

# SOUNESS

In 20 years time, today's younger Boro fans will be sitting around the fire with their kids, educating them about the glory years under Bryan Robson. As their children look up at them in awe, they will drop names like Barmby, Juninho and Ravanelli into the conversation, names which then as now, will be part of Boro folklore.

However, sitting around the fires in houses along the street, an even older generation of Boro fan will be holding their grandchildren spellbound with tales about the *really* old days; the 1960's and '70's. A time when Middlesbrough Football club did not buy polished talent, as is the case now.

In December 1972, the then Boro manager Stan Anderson paid £32,000 for a player who turned out to be his last signing for the club, and arguable his most inspired. It was a 19 year old Scot who couldn't get a game at Tottenham and so he came to assist Boro's also-rans in the old Second Division.

Six years later, the rough diamond had become a highly polished product and Boro gratefully received a then club record receipt of £352,000 from Liverpool in exchange for the services of Graeme Souness.

It was Souness's determination to get out of the reserves which saw him move to Ayresome Park from glamorous White Hart Lane: "I just wanted to play first-team football; several clubs in the London area wanted to buy me, but Bill Nicholson (then Spurs boss) wanted to get me out of London – I don't think he wanted me to embarrass him – so he sold me just about as far north as he could!" Reflectively, he adds: "Looking back, Bill Nicholson was right, and I was wrong, but I was young and impatient."

However, Souness's arrival at cash-strapped Ayresome was not a deal done over a half-hour telephone call. Stan Anderson remembers: "Tottenham's asking price was £35,000 which I knew Boro didn't have. I spent a lot of time pleading and bartering with Nicholson to drop his price and in the end we settled at £32,000. Of course, that was when the real work started – persuading the board that he was worth it, because it was a lot of money for a reserve player. There was a four or five hour session with the board, who told me it would be a waste of money. The chairman, Eric Thomas as always, backed me up, and in the end the rest gave way.

Souness made his debut in a 1-2 defeat at Fulham, just four months short of his 20th birthday. Then, a week later, Anderson resigned after Plymouth sent Boro crashing out of the FA Cup at the Third Round stage. To his credit, Anderson had left behind an excellent group of players for his successor Jack Charlton, and Souness was to be a major benefactor of his new manager's experience.

The Scot recalls: "There was a nucleus of very good players when I arrived at Middlesbrough. Stan Anderson is a very nice man, but management styles vary, and Jack's was different to Stan's. You have to say, because of his success, his style worked best with that particular group of players. He made us more disciplined and

professional. He made players turn out good performances on a weekly basis, instead of just occasionally.

“I was a young player who did not work hard enough at his game, and Jack Charlton, more than anyone in my career, changed my whole attitude. He bluntly pointed out to me that I had two choices – if I carried on the way I was, I was going nowhere, but if I knuckled down, I had a chance to develop into a very good player and if I get lucky, maybe win things.”

Souness promptly became Boro’s midfield general in the legendary 1973-74 side and the number four shirt became his own. He still fondly remembers his hat-trick in the 8-0 thrashing of Sheffield Wednesday in the last home game of that amazing season: “I remember driving down to London after the game. I passed the Sheffield Wednesday team coach on the motorway” he chuckles and adds: “I’ve never seen such a dejected bunch of lads.”

He has fond memories of that Championship winning season: “We had excellent camaraderie, and we were streets ahead of anybody else in the Division. We proved that by going to Luton, our nearest rivals, and winning that game and therefore the League with six games to play.

It reels off of his tongue as though it were only yesterday, so I congratulate Souness on his memory. “Well, they were great days,” he says. “I still have a lot of affection for the club. In many ways my happiest times in the game were at Middlesbrough. People may say ‘but you went to Liverpool and won all those honours’ but I had a wonderful time up there. I loved the environment of the place and I am still in touch with friends in Middlesbrough from those days.”

The Boro team which finished seventh on their return to the top flight is regarded as one of the strongest in the club’s history, in terms of title contenders: “With another two or three players, we could have been knocking on the door,” he says, before adding with a wry grin: “But Jack is notoriously tight with his own money, and just as tight with other people’s. He was nervous of spending the clubs’ money to strengthen the squad.”

Souness also defends John Neil’s decision to break up Jack Charlton’s squad: “When Jack went, John had to make changes; some of the players were getting too old for the top flight. I was attracting interest from Newcastle, Leeds and Liverpool and I had decided that to have a chance of winning things I was going to have to leave Middlesbrough.”

Unfortunately, news of his imminent move to Liverpool was common knowledge by the time he came to play his last game for Boro. Norwich provided the opposition at Ayresome Park in December 1977 and feelings in some sections of the crowd ran high about Souness leaving, booing and barracking him throughout. He says this does not detract from his affection for Boro: “People have to understand that at the time, Boro were a mid-table side. I was offered the opportunity to join a team that was winning trophies, and that’s every footballer’s ambition. Middlesbrough paid £32,000 for me, and I gave my all for five years. They sold me for £352,000 and I think I gave good value.” It would take an unreasonable man to disagree.

Souness admits to being stunned but delighted by Boro's rapid development: "If you'd have said to me two years ago Boro would have three Brazilians and a top flight Italian, I'd have said you were crazy."

While on the subject of world-class players, I ask about Souness and Robson in their heyday – how did they compare? A wicked grin flicks across his face: "Well, Robbo was a great player, but I was in a great team!"

Touchingly, he reserves his kindest words for Willie Maddren, his old partner at Boro. He says that of all the players who helped him develop at Boro, it was Willie who most influenced him and that they became great buddies.

I remind Souness of the opening night at Willie's sports shop and he recalls: "I was at Liverpool by then, and we were playing Boro, so I got all the Liverpool players to come down to the shop. There was a mass of people. I had just walked outside, and there was this loud cracking noise and the whole floor collapsed under the sheer weight of people. The Liverpool team, worth millions of pounds fell through to the basement!"

He laughs out loud at the memory and adds with a shake of his head: "Can you imagine the manager's reaction if somebody had broken a leg?!"

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