



# THE DAY I MET

# RAVA

**L**ike many Boro fans, I was intrigued to read in the national press recently that our favourite punch-bag, Fab Rav, has stated his desire to be Boro manager. Apparently. Probably. Because that's the problem with Rav isn't it? No sooner has he been "quoted" than he is hastily backtracking, claiming a misquote. You only have to mention his name to many Boro fans and they are spitting blood at the very thought of Ravanelli and his "misquotes". He apparently made his comments in an interview with Bernie Slaven for *Boro TV*. The Boro website promised that they would publish the full transcript. If they have, I can't find it.

However, the club dismissed Ravanelli's comments, making light of it by suggesting that there was probably a translation error between Bernie's Glasgow accent, Rav's northern Italian and Rav's interpreter. Could it be that MFC have used the same 'mistranslation' excuse that Rav was fond of using during his time at Boro and beyond? Surely not.

I have to say that I did not understand why the Boro sent Bernie and a camera crew all the way to Rome to interview a player who is notorious for

claiming to be "misquoted" without at least bringing their own interpreter. How can you ever hope to get a correct interpretation from somebody who is, in effect, working for somebody else, and with all respect, not one of your own team? So, I thought, let's get to the bottom of this once and for all. I sent a fax to Lazio for the attention of Ravanelli (in English) stating that if he wanted to put his side of the whole sorry story of his time at Boro and the recent press reports, then I was willing to travel to Rome, with an interpreter, and I promise hand on heart that I will not misinterpret anything he says.

This was, you understand, sent more in annoyance at how the Boro cocked-up their piece. I didn't even have an interpreter in mind. Anyway, I cleared my desk and got on with something else, and forgot all about it. There is no way that I even expected the courtesy of a reply.

So, a couple of weeks later, the phone rings, and a voice says "Elo, er, thees eez Fabrizio Ravanelli..." I nearly choked on my executive tea, I can tell you. It was clear that his English was not good, but I managed to pick up on the fact that he seemed to be saying, "Yes, I'd like to

do the interview". What I needed was someone who spoke Italian. But I was in my office, which is at the bottom of my garden in a hamlet of 30 houses, three miles from the nearest town and set deep in the middle of the Hertfordshire countryside. And then I remembered, the lady who lives opposite is Italian. What a stroke of luck! As Ravanelli had called me on my mobile, I dashed over to my neighbour while keeping Rav on the line by saying "Momento! momento!" and within seconds, having briefly explained my plight to my neighbour, communication was restored, and I agreed to fly out to Rome five days later.

Now, my Italian neighbour, Alba, had no idea who she was speaking to until the call was ended. However, she and Carlo, her husband of fifty years don't just let the world pass them by in their quiet retirement. One of the things that they both enjoy is football, and one programme that they enjoy is Channel 4's *Football Italia*. So when I told Alba who she had just been speaking to, she stood in stunned silence and after a while said words to the effect of "Ooh! He's a the white feather! He's gotta looovely legs!" I looked across to her over the top of my glasses and said

## EXCLUSIVE mss interview by Shaun Keogh

# RAVANELLI

"How do you fancy meeting him in Rome next week?"

So, with the blessing of Carlo, Alba started planning what would be a momentous day for her. She was going to fly for the first time. She was going to Rome for the first time. She was going back to her homeland for the first time in 26 years. She was going to meet a world famous footballer with (apparently) "loovely" legs. Alba won't thank me for telling you this, but she is 70 years old; her vitality and zest for life would put many 40 year olds to shame.

The story of our day in Rome (we flew back the same day as we went) is long enough to fill an entire edition of **mss**. We suffered so many setbacks while in Italy that it became a joke between us. I said a few times that I felt like I was in a Laurel and Hardy film; everything seemed to go wrong.

Anyway, after leaving for Stansted at 4am, and consuming along the way one sandwich each and a few coffees, we finally got to meet the mighty Rav at 6.20pm. We had spent most

of the day waiting in the Lazio press room, where there were no food facilities, just bottles of water. We were very tired. And boy, were we pissed off. Alba laughingly told me later on the flight home that when Rav finally appeared she was so wound up with all the waiting that she regretted that she involuntarily blurted out to him in Italian, "and about f\*\*\*ing time too!"

However, Rav looked at her like a naughty schoolboy and apologised copiously to us both. In fairness, it turned out that it was not his fault; there was a breakdown in communication between him and his wife (who Alba had spoken to on the phone when we landed to confirm the meeting place and time). I was slightly disappointed when he turned up

because I had already half-written in my head a venomous article about how "Rav Snubs MSS".

Rav's first words were that we could have as much time with him as we wanted; that it is really important to him that Boro fans get his side of the story because he cares for the club, and is very hurt at the spiteful things said about

him in the press by Boro fans. He did wonder if the fans were being misquoted as well....

