



Craig Hignett



mss interview

CRAIG HIGNETT'S departure from the Riverside has ruffled the feathers of many Boro fans. Notwithstanding his consistent performances throughout his time at Boro, he has struggled to establish himself under Bryan Robson, his place constantly undermined by big name signings who have mostly come and gone while Hignett has loyally soldiered on. Five days before he officially became an Aberdeen player, MFC invited **Shaun Keogh** to the Riverside for Hignett to exclusively give him his last interview as a Boro player.

Hignett bounces into the Bulkhaul executive box apologising for being an hour late. He got held up in London because of the demonstrations against the visit of the Japanese Emperor. We could have met in London and saved us both a journey, but it wasn't a problem for me because as luck would have it, one of my best mates was burying his auntie that afternoon and had invited my wife and I to the wake at The Viking on Easterside. I also bumped into my sister for the first time in 15 years. Funny how we only see each other at funerals...

Anyway, we settle around a table overlooking a brown pitch. We aren't allowed to get too close because our escort told us that the pitchside is a hard hat area. Blimey, I said, are there some Leeds fans here already? It turns out that it's something to do with the filling in of the corners, health & safety and all that.

The pitch is brown because the turf is being replaced and the area is covered in thick sand, with a small gypsy type caravan straddling the centre. I wonder if the owners are related to the gypsy family who, as legend has it, were thrown off of Ayresome Park so that Boro could build their ground?. The family then allegedly put a curse on the ground saying that Boro would have nothing but bad luck at Ayresome. Hmmm. Are curses transferable? So, the coffee is on the table, the tape is running, we've exchanged hair-care tips and we're off...

Do you come from a sporting family?

My dad played for Liverpool and Chester. From an early age he had me playing football, and he even started up some leagues in Liverpool so that I could get a game. There was an age gap in Liverpool where you couldn't play at the age of eight. You had to go

in the under 12s, but it was too big a gap, so my dad made up an under-nines league for me and my mates.

I was quite lucky looking back that my dad was dead pushy. He'd be shouting from the sidelines and I used to hate it (laughs).

Was there ever any question of you not becoming a pro-footballer? In



that environment of growing up in Liverpool it's probably difficult for a young lad to focus on anything else.

You're dead right there. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't made it as a pro-footballer.

Going back over your career, which of the three managers that you have played under has been the biggest help to your career development?

Dario (Gradi, Crewe coach). Nobody else comes close. At bigger clubs they tend to forget about the coaching because they think 'Well they're top class players and they should know it all anyway' but I don't agree. Even if you're a top class player you still need coaching.

All we did was coaching and shadow playing and everybody in the team knew what they had to do, so if something went wrong you could pinpoint it. There was a lot of short sharp explosive running in training, but mostly ball-work. Dario is very very straight with you. If you've played well or been crap, he'd tell you straight.

Leaving Liverpool for Crewe must have been a bit of a wrench?

Towards the end of my time at Liverpool, I had glandular fever and couldn't play for three months. By the time I recovered it was decide time as to whether they were going to let me go or not. So Malcolm Cook (Liverpool youth coach) said 'Play in the reserves and we'll let you know' so I'd play a few reserve games and then they'd say 'Well, come on this tour with us'. They couldn't make their minds up, and then Dario came in for me. I was gutted to leave Liverpool, but in my career, it was the best thing

roll of the dice. Then the week after they got in touch again and it all went through. Leaving Crewe was difficult, but I wanted to do better for myself. **You've shown incredible loyalty to Boro, especially when you consider the insecurity that you must have felt at seeing new players coming in while you're fit but still can't get your game...** I've seen a lot of players coming and going here, but I've always fancied my chances of getting into the side. Now, that's up to the manager to put everybody on an even keel, to say 'well, he's doing well this week, he should be in' and if you're not doing well – you might play four or five games and then have a bad one – then you should be out. That's how I think a football club should be run, but sometimes politics get in the way.

