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CUSTOMISED
GIBSON:
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FOR SALE**



mss interview

Steve Gibson

SHAUN KEOGH writes about his and **JULIE YATES'** meeting with the Chairman before the Liverpool game

Steve Gibson is an extremely rare human being in the football world. He is possibly the only Premier League chairman not to have heard fans chanting for his head; probably the only Chairman of any club for that matter not to suffer the indignity of the withdrawal of the support of the fans.

We surely all know the story of how this quietly spoken son of a Park End welder rescued the Boro from certain death. Not only that, he made the club what it is today with the funds from his hugely successful business (Bulkhaul Ltd) and his astute, reserved style of management.

This writer's weekend begins on Friday 21st November, as I am invited to the annual Sedgefield Cricket Club dinner. This was the day of the Blair-Bush visit to the town, so there was a buzz in the air at what was a very entertaining evening.

Next day, I am up at the crack of 9am at the Blue Bell Hotel to watch the Rugby World Cup final, and at 12.30, I meet up with Julie Yates and her friend Stuart in the Riverside Stadium reception.

It is the day of the Liverpool match, which perfectly suits me because I specifically want to ask Mr Gibson some questions about this particular club. We are whisked up to the press office, as Gibson is late arriving at the stadium. This is a shame, as it means the interview time will be reduced and I almost certainly will not get to ask all of the questions I have prepared. Anyway, I sit and drink my coffee, mentally going through my questions and cherry-picking the ones I consider most important whilst chatting with Boro TV's cameraman Michael Weadock. Julie and Stuart, slightly peckish after their long train journey, Hoover up the free sandwiches in the company of former Liverpool legend John Aldridge, who is doing media work today.

The various press corps come and go until our escort arrives and shows us into Keith Lamb's office overlooking the front of the Riverside Stadium.

There is an assortment of quality leather seating, and luckily, we are shown in five minutes before Steve arrives. This gives me a chance to set up the video, and test the microphones and picture quality. Hot coffee and biscuits are on the table. In front of Mr Lamb's desk (Gibson does not have an office at the Riverside) are an assortment of Boro publications. On top is a Boro Bible and underneath I can just make out a pile of back issues of MSS. I am tempted to pick a couple of copies up to see if they show signs of being page marked. Does Mr Lamb, for instance, like to keep up with how the MSS footy team is doing? Does he lie awake in bed worrying about Claire Carvello on her world tour? Or does he simply wish that that lazy b*****d mss Chairman Steve Smith would get off his arse and write something funny again. We will never know, as good manners stop me from looking.

Gibson enters the room with a bright smile and good humoured apology for his lateness. To cement the jovial atmosphere I deadpan him with "What time do you call this?"

He is wearing a suit that is definitely not from Burton or Marks & Spencer. To my relief he does not show any sign of being ruffled by his delay in arriving at the Stadium. The last thing an interviewer wants is an agitated interviewee.

Much has been written about Gibson since the years that the then former Labour councillor became a director of the old



“My first ambition back when I joined the club was to find the truth”

► MFC all those years ago. He is one of the few people that I cannot for the life of me remember reading a bad word about.

Throughout our meeting he is gracious, good humoured and incredibly relaxed. He speaks freely and with remarkable frankness. The beginning is a good place to start. I wonder if during his childhood he ever gazed out across Ayresome Park and thought to himself: “If I could, I would buy this club.....”.

“No; being brought up on a council estate in Middlesbrough your options were playing cricket and football and I never looked further ahead than that. I was around in the days of black & white telly, and it didn't start until six at night back then, so you would stay out playing football or cricket every night.”

So was he a regular at Ayresome in his childhood?

“My early days going to watch Middlesbrough play were infrequent because I was mostly playing football myself. My father used to take me to see the Boro if I wasn't playing or if my game was cancelled. My father was a big Boro fan and a keen player himself. I can remember going to see my dad play on Saturday mornings and then in the afternoon we would be off to see the Boro play.”

