



SHAUN KEOGH

Pre-match ritual

Avoiding the mobile "catering" units outside every stadium. The smell of cooking onions tempts me into eating something that offers poor value for money and a bad taste in the mouth. A Boksic Burger, perhaps.

TFH Reasons to be cheerful?

SK End of season party at (hopefully) sunny Portsmouth. It's always good to finish the season at the seaside.

TFH Reasons to be fearful?

SK Opening the season at Loftus Road; Boro have never won there, whatever the opposition.

TFH The new signings — good or bad?

SK From last season's top pre-season spenders, Boro's activity in the transfer market thus far has been muted. Watch this space.

TFH Who'll be the next big thing?

SK Any or all of Andrew Davies, Stewart Downing and Stuart Parnaby. Traditionally, Boro fans are very harsh on local lads who do not show a "die for the Boro" attitude. This fan hopes these players will be given the chance to emulate Wilf Mannion — a world-class England international born in (or close to) the Boro.

TFH How is the boss managing?

SK Only the Jack Charlton years and the early days of the Bryan Robson era gave that all-important pipe-and-slippers feel that McClaren now enjoys. His quiet efficiency in getting the best out of internationals and up-and-coming youngsters then blending them into a cohesive unit is to be admired.

TFH Which player is indispensable?

SK All of them. Never before has a Boro squad been assembled where every player loves the club so much. Their love for the Riverside is such that homesickness prevents them from stringing two meaningful passes together if they play anywhere else.

TFH And which grossly over-rated so-called style icon do you wish you could sell to Real Madrid?

SK Franck Queudrue, but only for the duration of his five-match ban. Let Real pay his wages while he sips Pimm's during August and September.

TFH How are the neighbours?

SK They will be pushing hard for promotion in their lucky red and white

stripes. Yes, Darlington are on the up. You didn't think I meant Sunderland, did you? Nobody takes them seriously any more.

TFH If you were chairman...

SK I would clearly have more money than sense.

TFH If you could ask Steve McClaren one question, what would it be?

SK Exactly what is it about the comb-over that appeals to you?

TFH And a prediction?

SK There is some small hope of snatching a Uefa place. This is exactly what I said last year, and we would have achieved it but for our awful away form.



Local hero: Parnaby has what it takes

MONEYBOX



The debt has been estimated at £54 million, but any speculation about Middlesbrough's financial health is guesswork because the club is in the private ownership of the Gibson family. Steve Gibson has financed a remarkable outlay on the team since the mid-1990s, but the number of players who departed two years ago was perhaps an indication that costs had to be cut. At least the removal of Alen Boksic from the staff will ease the outgoings at a club that has suffered more than most because of sky-high wages.