he 'flicks through it'. He also says he particularly looks forward to reading Steve 'Fat Nacker' Smith's humorous articles. OK, OK, I made that up too.

In the following seventy minutes, it becomes rapidly clear that a fraud on a massive scale is going on and being played out in front of my very eyes. This guy must think I am really stupid. Take it from me, Bryan Robson has an idiot twin brother. It's true. It is this



monosyllabic imbecile who gives the post-match interviews. The grinding, slow answers to questions that are delivered by a flat, granite face in an almost tortured manner, with every other word punctuated by a strange word that he pronounces as "Errrr". Example: "The lads, errrr were really, errrr, up against it in, errrr, the second half..."

I clearly was not paying attention for a few seconds, because it was the idiot brother who hosted the press conference, and somehow, while the TV and radio boys were packing up their stuff, a switch was made. Your secret is out Bryan, and now the world knows.

I have in front of me the *real* Bryan. This guy smiles throughout our time together, even for the photos. I have listened to the interview a few times now, and a more free-flowing and yes, very likeable conversationalist you couldn't wish to meet. Not an "er" in sight.

Why doesn't this guy do the media interviews? Hang on a minute; if they are twins, could the guy in front of me be the idiot one?...

You said in your interview with us in 1994 that the first thing you had to do was 'sort out the defence'. The Boro have conceded some sloppy goals this year - is the defence not due for a major overhaul?

No, I don't think it's due for a major overhaul, because when the lads are fit, we do defend well and do well as a team. Against Everton for instance, Vickers went off after 15 minutes, so that meant across the back four we had Festa making his comeback, Jason Gavin playing his first game of the season, and Dean Gordon making his first appearance after a 16 month lay off, so we only had Curtis Fleming there who was at the top of his fitness and had played a few games. So in the last 20 minutes, three of those players were really tired, which is why Everton scored their late winner. Festa is getting better now because when he made his comeback from injury in that game, he cost us a couple of goals due to sloppy defending. When my defenders are all fit and playing week in week out, I think they are pretty dependable. However, I am currently looking for a couple of younger lads to put in with the defenders I have got.

Experienced defenders? Many fans are concerned that young talent coming through the training academy are not getting the opportunities within the club that they perhaps deserve. Why not give a chance of an extended run to Jason Gavin, and Robbie Stockdale? Similarly, why did you sell Craig Harrison?

For me, you've got to look at young lads careers, and in my opinion, Craig was behind Dean Gordon and Keith O'Neil, and he's not quite as good a player as those two. So to get half a million pounds for Craig to let him develop his own career and to play at a level that he is comfortable at, was good for him and this club. It shows that the youth policy is working because you've brought a player through who has made you some money and has become a league player. I want to make this club one of the top eight in this country, and I look at Craig and think, well, he's 21 now, and I don't think he is going to progress that far.

Robbie as you know is on loan at Sheffield Wednesday, because Curtis Fleming looks as fit as he has ever been since I've been at the club, and Robbie was behind him. So I felt at this stage of his development, it was more important for Robbie to play league football in front of crowds, and that will keep him more on top of his game than playing in our reserves. Playing first team football exposes him to the nerves and atmosphere that goes with the big game, and that is totally different from a reserve game.

In an interview with our magazine in 1994, Steve Gibson said that 'When we are established in the Premiership, we will change our goals' You said on taking over the job that 'success' here means getting Boro into the Premiership - does that mean that you have now taken the club as far as

you can go?

My aims, and the Chairman's aims are to go into the history books, we want to play in Europe and win our first major trophy. So that's the next step.

Bearing in mind the 100 percent support you have enjoyed from Steve Gibson since day one, what would you have to achieve here between now and the time you leave to feel in your heart that your managership was successful?

Success for me would be to establish this club in the Premier League, and lose the 'yo-yo' tag that everybody associates this club with. I feel that we have more or less done that, but you've got to go six, seven, eight years without going down to prove it.

If Coventry can do it for 30 years as they have, we should be able to...

That's exactly right. Especially when you consider the foundations we have laid with the stadium and this training ground, and the quality of players that we have within the club now.

But a few of them are getting on a bit...

