



The Voice's Thoughts

Andy Hainsworth, former co-manager of the GPSFA B Squad and self-styled Voice of Football, recounts another day in the controversial life of Ken Blackburn.

A gentle word, dear reader. If you appreciate good football, keep well away from Longlevens Football Club on the Friday before the Cup Final. This is no insult to the fine young men of Longlevens, but reflects on their opposition - the infamous GYPSTIFS. The GYPSTIFS are the Gloucestershire Young Primary School Teachers International Football Stars, and are made up of the best available talent within the teaching fraternity plus high quality ringers. The standard is not too high, and rather wisely the diplomatic Mr. B. Stait announced he was rather too busy to become Chairman, thank you. Mr. Bob Owen (Robinswood) is a regular between the sticks and Mr. Martyn Ellis (Harewood) patrols the defence with cool, measured authority. The dashing Mr. David Smith (Longlevens) is our version of Michael Owen. High quality ringers have included Mr. Stu Eckford (Heron), Mr. Tony Hickey (Castle Hill) and Mr. Alan Duggan (The Seymour). The highest quality ringer of all is of course our very own Mr. Ken Blackburn (Grange) and this is where our story begins

Despite being a Gloucestershire Schools County Rugby Player, Ken was an outstanding Football player. It came as no surprise when he signed professional forms for Brighton. (Brighton Pier is halfway into the sea and the Goldstone Ground was demolished in 1997, but nobody at the club blames Ken; after all an apprentice Double Glazier has to start somewhere.) You may have noticed, as with all top ex-players, as a fully paid up member of the PFA he is legally allowed to abuse referees, chew gum stylishly, claim free teas of Sandra and Gill and talk about the Diamond Formation without anybody laughing. Luckily Ken played with the jovial Howard Wilkinson at Brighton, which explains why Ken is always so free with his money and is insulted if you don't let him buy the first five rounds. But I digress, gentle reader.

The main point of all of this is to establish that Ken was once a Professional Soccer Player. The second key point of the story is that, by and large, Ken does not think teachers are overpaid and Ken does not think teachers are over-knowledgeable about football. I became immediately aware of this when I tried to play John Blackburn (leading Scorer for the Bi team in 1992) as an attacking fullback. I only tried it once, as my ears couldn't take any more pressure.

A few years ago, when Spurs were in the Premier League, the mighty GYPSTIFS had an away fixture at Pates Grammar School. Ken was down as our high quality ringer. As Ken was used to more superior clubs, he did not realise that the first players there got the eight shirts. The remaining two had to wear my old West Hartlepool Rugby jerseys, which were not made by Cotton Traders and resembled large green Kaftans. Ken was wearing one of these. Ken was not happy. During the kick-in Ken became rather critical of the quality of his team mates. He was also clearly struggling with the concept of it's just a game. We just play for fun, really. Ken was most unhappy.

Our captain at the time as a huge star. He had once played for an English Teachers XI against an Isthmian League Select XI and as a boy he had once been watched by a scout from Bath City. He called us in and gave us his team talk. And what a team talk it was.

Boldly ignoring the fact that we had never won in four seasons our skipper appealed to the inner man. Passion and commitment poured out. We were going to boss the midfield, we were going to play the ball down the channels, we were going to soak up the pressure and attack quickly on the break, we were going to make the mighty Pates Grammar School suffer. He fixed us all with his steely glare and slowly turned to Ken. Naturally we thought he would call upon Ken to give us some expert advice, to advise us on the nuances of the Flat Back Three with the Diamond Formation. But no. He turned to Ken and uttered the most historic football phrase since They think it's all over

“Isn’t it Ben, isn’t it?” Well, Ben, if the ball comes anywhere near you, just kick it. Okay? Just do your best. That’s all we can ask of you.

Ken would have punched our skipper, but unfortunately his arms got tangled in his dress. Ken’s mood was not enhanced by our rather effete left winger (The Vicar - think Dad’s Army) offering to let him play .. up front, out of the way if you can’t cope ..

Despite the ominous build up the game started well. Our skipper jinked past three defenders and drilled an inch perfect ball across the six yard box. Sadly our centre forward was just surging past the 18 yard line and The Vicar had stumbled under a weak challenge from the referee. The chance went begging. Then the Gods of Football intervened. The lively Peter Kingston on the Pates’ wing hacked the ball optimistically high in the air. Ken rose like a young salmon and launched into a powerful header. Sadly he stumbled over the Vicar who was busy tying his laces. Ken was doubled up in agony, unable even to swear or chew gum. The Sixth Former who was refereeing ran to phone an ambulance, while we all stood around. Not laughing. Poor Ken was severely winded and we had to stop the game for a while. Ken was not happy. Bravely he soldiered on, though to be fair, it was not a vintage performance. After the game, even the soothing effect of a Toby Dash did not ease the pain. Reluctantly Ken went to hospital and discovered he had broken three ribs and could not work for a month. Still, as ever, Ken remained philosophical, but his composure was rattled later that week when I passed on our skipper’s remarks.

“I’ve got a mate who once had trials for Shortwood. He can play instead of Ben.”

Only after Alan at the Pike had twice threatened to bar Ken if he did not stop using foul language did Ken calm down a little bit. He was not happy. I decided it was not the right time to ask him for his match fees and for my shirt back. These things could wait. After all, it had been a very black week for the Black.