But surely there must have been an ambition in the young Steve Gibson? What I wonder were his ambitions for the football club when he got involved as a director? I indicate our opulent surroundings and ask him if he had all this in mind? Gibson adopts a serious tone to counter my brevity:

“My first ambition back when I joined the club was to find the truth. I had seen a document from Charles Amer (Boro's Chairman at the time) to Graham Kelly (at the time, Secretary of the Football League) in which Graham Kelly was asking Charles Amer how he was going to fund the building of the sports centre, a building contract which he had awarded to his own company. (Younger Boro fans will need to speak to Dad about this, but essentially what happened was that a sports hall was built next to Ayresome Park) That document made it very clear that he was going to fund that building from the sale of Craig Johnston, Mark Proctor, David Hodgson, David Armstrong and Graeme Souness. Any fan that was aware of that document would have been angry; I saw it, and it was obvious what was happening to the football club.

“But I needed to back that up, because something had to be done. What I needed to do was find the truth and when I tried, I couldn't because books and documents had gone missing. Bit by bit I estimated the debt to be £1.3 million which in 1984 was a huge amount of money. Then I found out that the club was continuing to lose around seven or eight thousand pounds a week; it was haemorrhaging cash. The banks were telling the club that they cannot lend any more money, and at that time, I was not a shareholder.

“The more I started to dig, it became more obvious that there was only one thing to do and that was to put the club into receivership, and of course, you can imagine how popular that made me in the town. The press had an absolute field day. The Football League at the time had other clubs with similar problems and they needed a scapegoat, and that scapegoat was us. Some of the things that went on were absolutely dis-



graceful – and this was by (Football League) members.”

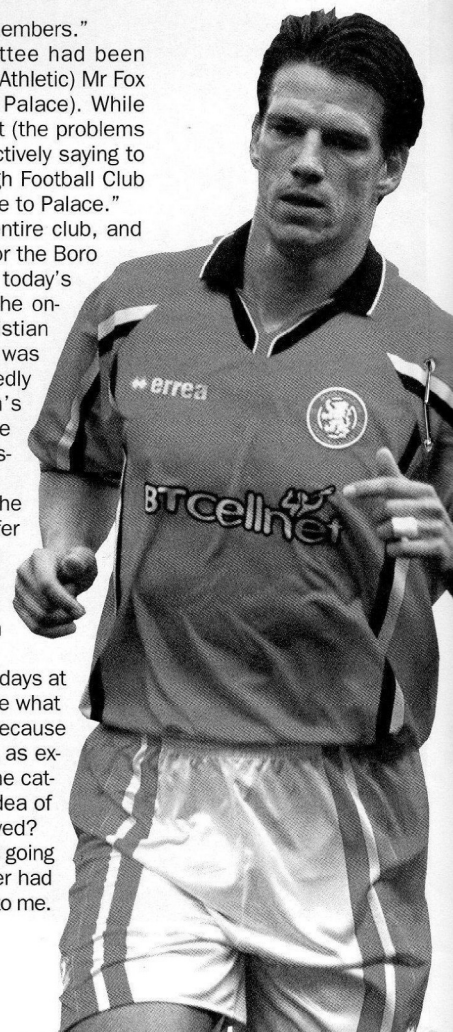
“For example a Football League committee had been formed which included Mr Stott (from Oldham Athletic) Mr Fox (Blackburn Rovers) and Mr Noades (Crystal Palace). While Noades was involved in the discussions about (the problems of) Middlesbrough Football Club he was pro-actively saying to our players, that in the event of Middlesbrough Football Club going bust, we will offer you a contract to come to Palace.”

Just the sort of thing to de-stabilise the entire club, and put the players minds off of doing their best for the Boro in their hour of need. This brings us nicely onto today's opponents. Many may have forgotten about the ongoing dispute concerning the transfer of Christian Ziege to Liverpool. The Boro maintain that he was illegally approached, and losing him undoubtedly had a catastrophic effect on Bryan Robson's plans. I remind Gibson of a recent quote he gave to the Boro website which states his dissatisfaction with the conduct of some clubs.