Had you decided to quietly wait out your contract and then move to somewhere that values you more?

It always helps to play for someone who wants you, and when I spoke to Alex, (Aberdeen manager) that's the main thing that I noticed, how badly he wanted me to play for his football club, as far as I'm concerned, that came before everything. Alex had been watching me for four or five months, so I knew he was keen, but I had to sort things out here first. (So that's a 'yes' then! SK)

It has always seemed to me that Bryan Robson has never been really bothered whether you stayed here or not, – you said yourself in an interview during the last Premier campaign that he had said to you that it didn't



I ever done. When I first arrived at Crewe I thought 'What am I doing here?' It was a massive culture shock. I was even on loan to Stafford Rangers in the first season.

There were all sorts of stories about clubs being interested in you before you came to Boro; what's the story?

I'd just signed a new contract at Crewe, and then Dario came and told me there was some interest being shown in me by Liverpool and West Ham. I'd just scored 15 goals in 19 games I think, all from midfield. Anyway, we played against West Ham in the Coca-Cola Cup, and we beat them. I'd scored and played pretty well, so Billy Bonds, who was in charge there at the time said he wanted me and the centre half, Steve McAuley, but Dario wanted a lot of money and it scared them off.

Anyway, Boro came in near enough the same week, and put the money up front, so Dario said 'Go and talk to them' Boro were about 6th in the Premier League at the time, so it looked pretty good from where I was.

Then, the day I was supposed to be talking to Boro, they phoned up and cancelled it because I think Colin Henderson (Then Boro Chairman) pulled the plug on the money. Lennie (Lawrence, then Boro manager) didn't have a lot of money to spend anyway, and it was his last

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matter how well you played – in the reserves, say – you're still not in the first team.

You can only take so much. Last season (96-97 – not 97-98 in the Nationwide) it didn't seem to matter what I did, I scored about 20 goals in the reserves – in fact, I think I scored in every reserve match I played, but I still wasn't getting a look in; I nearly went to Wolves, but that fell through.

It didn't matter what I did that season, because if Juninho and Nick Barmby were fit, I wasn't playing. I had to accept that, because he'd spent £10million on the both of them. You can't spend that sort of money on someone and then let me, who cost him nothing, take his place.

Robson is going to have to spend a lot of money to replace you – did he want you to stay?

I realised that with the offer he made me he didn't really want me here, or at least, he only wanted me as a squad player. So I decided, like you said, to sit it out and see what happens in the summer, because I'm 28 now, and I didn't want to be messed about for the rest of my career. Don't get me wrong, I'd have stayed here for the rest of my career if he wanted me to, because I love the place.

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So you would have stayed if the offer was right, and taken your chances on whether you'd get your game?

Yes, no question.

How do you look back on the pay cut that you took – especially when you look at some other players who were getting a king's ransom by comparison?

I think that by taking the pay cut a couple of years ago I showed my loyalty to the club, and the fans here want that. We have got some loyal players here and you'd think that the club would do more for them, look after them a bit better than perhaps some of the other players they've brought in. I'm not talking about money necessarily, but loyalty deserves to be recognised, because there isn't much of it about in the game nowadays. I don't think many players would be loyal to a club; certainly no players I know would take a pay cut. I mean, I wouldn't do it again.

So do you regret doing it?

No, not at all, it was the best thing I could do at the time, because it was my first full season in the Premier League, and I knew that I was good enough for it. But the money didn't matter, I just wanted to play in the Premier League.

You've got to be a strong person to be able to keep all that from knocking your confidence...

Well, when the club took off and the gaffer came in and started signing the Juninho's and Ravanelli's, no-one is going to assured of a place – unless you're Juninho or Ravanelli – and even then, if other lads are doing well, they should get their chance on the pitch as well, which didn't always happen.

But I knew that I'd be the first person or at least the easiest person for the gaffer to tell 'No, you can't play'. So what I had to do was get my head down and make sure that he took notice of me. But even when I was playing well, I'd still be the first one who'd be subbed, so there comes a time when you say 'Sod this, why am I here?'