We settled in a dugout on a training pitch; Rav did not want to do the interview in the press room, because there were a few hacks still in there, and he did not trust them to sit in the same room without reporting his words to the Italian soccer press.

Because of the time, we now only had 30 minutes to do the interview and take photographs before having to dash to the airport (a 45 minute taxi drive away) to return to England. So, slightly calmer, but extremely hungry and tired, your intrepid reporter begins the interrogation...

Incidentally, some of the answers given appear to be very brief and perhaps disjointed; this is because it is impossible to have a normal 'conversation' when speaking through an interpreter. However, I can promise you that these are Ravanelli's answers, without any touching-up or creative license used. There is no possibility of any 'mis-quotes' as I have listened to the tape with Alba a few times now to make sure we got everything right.



# THE DAY I MET RAVANELLI



► **I want to talk first of all about how you came to play for Middlesbrough; You had just had a great season winning the European Cup with Juventus, and then you moved to Boro – a low-achieving but ambitious club. Why Boro?**

I looked at Middlesbrough and was impressed because they were portrayed to me as a club with a big future.

**You have been openly criticised by other former Boro players for causing a great deal of unrest in the dressing room. From a supporters point of view, your unhappiness with other players was clear to see at times on the pitch. When you look back, do you think your criticism of team mates on and off the pitch was harsh, or did they maybe misunderstand your Italian passion?**

Yes; Italian people are very passionate; but I did not cause any trouble, I only wanted what was best for the team and Middlesbrough Football Club. There were three or four players there who made it difficult for me to concentrate. I say this because I would like the fans to understand what my problems were. There were three or four players who did not play for the club, they played for themselves, and for me, this was a big problem.

I felt that some players were not as professional as I am, and yes, I did get angry at times, but it was because I care about Middlesbrough.

**During your time at Boro you made many trips back to Italy to get treatment for injuries – did you have no confidence in the set-up for this sort of thing at Boro?**

No; To give you an example of the problems we had, whenever we had an away game, the team doctor never travelled with the team. So if you picked up an

injury it could not be treated. It is very difficult for a player to have to deal with this.

**Why did the doctor not go to away games?**

(Shrugs) I don't know.

**Did you ever have any argument with Mr. Gibson?**

Everyday! (laughs) But it would be no problem for me to work with him again.

**Do you know why Emerson kept disappearing – was he as unhappy with his team mates as you were?**

I played everyday with all my heart for Middlesbrough. But Emerson was not happy at Middlesbrough. I played for the team, but Emerson played for Emerson.

**Was there a point during the season when you thought to yourself "We have some great players here, but not a very good team"?**

Well, from the beginning I thought that the organisation was not good; the club was lacking in organisation. It was because of this that we did not get the results on the pitch; it wasn't the players faults.

Every day I would speak with Bryan Robson about the big problems with the team; every day I talk to him about the problems with the defence.

**You were quoted recently as being critical of the training facilities...**

Every day training was very difficult. We had to go to the Riverside Stadium, get changed, and then travel about 20km to the training ground. After training, we had to travel back to the stadium to change again. This sort of organisation is not the sort of thing that a player at any level would expect, let alone in the English Premier League.

**Was communication with your team mates a problem? There were so many languages and regional accents out on the pitch that it must have been very difficult**



# “Please understand, for me there is only one club in England, and that is Middlesbrough”

Autograph hunters pose at the heavily secured entrance to the Lazio training ground



(Above left) Alba settles in next to a noisy foreign hack in the Lazio press room. The water bottles on the table on the right were her only nourishment for six hours...

## for everybody to make themselves understood.

This is true, there were many misunderstanding out on the pitch as well as off it.

## Will Bryan Robson be a great manager one day?

I do not know. But I would like to work with him again; he is a good man.

**Players like Andy Campbell and Mark Summerbell were just breaking through when you were at Boro, but they are now establishing themselves in the first team squad. Do you think that Robson was right to put these inexperienced players into the team amongst so much established talent, or perhaps you might feel it is a good way for them to learn their trade, by being 'put in at the deep end'?**

No, it is not good. Campbell and Summerbell are good prospects, however – I mean no disrespect – but they find the Premier League difficult even now, so two years ago it was even more difficult for them.

However, I thought Gordon McQueen was a good coach, he impressed me.

It is unusual that the club spent many millions of pounds on top players and expected very young and inexperienced players like these to perform at the same level. It is not fair on the youngsters, and it does the balance of the team no good.

**There were all sorts of stories circulating about a physical fight between yourself and another Boro player on the morning of the FA Cup final; what really happened?**

(looks bemused) Nothing; I know nothing of this.