The fans sometime give me stick about having older players like Pally, Coops, and then we had Townsend and Gazza, but the reason we have stayed in the Premiership these last few years is because of these players, who have been there and can get results for you. When Townsend, for his own reasons, decided to leave, people were saying 'Oh no, we've lost Andy, what are we gonna do now' sort of thing, but we replaced him with Paul Ince...how bad is that?

Do you see Karembeu as a natural successor to Juninho? What was the thinking behind not re-signing him?

No, he's more of a defensive minded player, although he is good on the ball. [Not at Southampton he wasn't. Or against Newcastle. Or Charlton for that matter...] I know that the fans were all for Juninho to stay, but I got Alen Boksic for £3m less than Juninho would have cost. I thought, the end product, as far as scoring and making goals is concerned, there's no doubt that Boksic has got to be better value. I think Juninho was a very good creator of goals, but he wasn't a good finisher himself, and his record shows that; he missed the target too many times. So that's the decision I had to make, it saved me £3m, £2.5m of which I spent on Karembeu.

"I want to make this club one of the top eight in this country"

How did Ziege get that clause in his contract?

We never like to give anyone these clauses, I mean, Juninho and Ravanelli and others all asked for get out clauses if we got relegated, but we never gave them. However, after me and Christian had tied everything up and agreed the deal, his German agent put a hold on the transfer, unless he had this clause. The reason for it was in case Christian and his family didn't settle in the north east...

The north east? Not England, as has been reported?

...That's right, the north east, if he didn't settle here, he could go. It was very disappointing, because Christian is a top class wing-back. With Christian on the right and Keith O'Neil and Dean Gordon on the left, I felt we had the balance right. I'm still looking for the player to replace him.

Alen Boksic has been a great success since he arrived, and has impressed everyone with his pace, ability to get behind defences and goal-scoring... How much better do you think he might have done if he had been able to link up with a Juninho, who has the vision and skill to thread passes along the ground into the gaps behind defences?

It goes back to what I said earlier; I felt that the whole package of Juninho was a hell of a lot of money. To have bought Juninho and Boksic would have cost a total of £9m. Plus I feel that Marinelli is going to be a similar player to Juninho. He has all of the qualities of Juninho, except perhaps the lightening pace off the mark that Juninho had, but he has very similar aspects to his game.

► **I came in for a fair bit of grief over the Ravanelli interview – some people think I am his biggest fan but...**

(Laughs) you should be! He scored 33 goals and was a big success!

...with the hindsight of a few more years of managerial experience, and the opening of Rockliffe, do you think that the comment made during the Ravanelli unrest by an Italian journalist that 'you don't buy a Ferrari unless you have a garage to put it in' was pretty fair comment?

Fabrizio knew what he was coming into. He saw the plans of this (Rockliffe Park) and he knew it would be a year before it was built. That's why it annoyed me, Keith Lamb and the Chairman, when he said to you that the facilities here were no good, because he'd seen all of the plans for Rockliffe; he knew it was in the pipeline. So there was no need for him to go and spout his mouth off, especially as the Chairman has put £8m into this place.

Ravanelli: "There was no need for him to go and spout his mouth off..."

Paul Ince said after the Southampton match that Boksic was constantly whingeing at his team mates during the game, but that it is OK by them because 'at least it shows that he cares'. What is the difference between Boksic showing that he cares by whingeing at players, and Ravanelli being called a troublemaker for doing exactly the same thing?

The thing with Fabrizio was that he would shout and have a go and show that he cared, but it was his gesticulating with his hands that annoyed the lads. Now Alen doesn't do that, he'll have a go at the lads, whereas Fabrizio would show his anger to the whole of the crowd; that's what the players didn't like. But some of the lads here now are really quiet. If they make a run into the box and they don't get the pass and the player with the ball shoots and misses, they just accept it. They turn around and get on with the game, and I say they should let the other player know they are unhappy. I mean, if it was me, I'd rip the blokes' head off *(laughs)*.

Alan Moore has not played since April 99 - what is the nature of his injury – will he ever get back to fitness?

He's had about six operations. He had circulation problems in his calves, so he had all the veins more or less took out I think *(laughs)*. He came back from that, and he has since had two operations on his knees, because he has some sort of tendonitis problem. Now the kids' just starting to come back again.

Will he ever play again?

Yeah, I think he's got the ability, but for the past two and a half years he has had one injury after another. I mean, he was one of the first players on my team sheet when I first came here.

What about the youth set up – do we have a Kewell or Scholes coming through?