Do you think it's anything to do with the fact that you're one of the few players left here who he didn't sign?

Sometimes you feel that way, but there's only about four of us left now (*Of Lennie's signings*). Only the manager would know that.

What were your ambitions when you signed for Lennie Lawrence, and do you feel that you have achieved them?

I wanted to win things, and maybe get into Europe with Boro. Maybe get an international cap myself, but I've not done any of them things. So no, I haven't.

Did you and Lennie have your disagreements?

When I first came to the club it took me a while to find my feet. With us having a bad run I was getting a bit depressed about it all and then Lennie started dragging me off -like Robson does now! (*ironic laughter*) – and subbing me so I was getting a bit frustrated with it all. In the end he put me out on the right wing, and he didn't buy me to play right wing.

Lennie kept saying 'You're still young, it's your first time in the big league and I need experienced players to get me out of the hole' and I didn't think that was right, I just thought he was messing me about; if



you're good enough, you're old enough. But I never made a fuss, that's not my way; I just get on with it. I thought I'd be playing in the middle of the pitch, behind the front two, same as I did at Crewe. He played me there a couple of times, both at home in consecutive games against Blackburn and then Chelsea. We beat Blackburn 3-2 I think, and Hendrie scored a hat trick, and we drew 0-0 against Chelsea. I thought I did reasonably well, but after that he put me out on the wing.

Your first two goals for Boro must have been sweet for a few reasons? (*v Everton at Goodison, 26/12/92. Boro drew 2-2*) (*Laughs*) Me dad killed me! (*Craig's father is a lifelong Evertonian*) I couldn't have picked a better time. I had about 20 members of my family in the stand because we were having a party afterwards, and my dad was gutted. It was great!

You've had quite a few highlights – the promotions, The first goal at Riverside, five goals in one game against Brighton, – when you're an old git and you look back at your time here, what one moment will give you the most satisfaction? I don't even have to think about that -it's that first goal here against Chelsea. It's that moment without a doubt.

You must have felt with that goal that you'd made your point about being worthy of being in the team, especially in view of the pay cut?

Yeah, it was great. (*Huge grin*).

I'm sure I'm not the first person to say this to you, but watching Boro this season just gone has been very frustrating. Can you say whether the change in the style from the flowing football of the Premier League to the 'grinding out a result' style seen this year was forced on Boro because of the absence of flair players like Juninho or was it a deliberate part of Robson's game plan of promotion at all costs?

I think the change has been deliberate. As a unit, we are more solid



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than last year. When we went forward last year, there would be seven or eight players in the box, and then we'd get caught on the break. We scored a lot of goals in the Premier League, whereas this year we won a lot of games by the odd goal. I think you've got to do that – especially in the Premier League – keep it tight, because there are players there who'll kill you if you're a bit cavalier with it.

I presume that you've been involved in long conversations with Derek Whyte. Did he – or Gazza – help you to make your mind up about going to Aberdeen?

Yeah, I've had a few chats with Dagsy, and I said to Gazza once in training, 'What's Aberdeen like?' and he said 'it's alright, scotch (*sic*) football's not as bad as they think it is'. It was just an off the cuff remark, but he didn't influence me in any way.

How long have you signed for?

Two years.

You are going from being a small fish in a big pond to being a big fish in a relatively small pond – especially because of the press rumours about your wages; the Aberdeen fans will have high expectations – will that will be a new type of pressure for you?

Well the pressure I can handle. At least I'll be involved a bit more up there. I'll be playing in the centre of the pitch, where I want to be. They've got four or five international players, so they're a decent team.

What are your ambitions between now and retiring from football? Obviously, I want to win things with Aberdeen, but I'd love to go back to

Crewe before I finish – I do owe them a great deal. Dario gave me my chance, and he's done everything for me. I speak to him a lot, and he has asked me back once or twice, but the time isn't right yet. I can hopefully finish my playing days there, and go onto coaching and maybe be a manager one day – who knows?

