

Paul Sugrue, in action against Wolves, in front of the Chicken Run at Ayresome Park



Suggie

The job of tracking down former Boro players is a thankless task. Some people seem to think that there is a special section in the telephone directory, like the players concerned sit by their telephone for years hoping **mss** will call. The graft of tracking them down and then persuading them to consent to an interview is sometimes alleviated when they turn up in the public domain for a brief moment and then go back to whence they came. It's a matter of tracking them down through the media on which they featured, which in itself can be time consuming.

So, a couple of months ago, I'm listening to Radio 5 in my car, when they run a 'feel good factor' piece about Inter Cardiff, a club in Wales who had informed their players the night before a very important cup match, that they could not afford their wages this week. I was thinking "Hmm, sounds like Boro in the 1980s, wonder if they'll call in Bruce Rioch to knock them into shape". The next announcement really pricked my ears up, because who should be announced as the spokesperson and manager for the club concerned but former Boro player Paul Sugrue.

For those of you too young to remember, Sugrue was signed by Bobby Murdoch (appropriately enough, for this issue of **mss**) and made his Boro debut in a 0-2 defeat at the mighty

Cambridge United in December 1982. He was a virtual ever-present the following season before being enticed away by Portsmouth in December 1984.

Sugrue was a strong inside-forward, who perhaps did not score as many goals for the Boro as he might have. He seems to hold a record worthy of a Boro quiz night, because he must have played the fewest amount of games in a Boro shirt under the most managers. Sugrue made 66 league appearances for Boro under no less than five managers: Murdoch, Harold Shepherdson (caretaker), Malcolm Allison, Jack Charlton (caretaker) and Willie Maddren.

After a troubled 14 months at Pompey, where he only made two league appearances, he had even briefer spells at Northampton and Newport before retiring and disappearing.

Anyway, with my investigative reporter's nose for a story and fearful persistence (oh, all right, I phoned the beeb) I tracked him down to Cardiff, where he now owns and runs the biggest school of excellence in Wales.

A cheerful soft Brummie accent greets me down the phone, and while his car takes him down the fast lane of the M4, I take him for a trip to a far away place.....

When did you retire, and what did you do in the years after?

At the start of the 1990s, I played in Finland for a few years, but I got a double cruciate and knee dislocation which finished me off. I came back and got the job of managing my home town team, Nuneaton Borough. After about a year the club went into liquidation, but they found a buyer and as you know, they are now doing well in the Conference, which is several Leagues above where they were back then.

Soon after, I broke a vertebrae in my back in a car crash so had to leave, I ended up moving to Wales, and got a job with the FAW (Football Association of Wales) coaching the under 14s with Bobby Gould. I went back to college and got all my badges,

started on my own and now I've got the biggest soccer schools in Wales.

Tell me about the soccer schools...

Well we service mainly the south of England. I only have ex-pros doing the coaching. I've also done work with the FA of Wales and their schools of excellence.

How have the kids shaped up?

Well I've got 180 kids on the books, and 10 per cent made it as pros in their first year. I've got a lad called Christian Diamond at Palace, he's played a few times in their reserves and he's only 16. I take them on from age eight to when they are 12, and then we try to place them with clubs. A lad will go for a trial, the club becomes interested and they tell us what they want us to work on with them, and they go back a year or six months later and we then hope they take them on.

How did you get involved with Inter Cardiff?

I wanted to get involved with Inter because their youth team play in a very good league. I wanted to put a team into that because I've got an under-17 side that's as good as anybody's, I've got three or four who should have made it as professionals but they missed their opportunity.

"Without doubt my big regret is leaving Boro"

They only way they can get a second chance is if they play in a league where they play against league opposition. Inter play against teams like Bristol Rovers and City, Cardiff, Swansea etc. so it's a great shop window. I joined the board at Inter and brought my lads in. Two weeks after I joined they hit financial difficulties so we spoke to UWIC (University of Wales Institute of Cardiff) the local university side. I'd agreed to take over as team manager for the two big games coming up and as the existing Inter players walked out when they got no wages, it worked out that UWIC players took over all of the fixtures. If they had not have played the matches they would have been fined.

So these teams have the same money problems as all the other small clubs?

Oh yeah, well, the wages are extortionate for the small attendances. You might get 80 or 90 people paying £3 or £4 a head, and some of the players might be on £250 a week. It doesn't take much to work out that they are living on a prayer or two. Last year Inter won over £200,000 in prize money, but they still went bust.

It harks back to your days at the Boro - did you see the problems coming?

No, I just had a great offer from Portsmouth. I don't know where the Boro money went but it wasn't on wages (*laughs*), the top earner was Irving Natrass, who was on about £600 a week. We had gates then I think of about 10,000, so it wasn't wages that crippled the club.

You signed to Boro from Kansas - was that just a summer job?

Yeah, I was there for three and a half months, but I go back to the USA every year and coach for five weeks in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

How do you look back on your time at the Boro?

I loved my time at the Boro, but I don't mind telling you this - I'll always remember the first time I came to the town. I was driving up the A19, came over the hill and saw ICI and all the chimneys and I thought "oh, f*** me, what have I done!" But I had a great time there. The biggest mistake I made in my career was leaving the club for Portsmouth. We were all under stress while we were playing as it was week to week not knowing if we were gonna play again or get paid.

Is it true that at one stage, while Malcolm Allison was in charge and under pressure, that you said "If he goes, so do I"?

I did say that, yeah, me and Mal go back a long way. I felt I should say that out of loyalty to him, but you learn that this is a selfish game, you must look after yourself first... (*pause*) Without doubt my biggest regret is leaving Boro.

So what did Portsmouth have to offer?

Well, it made me financially secure, it was only 17 minutes between the commencement of negotiations and me signing the contract. Alan Ball was their manager then, and for me he was a boyhood hero, unfortunately, he turned into an adult nightmare. We never got on from day one.

The Chairman there was also a problem, I only played twice for the first team, and that was when he was on holiday (*laughs*). I was the leading goal scorer in the reserves for both seasons I was there though, for what that was worth!

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Paul Sugrue, in the middle without his shirt, with the Allison team that beat Notts County in the FA Cup in 1983. Back row: Helne Otto, Ray Hankin, Kevin Beattie, Kelham O'Hanlon, Paul Ward. Middle: David Shearer, Suggie, Stephen Bell, Irving Natrass, Malcolm Allison. Front: Lew Clayton, Cyril Knowles, Darren Wood, Tony Mowbray



"With Inter Wales Vets in 1998, it's the Umbro Vets Pro Trophy at Wembley. Who's the person behind me I wonder? We beat Liverpool 1-0. I was manager, coach, player, physio, minibus driver, kit washer and sponsor. All to achieve a dream of leading a side out at Wembley. One of the greatest days of all..."

