

Fly Me To Ipswich!



Any Boro captain of the future would do well to emulate the record of Tony Mowbray. Mogga's career with Boro spanned ten seasons and a total of 348 league and 77 cup games, and he is the only skipper to lead Boro to three promotions. His departure to Celtic four years ago this month was a shock to most Boro fans and his recent transfer to Ipswich has raised some eyebrows, but it brings him within distance of **mss**, so **Shaun Keogh** arranged to meet him so that we could bring **mssers** up to date, and to indulge in some reminiscing....

mss: You made your debut for Boro at a time when the club was going through a great deal of turmoil; there had been a big clear out of the team that had been relegated the previous season, Murdoch was about to be sacked, and you were one of the new boys, making your debut in the third game of the season following two heavy defeats. Who did you look to in those first couple of years for inspiration and encouragement and how did the sheer struggle affect you?

Tony: At that time, all of (Jack) Charlton's team had gone, and really, my first few years were just hard grind. We were a very young side with no real role models, and we were playing to home crowds of less than 5,000 sometimes. There were many times when I couldn't face going to Middlesbrough town centre because everyone I met was just as depressed as we all were with the teams results, and the last thing I wanted to talk about was football. They were very hard times, looking back, although at the time I knew no different.

mss: Rioch's team and his managerial capabilities grew and blossomed very quickly - did his ambition come across with infectious enthusiasm, or was he fairly detached, seeing as you were all

so young?

Tony: Bruce Rioch has been one of the most influential people in my career; he taught us all so much. I remember coming back on the coach from a match at Plymouth. It was a seven hour journey and it went by in no time, because for the whole journey Bruce just kept talking and talking to us all about football. He is so enthusiastic and that has got to bounce off of you in a positive way. He has an incredible knowledge of the game, and I respect him immensely.

mss: I've tracked down a few other players from the Lawrence era - Trevor Senior is now at Farnborough.

Tony: Ah Trev! (*laughs*) Trev was a legend with the Boro players of that era. He got so much stick from us but he accepted his limitations and used to laugh along with everyone. My best mate from my Boro days is Peter Beagrie, I talk to him all the time, and big Pally.

mss: Do you have any regrets about leaving Boro when you did, or was it the right time for you?

Tony: No it was definitely the right time. There comes a time when you can spend too long in one place; you need to enjoy your training, but I was losing my motivation. I spoke to Lenny about it and the

next day Liam Brady phoned and said he'd spoke to Lenny and could I meet him. I drove up there the next day and Celtic had a European match that night. I immediatly got a good feel for the place and I signed the next day. It really was that quick. The fans up there took to me



the **tony mowbray** interview



very quickly, I hit a shot against the bar from 35 yards on my debut, and the fans started chanting my name. I scored in my first 'old firm' game as well, which did me no harm!

Glasgow is a fantastic place, and when I talk of 'home' these days, I mean Glasgow almost as much as Middlesbrough, and it was a real big wrench to move away from both places, but the time was right.

mss: Did you have to adapt your role or style to fit in with the Scottish Premier way of playing?

Tony: Not really. I like to think that I am what I would call an honest player. I give everything I've got to every game, so what you see is what you get, and Liam Brady knew what he was buying.

mss: A couple of years ago you seemed set to rejoin Boro - a fee was agreed, but Lawrence backed out - what happened?

Tony: Lennie came up to Celtic to see me play one day, and he was dead annoyed when he got to the ground and

wasn't on the field. He came and sat next to me in the stand and asked me if I wanted to come back to Boro. We had a long talk and everything was agreed between us. It would have been the right time on a personal level as much as anything else because I was getting married at the time, and I had been telling Bernadette how great the countryside around Middlesbrough was. Once the deal was agreed between the clubs, we even went as far as picking out the house that we wanted to buy.

The stumbling block was that I was owed some money - a lot of money - by Celtic as part of my contract, and they were not prepared to pay it. The Boro made it clear that they were not going to pay it, and so it all fell through. Celtic suggested that I forget about the money, but I had signed a contract with them of which I had honoured my part. It was a matter of principle in the end, so I stayed put.

mss: You were at Ayresome for the last match?

Tony: Yes, I was there! It was a great day and I met so many other Boro old boys who I had only read about before, people like Wilf Mannion and George Hardwick.

mss: How do you rate the current Boro side?

Tony: Well, I saw them play pre-season at Motherwell, and I honestly thought that they would struggle - and I mean struggle badly. But then Barmby came in and he has made all the difference. Barmby is the key to it all because he links it all up from midfield into attack. It's a counter-attack game that Boro play, but with a tight pattern; and of course, they are just so solid at the back now, they don't give anything away.

mss: We have all fantasised since childhood about Boro doing exactly what they are now - it seems so surreal

and I sometimes chuckle openly in disbelief when I think about it - how have you reacted to the incredible developments?

Tony: Well, you're right, it's so unreal. Like I've said, I remember playing at Ayresome in front of gates of three and four thousand, and now they are packed out at 30,000 every week. I went to the Coventry match, and the atmosphere was incredible; Steve Gibson deserves a great deal of praise for his foresight, and for his courage in finding the money for it all.

mss: Do you think that Juninho will fit in easily with English football - especially given his physical stature and poor command of the language - and who is going to make way for him?

Tony: It's surprising how quickly foreign players pick up the language. (tell that to Kanchelskis's interpreter - SK) If you look at the British players that have been successful overseas - Platt for instance - they are successful mostly because they put themselves out to learn the language and absorb the culture, (So it's seven pints of Tetley Imperial at the Longlands Club and curry and chips on the way home for you young Juninho - SK) and I'm sure that Juninho will be no different.