We have some good kids coming through who I think will definitely play at League level. How high they go is down to their own determination.

When do you see Marinelli getting a prolonged run in the team?

Carlos has showed some lovely skills, but he is still developing as a lad and a player. He has moved from the other side of the world, and that in itself is a massive step. The thing I've got to do is nurture him, so that when he is physically and mentally right and can work like an English player, then I can put him in regular. He did really well against Villa and Middlesfield, but he's only just turned 18, and he will develop into a good player.

To me, the current squad has echoes of the relegated team from 1996-97 – some excellent individual players who just didn't gel as a team. The Southampton match was a good example, because even though we won the game, we got out of jail really, because Southampton were unlucky not to take at least a point. There was some dreadful passing and movement by the Boro players – do you think that is a fair analogy?

When you are making changes all the time as we have had



to this season, the cohesion is not going to be there, and there is no fluency in your play. It's when you've been playing together for six or seven games and you've had maybe one change rather than the three or four that we seem to have been doing every match, that's when it starts to look right. I don't blame the lads for it, I think we have played 25 players so far *(up to the day of this interview, 13 October)* which is ridiculous.

Do your achievements of the past five years match up to what you aimed to achieve for when you took over?

Yes, I think so, I am pretty pleased. The Chairman gave me a three year contract when I came here, and I said well, if we get promoted in that time, that will be a good achievement. That's how it started anyway *(laughs)*. But when you get promoted the first year, the pressure is on. The Chairman said to me, 'We'll back your judgment on which players to bring in'. I think the first year we had in the Premiership we did nicely, then the second year we tried to go that one step further. The depth of my squad that year wasn't good enough to cope.

You mean the injury problems?

No, it was more the number of games we played, what with the cup semi-finals and the replays. Big cup games really take it out of your players, especially those who have never been there before. Now, Ravanelli, Emerson they coped with it quite well, but some of our players had big problems. If you look at the records, you'll see that in the League matches that followed the cup games that year, we lost nearly every game 1-0. *(He's right)*. Out of 12 league games that followed cup matches, Boro won just one, drew three, and lost eight, five of them by 1-0. Interestingly, the Coca Cola second leg against Stockport which Boro also lost 1-0, was the first match after the FA Cup 6th round win against Derby). So that was a big





“This year, I want to finish higher than last year, but I don’t want 53 or 54 points, I’m looking to finish with something like 60 points”

problem; some of the boys were just out on their feet.
So if it wasn't for the cup run we would have stayed up...
Yeah, we probably would have done. So, the success of the squad, with the cup runs, was there, but with the relegation, Ravanelli, Juninho and Emerson all wanted to go. But, on the bright side, we got great money in for them.

I was fortunate that at that time Andy Townsend was looking for a new challenge, and then Merse, I couldn't believe that Merse was available and would come to us just after we'd been relegated. So for me, those were the two main signings that year; it was so important for this club to get straight back into the Premier League.

The fans were brilliant, because they made it so much easier for the Chairman and I by buying up all of the season tickets, even though we had just been relegated. That gave everybody here such a big boost, that the fans were right behind us.

During the summer after we got promoted, I had a different idea on how I should build a base first at the club rather than going in big like I did the previous time. That's why my signings that year were the likes of Gary Pallister, Colin Cooper, Dean Gordon, Keith O'Neill. However, I didn't expect to lose Merse, that was a blow.

Since we got back up, our League position was higher two years ago than it was last season, but two years ago we didn't have anywhere near as many injuries as we did last year, and OK, we finished in a lower position than the previous year, but we had one point more. It was an improvement, but not the improvement I wanted. I was looking for an eight or nine point difference. This year, I want to finish higher than last year, but I don't want 53 or 54 points, I'm looking to finish with something like 60 points, to show that we are making steady progress..

What concerns many Boro fans is that they look at what Sunderland and Leicester have achieved on very much smaller budgets, and they feel that given the money that you have spent – albeit on some world class players – along with the backing of the chairman and the fans, Boro are still massively underachieving.

You've got to remember that the difference between the money I have spent and the money I have recouped is only £14m. (I have listened to this part of the tape a few times, and it is difficult to make out if Bryan is saying £14m or £40m. Anyway, I make it about £32.27m – see article that follows this interview, SK) During the summer I spent £10m, but if we get what we think we are gonna get from Liverpool for Zeige, put that together with the £0.5m from Palace for Craig Harrison, it shows a spend of only £2m.