We proceeded to have a discussion about the dispute between the clubs regarding the transfer of Christian Ziege. I have decided to use this section of the interview in a separate piece that I shall write after the legal wrangle between the clubs is settled. It is due in the High Court in March 2004.

I am particularly intrigued by Gibson's early days at the club. It is easy for people to under estimate what that young lad went through to save the Boro, because he was not as rich then as he is now, and not as experienced. Apart from being a fan, what was the catalyst to his involvement and did he have any idea of how dire the situation was before he got involved?

“I got involved out of frustration; the club was going nowhere, and the chairmanship of Charles Amer had wrecked the club. Middlesbrough Council spoke to me.





Above: On the Wembley pitch with Bryan Robson before the FA Cup final in 1997.

Left: Gibbo's favourite player, Christian Ziege



They said 'Look, we've got 27 percent male unemployment on Teesside, the shipbuilding industry is on its knees, the chemical industry is being run down – can you help us?'

"I was also approached by Mike McCulloch who said that the club had all sorts of problems that he had inherited, that he was doing his best with, but he needed some help. At the time the clubs' board consisted of eight or nine members who were, to be frank, worse than useless. They were third generation shareholders whose great-great granddad had bought shares in Middlesbrough Football Club in 1870 or whatever and they had kept control, irrespective of what they had to offer the club.

"Mike McCulloch had done his best – I've always been a fan of Mike, but he didn't have the resources to turn it around. I couldn't see any way that the board, the way it was structured, could save Middlesbrough Football Club. I told them that I wanted full executive power to run the football club. This prompted a huge, very ugly debate. They thought I was above myself; they saw me as a bit of an upstart and at that time perhaps I hadn't learned the art of diplomacy. Anyway, I told them that if I walk out now, I am not coming back, so they then agreed to give me full executive power." Gibson looks away for a second then looks back at me to deliver the killer line: "Then I sacked them all."

This is stunning stuff. What would any Boro fan who remembers those times give to see a video of those 'Worse than useless' directors unwittingly hanging themselves? Gibson continues: "It was a very difficult period. I was by myself. All I wanted to do was to get the club through the season."

I suggest that sacking the deadwood was probably a crucial event. Having run my own business for many years, I know that you get far more done when you don't have to consult Directors or a committee. You can't waste time with seven hour board meetings.

"Exactly. Decisions needed to be made very quickly and often on the hoof. I didn't have time to deliberate; I had to



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follow my instinct. But what is more is that I did not value the people that were there, I didn't value their opinion and I didn't value their ability to make things better. I just felt that I needed control. The other issue was that there I was putting all this energy into saving the football club, but who was I saving it for? I wasn't going to save it for the existing shareholders who had already buried it. I knew that if that happened the problems would bounce straight back very quickly."

Steve Gibson is not a man who seeks or courts publicity. But being the Chairman of the local football club and a big employer in the town means he can hardly be anonymous. I ask if he sometimes wishes that he had more anonymity?

"If I wasn't involved in football, I could perhaps play a lower profile. But Bulkhaul is the biggest independent and most profitable business in Middlesbrough, and one of the biggest and profitable in the north-east, so that gives you a bit of a profile whether you want it or not. You don't mind that profile if it is the result of some success though.

"Then, you look at the football side, where, really for a town of Middlesbrough's size, we shouldn't really have a Premiership football club. The town has a population of 125,000; to get 22,000 season ticket holders is phenomenal."

I make the point that ratio wise to the size of the town, Boro have many more season ticket holders than Sunderland or Newcastle. "That's right, and most of our season ticket holders live within a radius of two miles from the ground. There is a real passion. We know that the town has some inherent problems. I mean, when I went to school I was brought up to be a bricklayer or welder as were most of my generation. It is only in the last two years that the town has begun to show some real ambition both for the people and the town."

The profile of the football club has surely helped that?

