

INJURED PRIDE

SHAUN KEOGH met southern-based **DAVID ARMSTRONG** – the ex-Boro star who Jack Charlton called “my little gem” and who made 305 consecutive League appearances for the club

An excellent example of Boro's 1960s and 1970s policy of bringing players to the first team via the juniors and reserves is 'Spike' Armstrong (the nickname comes from his hair sticking up in the air during his playing days). Home-grown players were all that financially strapped Boro could afford back then. (Coming up to date just for a second, it is interesting to note that the financial excesses of the previous managerial regime have enforced this policy on the current team. A welcome return in my view, judging by the potential of players such as Stockdale and Wilkshire). An occasional gem such as Armstrong popped up now and again, made his mark, and then moved on, normally to a bigger or more ambitious club in exchange for much needed hard cash.

Making his professional debut under manager Stan Anderson, Armstrong played throughout the Jack Charlton and John Neal eras, leaving for Southampton just after Bobby Murdoch took over at Boro, in July 1981.

Armstrong played for Southampton's most successful side ever, which finished the 83-84 season as League runners-up to Liverpool and reached the FA Cup semi-finals. At that time, Southampton's team sheet read like a who's who of foot-

ball personalities, as Armstrong counted among his team-mates the likes of Peter Shilton, Frank Worthington and Kevin Keegan.

David had first consented to an interview when I met him at the Blue Bell Hotel in Middlesbrough for the Charlton's Champions book launch a couple of years ago. I met him again recently at another former player's event and, as David still lives in the Southampton area, we arranged to meet on the afternoon of Boro's away match against the Saints in March.

As his career at Boro has been covered in detail in many publications over the years, I concentrated most of my questions on his career and life subsequent to leaving Boro – an area of which not very much is generally known.

Another factor governing this is that David was unwilling to answer some of my more searching questions because he is currently writing a biography which he hopes will be in the shops by Christmas. We hope to have some as prizes for an MSS gathering in the near future.

David greets us at the entrance to his office and we adjourn to an adjacent bar. It is set on a magnificent quay surrounded by floating gin palaces, 10 minutes walk from the Friends Provident Stadium. It is a lovely sunny afternoon.

We get the beers in and I suggest we sit in a far corner, because this bar will fill up with people on their way to the match during the next couple of hours.

David left Boro just as the freefall into debt and despair was beginning. John Neal had left the club, Bobby Murdoch had taken over, and many players felt that their careers were stagnating, and that the club was not going forward. How right they were – and who could blame them? – but, I asked what were David's own memories of that time?

"I knew when it was time to go because of the lack of ambition of the club to add the players that we needed. But also, I was getting in a rut, possibly because of the club's lack of ambition. It was very frustrating. We needed a proven goalscorer, because we had a great midfield in both Jack (Charlton's) and John Neal's teams. Jack brought in players like Alf Wood, but these were very average, makeshift players, who did not help to improve the team as a whole."

A Sunderland supporter from childhood, Armstrong played – and scored – against the Mackems in a good many derby games. I wondered what it feels like to score against the team you grew up loving, and whether it ever affected his game?

"Oh no, I wanted to score against

"I am a Sunderland supporter, but Middlesbrough are my family"

them. All of my school friends were on the terraces supporting Sunderland, so it made me more determined for Boro to win. If I had a bad game against Sunderland, I would get stick from my life-long friends as well as my team-mates, so Boro had to win. Bobby Kerr (former Sunderland midfielder) is to this day my best friend, but on the pitch, he was my enemy. I am a Sunderland supporter, but Middlesbrough are my family."

In 1987 at the age of 32, Armstrong found himself a peripheral player at Southampton under a new manager trying to rebuild the squad. Constant problems with his injured ankle did not help him to gain match fitness. It was the first time in his life that David had to confront a career that was no longer moving in an upward direction:


"Chris Nichol took over as manager at Southampton from Lawrie McMenemy, and it went down hill as far as I was concerned at that point. I played alongside Chris; he was a great player, a good competitor, and a nasty piece of work on the pitch when he needed to be. But as a manager, I felt that he was sadly lacking."

As a consequence, Armstrong found himself transferred to local club Bournemouth in July 1987. However, after 6 games that season, his career was over. Like many players, David's playing career was ended by a long-term injury that his body could no longer carry. I asked specific questions about this, but it is clearly a touchy subject, as he wants to wait for the story to be told in his book. So I asked about how he sees himself among his contemporaries who are still in the game and if he had planned for a life in football after his playing days were over:

"The upsetting thing from my point of view is that I am up there with the Graeme Sounesses, Glenn Hoddles, and Peter Reids – the players of my generation who are still in the game. But my injury messed up my natural progression in the game. I thought that I was going to follow the path of player-coach, player-manager and then into full blown management. Instead, after I stopped playing my injury was such that I am now registered as disabled."

"I did my coaching badges even though I could not physically stand all day on my leg, but I needed the coaching badges to try to get into management. In retrospect, I shouldn't have taken them because it did not do my leg any good and I did not get a management job."