Have you ever 'resigned' from the club and been persuaded to stay? There have been many rumours to this effect, especially after the Everton game.

No, I've haven't done that.

You've always been successful – what does it feel like to experience the other side of the coin what with the fluctuating form of the team and the stick from the fans?

Well, nobody likes criticism, it is a blow to your pride, but I just try to be balanced in my thoughts; although if we are bottom of the League come Christmas, I'll expect a lot of pressure. But you've just got to be level headed and do what you think is correct. Last season, during January and February, I found it a bit difficult; I was having doubts. I would be out with my wife in a pub or something, and people would be saying things that you can hear, but they are not saying it to your face. This year has been a lot better; people are being much nicer.

Would you relish the chance of being the next manager to bring the World Cup home to England? Having been ►

A black and white close-up photograph of a man's face, focusing on his ear and hair. The man has dark, wavy hair and is looking down and to the right. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his ear and the side of his face, and deep shadows on the other side. The background is out of focus.

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► **England captain, although being unfortunate to suffer injury problems when you could have lifted the World Cup, do you feel that it is almost your destiny to manage England?**

I hope it is! I'd like to get more experience and success as a club manager, and then if I felt prepared mentally for it, and it was offered to me again, I will find the right time to say yes and give the job my best shot.

If either the England or Man U job came up today, would you consider them, or reject them out of hand to enable you to finish your job here? Do you have a get-out clause to enable you to take either job?

I could go if I wanted to.

What is Christmas like in England for the foreign players – for instance, the British habit of training on Christmas morning – do the foreign players find it a bit strange?

It's completely alien to them, because most other countries have winter breaks; they just call us crazy Englishmen (laughs). When the fixture list comes out, they look at all the games around Christmas and they can't believe it.

Is training on Christmas Day a fun occasion with lots of wind-ups and practical jokes?

You tend not to prat about on Christmas Day because everybody is focused on the game the next day. On end of season trips if you take the lads away somewhere, that's when you get people having their eyebrows shaved off, or being locked out of their rooms and having their clothes thrown out of the window (laughs).

Do you remember any times from your playing days when you were up against or playing alongside people who clearly still had too much alcohol in their system? (I tell Bryan the Arthur Horsfield story about Boro's disastrous performance against an overhung Rotherham side on New Years Day 1966)

There was a similar one when I was at Man United. We had played on the Saturday and had won our game, and then Villa, who were the only team that could catch us, were playing Oldham, who beat them 1-0 which meant we had won the League. We still had two games left, and the following day we were playing Blackburn at home. After the Villa match, all the players were phoning one another, and we all arranged to meet at Steve Bruce's house. Every member of the first team squad turned up, and we were at Steve's house until about four in the morning; everybody was absolutely blitzed out of their heads, and we went out next day and beat Blackburn 3-1. (Laughs)

Do you still get Xmas cards from West Brom or Man U fans?

Oh yeah; even now, 60 percent of my mail is from Man U fans.

Are there any funny stories about how the Brazilians or Italians have reacted to coming in for training the first time that they experienced a bitterly cold north eastern winter morning?

Juninho hated the cold; he wouldn't even put an ice pack on when he was in the treatment room – he said that it burned him (laughs).

There was also a time here when Vladimer Kinder and Emerson were injured; Vlad had an ankle injury, Emerson had a knee problem. Bob Ward, the Physio, took them down to Redcar – it was winter, and he made them stand in the sea up above their knees. When they got back, he told me that Emerson was fine, standing in the north sea in the depth of winter with his mobile phone, – probably talking to someone standing in the sea on a beach in Rio – but Kinder kept running out saying "Too cold! too cold!" and Bob had to keep shoving him back in.

In view of the club's very poor performances every January and February, have you considered campaigning for British clubs to have a winter break?

(Laughs) Yeah! We're just gonna pack in this year – gonna go to Rio for a month. On a serious note, it does concern me. I've tried to do things different every year – I've tried letting them sleep in their own beds, I've tried taking them to Hotels, I've even given them Christmas Day off. I've tried so many different ways to prepare the lads for the Christmas games, but I still haven't got the answer.

Have you tried fining them if they lose?

(Laughs) Good idea!

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