"Certainly it has, but at the moment we are very fortunate to have Ray Mallon as Mayor of Middlesbrough. In addition I think we are fortunate that there has been a big shake up in the police, and there is awareness at Government level that there has got to be more inward investment in Teesside and I think that that has happened. Middlehaven is coming together; I sit on the board of the Tees Valley Regeneration. The outlook for the town now has never been brighter."

Picking up on the Mayoral theme, and perhaps remembering Gibson's time some years ago as a councillor, Julie asks: "Would you ever want to be mayor?"



“Sometimes you also have to be prudent, with the state of football finances now”

► “No. When I was a councillor, which was a long long time ago, I found it incredibly frustrating....I am not good in committees, I enjoy the role that I have.”

I cannot let the interview pass without reference to Bryan Robson. I make it clear that I am not looking for an anti-Robson angle, but I am wondering if Mr Gibson remembers clearly in his mind the moment when he knew that in the interests of the club Robson had to go, or at least, that he needed help. I ask this because some fans were calling for Robson to go for some time before his departure, and Mr Gibson must have been all too aware of this:

“If we look at Brian’s seven years at the club, six of them were fantastic in the amount of progress that we made. We had one bad year, and if you look at that bad year, we actually had a bad three months. At that time for Bryan, everything that could go wrong went wrong. The personal pressure he put himself under to find a solution was huge. I know that occasionally he may have made the wrong decision, but he made that decision for the right reasons, and it was always, always, always made in the best interests of Middlesbrough Football Club.

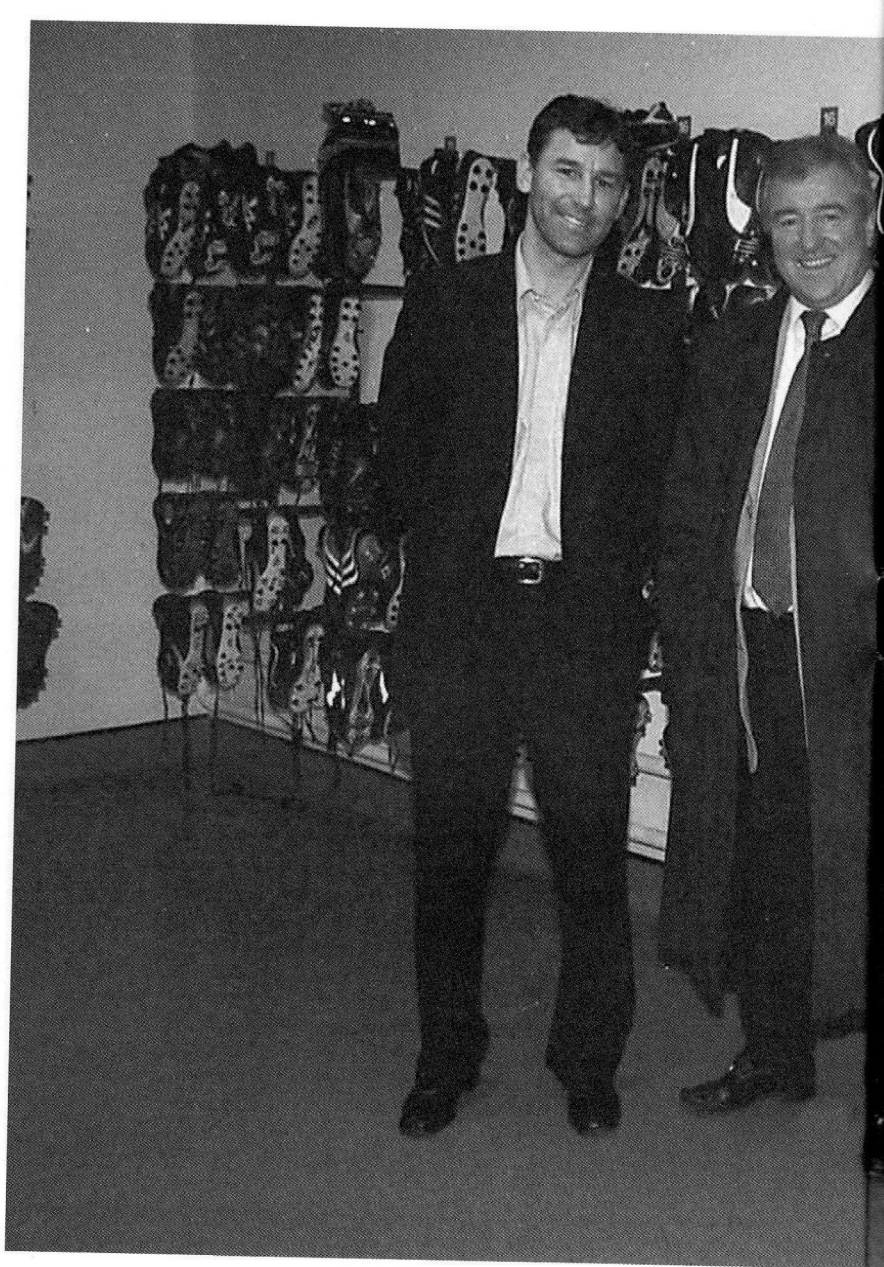
“In the 1998-99 season, which was our first season following promotion back to the Premier League, we finished 9th with 51 points. That is some achievement for a promoted club. However, we did it by playing some negative football. For the following season, we wanted to sweeten it, to play more attractive football, and Bryan was convinced that the way ahead was to play with three centre backs. So we brought in Ziege on the left and Karembeu on the right. However, when we lost Ziege it was a massive loss for this football club, but the eventual outcome for Bryan personally was horrendous.