Therefore, David was left with the stark reality of leaving the only workplace he had ever known for an uncertain future as he approached his mid-thirties. ▶



Spike the company director and the "little gem" as he's remembered by Boro fans

"I am now a director at the company I work for along with Jimmy Case (he's on the left in the picture) and life is much better than it has been"



"I was unemployed before I joined this company and we were three weeks away from losing our house"

▶ A daunting prospect for anyone, it was clearly a struggle to adapt and survive:

"I tried a number of jobs... I thought that being a well-respected and high profile player that I was that I would automatically be employed as a manager, or chief scout – whatever. Over a period of about 15 years I applied for every job going in the game, but I was never given an opportunity. I made a few shortlists but that was it. I ended up having to take a number of jobs because I still had a mortgage to pay. I worked in soft drinks; I loaded shelves, sold videos into shops. Eventually I had a bit of good luck and got back into the game by being appointed the first footballing Community Development Officer in the south of England at Bournemouth FC.

"The job involved promoting the facilities at Bournemouth Football Club to the local community. I informed people and organisations that they can use the club facilities for things like bingo, birthday parties – anything to involve the community in the football club.

"It is a vitally important job at any club, and you will see why tonight, because there will be virtually a full house here. Pulling in 30,000 for a mid-week match is no mean feat for a town like Southampton, and a lot of the success on that front is to do with the work done by the community officers at the club. All clubs now have people doing this job, but at the time I was appointed it was an untried area here in the south."

Winning this job and getting back into

the game was clearly a real boost to Armstrong's confidence after some difficult times. However, more bad news presented itself eventually:

"After a few years of happily doing my job at Bournemouth, the team manager Harry Redknapp left to take over at West Ham, so I applied for his job. However, the club appointed Tony Pullis instead.

"I went to see Tony straight away and said, 'Look, you know that I applied for this job, but I don't want you to see me as a threat because I am quite happy carrying on doing the community work.' Within three weeks I was out of a job. I sometimes wonder how some people got into the game.

"However, my job was funded by the football trust, so the club could not sack me because they did not pay my wages. The funding was withdrawn from Bournemouth, and I became the community officer for Dorset. I was answerable to the PFA, who were answerable to the football trust. After a while I became community officer at Reading, and then in March 1995 an opportunity came up to be General Manager at Waterlooville, who are in the Doctor Martens League. It was my job to generate income, and I more than trebled it for them. I did well there."

After a number of years at Waterlooville, David had given up all hope of getting back into the game he grew up with. The years away have developed his business acumen, and after another slump in fortunes on leaving Waterlooville, he joined Absolute Office Supplies, his current employers:

"Although I am now a director at Ab-

solute (along with Jimmy Case, Ex-Liverpool, Brighton, Southampton and Bournemouth) and life is much better than it has been, I was unemployed before I joined this company and we were three weeks away from losing our house. It has been a very tough time.

"The football connection with Jimmy and I helps the business in that people can buy paper for, say £2.50 a ream from our competitors, but they can buy it from us for £2.49 and have a chat about football as well."

So, what did he think of the contrast between the modern game and the game that he knew?

"There are a lot of people in the game now who do not have the passion, determination and loyalty that I had, and I don't know how I would deal with that. I'd like to think that I could deal with it, but it is a difficult scenario.

"If I were playing now, I would be very embarrassed at the money I would be earning. Now, it's not the player's fault – it is mismanagement by directors and managers. Most club directors are very successful businessmen, but when comes to being directors of football clubs, their business acumen seems to go out of the window. And because these players are earning so much money, some of them lose all of their commitment. I think the Germans have got a better system, because they pay a lower wage with high incentives."

So where does he see the future going? David's answer jumped in my face off of the mini disc when I played it back a couple of weeks later, because our meeting took place a week before the announcement of the collapse of ITV Digital:

"Something is going to have to change pretty quickly because even the TV companies are starting to catch a cold; they paid far too much for the broadcasting rights."

The massive bar that we met in was empty at the start of our interview, but by now it is crammed full of Saints fans having a pre-match beer alongside us. David has to leave before us because he is doing commentary and analysis on tonight's match for a local radio station. Physically bigger and now completely bald, he is almost unrecognisable from his playing days, but he is still greeted by a few fans as he limps through the crowd on his bad leg.

Like many former pros', Armstrong found the transition from playing football to having a 'proper job' a difficult turning curve. Let's hope that fate has now dealt him an easier road to travel. ■

© shaunkeogh@aol.com



Spike's Boro record will never be beaten

David holds a Boro record that is unlikely to be matched or beaten in the modern game; he made 305 consecutive League appearances for the club.

His record run commenced in March 1973 in a 1-1 draw against Aston Villa and continued to include every game through the

following seven seasons. The league run ended during its eighth year when he missed the match against Nottingham Forest on 6th September 1980.

However, this extraordinary appearance record is made even more impressive because during this time Armstrong also played in every single cup game played by the Boro during this

period. These further 67 matches means that he appeared in a staggering 372 consecutive matches in all competitions for the Boro.

● **Born 26th December 1954;**
Turned pro: 31st December 1971;
Boro debut: 3rd April 1972 away v Blackpool; 428 appearances for Boro, 77 goals; Eighth in Boro's all time appearances list.

● **Transferred to Southampton August 1981 (£600,000 – Boro record receipt at time); 222 league appearances, 59 goals;**
● **Transferred to Bournemouth July 1987: Six appearances, two goals.**
● **England under 23: four caps; England 'B': Two caps;**
● **One full England cap: against Australia in Sydney, May 1980. ■**