It'll be interesting to see who makes way for him, because Robbie and Craig are playing so well. You must remember also that Robson was brought up at Manchester United playing 4-4-2, and he may revert the team to this, although I don't think that that would be a good idea at the moment, given the team's current form.

mss: Were you aware of **mss** when you were at Boro?

Tony: Oh yeah, in fact I think I came to one of your do's once. I remember the **mss** newsletter as it was then, as it used to get passed around the dressing room. The magazine you sent me (**mss** 109) is very professionally put together.

mss: In the last edition of **mss** I said that I was disappointed that Ipswich were relegated, not just because it is fairly close to where I live, but because





it is a nice stadium with a fairly friendly atmosphere - who or what attracted you to the club?

Tony: Well, as with when I left Boro, I needed a new challenge. I'd reached a crossroads in my life away from football as much as anything else, and there is a mini-revolution going on at Celtic. Tommy Burns is trying to build a total footballing side, and in that sort of set-up, a player like me can be a bit of a luxury.

I spoke to Leicester and Ipswich, but couldn't make a decision, and then out of the blue, George Burley phoned again and caught me in the right mood. Ipswich are another one of these 'sleeping giants' and like you said, it is a very friendly club. It's nice to feel that I am being appreciated, and it's great to be captain of a side again.

mss: The Scottish Premier League has parallels with the English Premier League with regard to match attendances - Liverpool will get 40,000 while Wimbledon would be glad of 12,000 - and Celtic will get 40,000 while Raith would be glad with 5,000. Given these low attendances - which is purely logistical as there is one Scottish League club per 125,000 people and one English club per 500,000 - it makes me wonder why the Scots' clubs accepted the Taylor report. How do the grounds and facilities compare?

Tony: Well, without wanting to be unkind, they don't. The whole of Scottish football is based on Rangers and Celtic, and the only reason that most of the other clubs exist is because of the gate money they get from playing these two teams.

Most of the clubs should be ground sharing - for instance, there are five clubs in the Stirling area, all with separate grounds; it's just crazy. Another problem is that it is so parochial; apart from Aberdeen, our longest journey to an

away game from Celtic was about half an hour.

It's not good for the players either because you're playing the same teams four or five times a year; one season we played Aberdeen seven times! For Celtic and Rangers though, every game is like a home game, because wherever they play away from home in Scotland there will be a gate of, say 14,000, of which 10,000 will be away fans.

mss: Looking ahead, do you have a game plan for when your playing days are over or are you and John Wark going to try to set a record of being the only two players with a combined age of eighty?

Tony: Ha! you might be right there! Warkie is a one-off, I mean, he was supposed to be seeing out his playing days when he went to Boro, and he's still playing at 38. Mark Proctor is still playing you know - he's at St. Johnstone.

I definitely want to stay in the game when I finish playing. I'd like to think I'm worth someone taking on as manager or coach, but I just want to be involved. I love football and I think about it all the time, looking at patterns of play, and thinking tactics.

mss: How do you feel about an overall Head of Coaching being appointed (an ex-pro for instance) to get into schools and teach people how to instruct kids in the game?

Tony: Well, certainly we need to get youngsters being taught basic skills at a younger age, and we can learn a lot from the Dutch on this.

At Ajax, Heine Otto runs the youth development programme and they take youngsters from the age of eight and nine, so they are taught skills without learning bad habits which they would otherwise pick up. I've got a lot of time for Heine, he is what I call a footballing gentleman.

But the other problem that needs addressing, on a professional level, is the lack of a coaching intermediary between the whole playing squad and the manager; someone who answers perhaps to the Chairman, not the manager and is not under threat when the managers' job



is on the line. Because what happens now, is that when a manager gets sacked, it unsettles the whole club which affects everybody's performance. If we had this intermediary coaching and communicating with all the players, it would at least ensure that the players routine is not completely changed by a new manager, and they would therefore continue to make positive progress, no matter what is going on behind the scenes.

mss: What is the story behind the on/off transfer of John Collins?

Tony: John will be a Boro player soon - he is really keen to join. The problem is that if Celtic sold him without having a replacement lined up, there would be a riot, because he is such a good player, and very popular. Once Celtic have someone lined up, he'll be away, because the fee and everything else has been agreed. *[Interestingly enough, the*

day after this interview took place, The Sun reported that Robson had offered £2m plus Craig Hignett. At this point, I produced the latest edition of Red Roar.

mss: Are you aware that you were voted 8th all time Boro great in the Red Roar players poll?

Tony: No, I haven't seen this copy... *(he scans through the mag)...I remember filling in a form for this poll at the Luton match...I see that Pally and Bernie have looked after each other! (they both voted each other 1st)*

mss: Can you remember who you voted for?

Tony: Not all of them, I know I voted Big Pally first. *(He is still scanning the mag)*

Tony: Ah, there's Leroy!

mss: Who?

Tony: Oh that's Derek Whytes' nickname. He sings that Frank Sinatra song, 'Bad, Bad Leroy Brown', he's a good chanter is Derek. *(He is now engrossed in the mag)*

mss: Listen, you can keep the mag if you want to!

Tony: Well, that's great, thank you. And in return some advice: if Derek Whyte ever turns up at one of your socials, don't let him anywhere near the microphone, because you'll never get him off it!

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