“I remember him pulling me to one side and he said ‘Steve, I need to change things and I’ve tried everything I can. I’ve got to bring some help in.’ He had decided that it all needed new eyes and fresh ideas. I told him I agreed.

“I had met Terry (Venables) some years previously on holiday and built up a decent relationship with him. So Bryan, Keith Lamb and I went down to London to meet Terry. You could see straight away the regard that Terry had for Bryan, so the reason that Terry Venables came here was because of his respect for Bryan Robson. Terry did a fantastic job for us, but I think that Bryan knew that once he had brought Terry into the club, it was the beginning of the end for him. But he did it for the club, not for himself, which shows you the measure of the man.”

Indeed, the revelation that it was Robson’s idea to bring in help does reflect well on Bryan. Even though we were all frustrated at the time, it is hoped by this writer that revelations such as this will help to rebuild Robsons’ reputation and standing with the Boro fans. He was only doing his best; who could ask for more?

It is easy for some Boro fans to forget that Steve Gibson is just like them. He kicks every ball and questions as many refereeing decisions; lets face it, he has more riding on the results than we do. There was a moment a couple of years ago when Boro were 1-2 down at home to Bradford, who by then were as good as relegated. Boro were only two or three points above



them and this was a match that Boro could not lose. A minute before time, Paul Ince squeezed in a messy goal to grab a point for the Boro. I remember watching the TV highlights and the camera panned straight to Steve Gibson. He was so relieved that he pretty much fell out of his chair; I don’t remember seeing him smile. I have never forgotten that image because the poor guy must have been close to a heart attack. Does he remember that moment?

“Yes I do remember; that goal was vital. There was a feeling that if we had lost that game against Bradford we would have been in serious trouble. You feel not just for yourself but for people who you know are working so desperately hard. I watched people at this football club almost fall apart under that pressure, and age dramatically. What is worse is they were getting no credit or respect for the work that they were doing. I would watch Bryan Robson coming into work in the morning, knowing full well that he had not slept the previous night. It wasn’t unusual to get phone calls from Bryan at all hours of the night. He worked incredibly hard, as did Viv (Anderson) and Gordon, (McQueen) looking for the ingredient to turn things around.”

But why put yourself, as Chairman, under so much pressure?

“It’s the nature of the game; you have to take the lows as well as the highs. It’s a fantastic challenge here; you have to be balanced, but sometimes you also have to be prudent, with the state of football finances now.”

Indeed, and this brings us onto another subject I had on my list.