**Is there any truth in the speculation that you were asking to be substituted in the FA Cup final, not because you were injured, but because you were so frustrated with the way the team were playing?**

(Slightly agitated) Don't ask these questions; it is just not true.

**A lot of Boro fans feel that Robson's style of play is very negative – a very defensive game. Was it this that frustrated you?**

At the moment it is very difficult for me to say. But something that sticks in my mind is the Coca-Cola Cup Final against Leicester. We went 1-0 up half way through the first period of extra time. Bryan Robson had at that point, the option of using up to three substitutes. The players were very hot and tired by now, so it was not possible to be at our best.

If Robson would have made some substitutions, he could have finished the game off, and it would have been a fantastic victory for Middlesbrough. But no, he did not make any changes. After our goal we should have made it impossible for Leicester to come back. In my opinion, we lost the opportunity to win that game because Robson would not use his substitutes.

**“I did not cause any trouble, I only wanted what was best for the team and Middlesbrough Football Club”**



# THE DAY I MET **RAVANELLI**





*This may be  
auctioned at this  
year's MSS Social.  
Fat Knacker Smith  
will bid £50 just so  
he can burn it...*

# ▶ THE DAY I MET RAVANELLI



*The Italian Job. I couldn't believe how big his feet were...*

▶ **Would you have stayed at Boro if they had not been relegated?**

Yes, without a doubt; I would still be there.

**What was the one thing that made up your mind to leave Boro?**

The thing that really pushed me was when I realised that I was in the running for the Italian World Cup squad. This would have changed if I had stayed at Boro and played in the Nationwide League.

After the season, I spoke to Robson and Gibson. I told them that it is very important for me to play for the Italian national team in the World Cup, so I must play in the top division, whether it be in England, France, Italy or Germany. I said to Gibson, I go to France or Italy for one year, and then I would like to come back to Middlesbrough for the rest of my career, But Gibson said "No. If you go, then you are not coming back."

**But why did they let Juninho go then? (shrugs) I don't know.**

**When you left Boro, you could have stayed in England - I understand that Everton were interested - is this true?**

I don't know. But please understand, for me there is only one club in England, and that is Middlesbrough.

**Did your experience at Boro make you disillusioned with English football?**

No, not at all.

**Did you find the English game to be very different to the**

**Italian or French way of playing?**

Only a little; it is a little more physical, that is all.

**The British press recently reported your apparent comment to Bernie Slaven saying that one day you would like to manage Middlesbrough - was this quote taken wrongly or is this your sincere wish?**

I would love to become the manager of Middlesbrough. I would change a lot of things. I would be very happy to come back to Middlesbrough as player/manager. If this was not possible, I would have no problem working alongside Bryan Robson as co-manager. I would have no problem working with him again.

**Do you still think that Middlesbrough is a club with great potential?**

Yes, but only if I am the manager! (laughs).

**Do you think your wife would like to live in England again?**

Yes, she would love to; no problem.

**How old are your children?**

I have two sons. I only sire sons! (laughs) Luke is five and Matthew is one.

**You are the only player in the history of Middlesbrough Football Club to score a goal in a major cup final. You scored a hat-trick on your Boro debut. The record shows that your goals scored in games played ratio (32 goals in 50 games) has only been beaten by one other player in the entire history of the club. With all these achievements in mind, do you feel a little upset that a lot of Boro fans have turned against you**





"...and this from Neil Cox... this one's from Higggy ... and this one..."

**because of comments attributed to you by the English press; comments that you quickly denied?**

Yes, of course, I love Middlesbrough Football Club, and I loved living there. I think that the fans only turned against me because of all of the things that I was quoted as saying in the press, but most of it was completely untrue, or very exaggerated. But it is normal that they should believe what they read, because it is something that we all do.

**Can you understand why Boro people would get upset, hearing that one of their players has criticised their town?**

I understand why the supporters feel as they do when they read this rubbish. But they must understand that that is what it is – rubbish. I used to look in the paper and read these things and wonder where it all came from. I never said these things about the club or the town.

These things do not happen in France or Italy; we have a very good rapport with the press – from the players up to the President of the club.

The big problem for me was that the English press did not understand my limited grasp of English. So what they did not understand, they would just make up, or misrepresent what I was saying.

**Do you plan to go into management eventually?**

Yes, it is an ambition for me if the right opportunity comes.

**How is this season going for you?**

For me at the moment it is very good. My family home in Perugia is only one hour away, so this is good. But if Middles-

**“Although it would be a massive task for me to be accepted again, I want to be the manager of Middlesbrough and give the fans the success that they deserve”**

brough were to call, and say, “come and play for us, or be manager”, I would go immediately.

**What ambitions for your career do you have now?**

Although it would be a massive task for me to be accepted again, I want to be the manager of Middlesbrough and give the fans the success that they deserve.

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