At the beginning of the season just gone, you wrote a column in some of the Boro programmes – is that an avenue that you may pursue when your playing days are over?

They asked me if I'd do a diary, so I was happy to do it for them. All this year I had a column in the *Hartlepool Mail* as well. I like things like that. But it goes back to what you said earlier about being a small fish – nobody else has really really noticed.

Would you be interested in doing a similar diary of your first six months or so at Aberdeen for MSS?

Yeah, sure. (*Don't worry – I'll chase him up on this one!* SK).

You looked pretty choked when Gascoigne gave you his Coca-Cola loser's medal – but surely you were even more choked when you were told that you weren't even on the subs' bench. Given the disappointments that you have endured this past year, were you half expecting it?

Oh, I was devastated. You could argue that I'd scored goals and I should have been on the pitch, but football isn't very sentimental sometimes; the managers got to do what he thinks is best for the team, and he told me he thought he couldn't have me and Gazza on the bench because we were too similar. Then he told me that he had to keep players happy who were going to be here next year, so from then on I knew I wasn't in his plans.

I felt a bit embarrassed when Gazza gave me his medal – it would have been nice to have played even for ten minutes, because at least then I would have felt I had earned it. It was a great gesture, and he insisted that I had it. The media don't see that side of him everyone just thinks he's a clown, but he has a very caring side to him that he doesn't let outsiders see.

Have you got a few thousand copies in the loft of the record that you made at Crewe? (*Standing Together*, 88-89).

(*Look of surprise*) No one's ever mentioned that before! (*laughs*) You've done your research! We got promoted, and I sang a solo on it. I had to have a few drinks first though. It wasn't bad you know – it went down a bomb in Crewe!

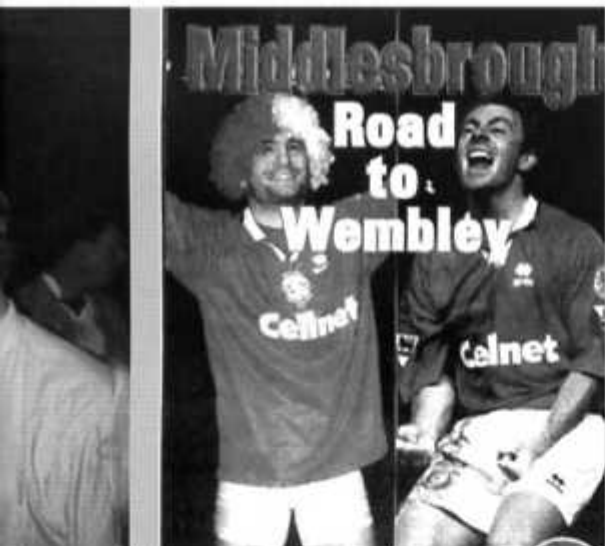
It must be great for you to be leaving here with the fans firmly on your side, especially as you do not really want to leave?

Everywhere I've been I've had a good relationship with the fans, but not to the level it is here – people signing petitions to try to keep me here, and shaking my hand in the street and wishing me all the best. No one has said a bad word about me since they've found out that I'm leaving, which isn't always the case at clubs. The fans know why I'm leaving, they know it's nothing to do with the club itself, whereas last year players left the club and slagged it off as they went. I wanted to stay at the club, and no one blames me for going. I'm glad that I'm leaving when the club is on a high though. Last year, because of relegation, as you know, some of the lads left. So for me, this is the best way to go, especially scoring two goals in the last game against Oxford.

Well, now you've mentioned it, what do you feel about those people leaving in the club's hour of need?

Well, Juninho only left because he wanted to play for Brazil in the World Cup. But I think that they should all have been made to stay. The dressing room is not going to be happy if you do things like that, but just for your own personal pride, you should want to stay and right the wrongs, because we all know that we should never have got relegated.

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