When Bryan Robson left and Steve McClaren took over, a massive pruning operation was undertaken to reduce the numbers in the Boro squad. Although money was spent on new players, this writer felt at the time that the club may have financial problems, because some big wage earners were moved on and

Above: With Bryan Robson and Terry Venables. “You could see straight away the regard that Terry had for Bryan, so the reason that Terry Venables came here was because of his respect for Bryan Robson. Terry did a fantastic job for us, but I think that Bryan knew that once he had brought Terry into the club, it was the beginning of the end for him”



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and his coaching staff. That is Steve’s strength, his coaching ability. In my discussions with him prior to his appointment, I felt sure that he had man management skills as well. I know how well he man managed me! So that told me a lot about Steve McClaren.”

We wind down the interview with some general football talk; then Keith Lamb signals to me through the door that we should wrap things up. Picking up on Steve’s enthusiasm for the game, Julie finishes the interview by asking “So what about you, Mr Gibson – where would you rather be – in the boardroom or on the football pitch?”

He immediately throws Julie a warm smile:

“Oh out on the football pitch; I think I should be playing today! I said that to Sven (Goran Eriksson) when I saw him recently at Aston Villa – the older we get, the better we used to be! (laughs) ■

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the squad, which was a bit bloated, was reduced. How, I ask, did he manage to sell the job to Steve McClaren if there was a proviso that the first thing he has to do is get rid of players?

“We didn’t say that. What we said to Steve is that we have a lot of players on the periphery earning very good salaries who are not contributing to the well being of this football club. I simply cannot allow you to bring more players in because the club cannot afford it. What you have to do is to get rid of those players, and the cash that those players bring in can be spent on new players. So there wasn’t a reduction in our wage bill as such, just a turnover of players to make the team more effective.

“But,” he continues, “What you also never do is to give a new manager a haversack of money, because Steve McClaren, although proven as a coach, was unproven as a manager.”

But, I interject, so was Bryan Robson....Gibson looks a bit taken aback with this for a second but is straight back at me:

“(Those were) Different circumstances. Bryan Robson came into a club that had a turnover of about three and a half million pounds; he had a squad that was costing about one and a half million pounds in wages. So with Bryan, the risk was low, as during his first season we were already in the First Division. With Steve, it is entirely different. The club now turns over about £45m, and the cost of being relegated from the Premier League is horrendous. So apart from the fact that the club was not in a position to do so, the point is that you do not give huge sums of money to spend to an unproven Premier League manager.”

So the clear out of ineffective players when McClaren took over was simply good management?

“It was certainly a part of it. We felt that wages were only going to go one way, and that was down. The remit for Steve McClaren was firstly that any players that came in had to be talented and able to play, (a swipe at Boksic, I wonder?) Secondly, they had to have a real willingness to learn from Steve

Clare Smith sent me some lighthearted questions for Steve Gibson. He was game enough to respond in good heart:

Can you lend me a tenner?

Only if I get it back

Will you do a match report for mss on today’s game?

Ask me at a quarter to five

Are you going to the Boro Ball?

Perhaps

How much is a pint of milk?

Don’t know

How much is a pint on the MFC concourse?

Don’t know

When was the last time you visited a corner shop?

I go to the corner shop all the time.

How much is the bus fare from the town to Park End?

Don’t know



Favourite band/ artists?

Oh, I don’t know...

(laughs) showing my age

here... Beatles, Stones,

Chris Rea...

Favourite film?

The Secret of Santa Vittoria. (1969) This film

starred Anthony Quinn.

It’s a dramatic comedy

set in an Italian village

during the Second World

War. The Nazis are trying

to confiscate the village’s

wine, and a chap called

Bombolini, who was pre-

viously the village fool

and the village drunk, be-

comes mayor and turns

into the village hero be-

cause he saves the wine

from the dastardly Ger-

mans.

Do you still hang about

with anyone from

school?

Yes my business partner

Mike O’Neill.

Have you ever visited

Friends Reunited?

No

What would you order

from the Boro fish bar?

Very large cod and chips!