

A Mighty Mighty Stones production

£10

The Stones are...

There was one delicious instant, in the midst of the sheer insanity of the 7-0 win over Bath, when Connor Stevens' header dropped into the net past the flailing City keeper for the third goal and the whole crowd, from the chairman to the youngest fan, craned their necks and gawped for a view of this defining moment...

Everyone knew, right then, that the National League South title race had tilted back overwhelmingly in our favour. We grinned in disbelief and the Bulla Stand roared its delight. Perhaps that memory wasn't enough to make up for being denied a joyous end to the season, lifting the trophy on an emotional final day and showing our gratitude and appreciation to the players. But it was something. A glorious, spine-tingling something that I, for one, will never forget



JUST LOOK AT THOSE FACES! Bath City keeper Ryan Young is unable to keep out Connor Stevens' header and the Stones fans are about to erupt PICTURE: MONTIMAGE MEDIA

Champions!

The full story of Wealdstone FC's magnificent 2019-20 National League South season, cruelly interrupted by the Covid-19 crisis but with (finally) the right & proper outcome



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 Printed by Martin Lacey at People for Print Ltd (www.peopleforprint.co.uk) Pictures by Adam Williams, Steve Foster and MontImage Media



Champions!



Bonus 1: Ross Lafayette reminds us, at Hitchin, what a headed goal looks like



Bonus 2: New manager Dean Brennan



Bonus 3: Michael Phillips makes his anonymous debut v Watford

Since winning promotion six years ago, Wealdstone and the National League South title seemed as unlikely bed-fellows as Les Dennis and Amanda Holden.

And yet....at the end of the year we went up as Ryman League winners we published a celebratory booklet much like this one, and it began with a lament about how the club were at a low ebb the previous summer - devastated by losing in the play-offs and with unrest and discontent behind the scenes.

Yet we ended up as Champions. How spookily similar is that?

Summer 2019 was indeed one of turmoil. Bobby Wilkinson's reign as manager was peaks and troughs, and when he came to the chairman following the fateful semi-final defeat at Woking wanting reassurances about 'the ambition of the club matching his' and threatening resignation, he got the answer he wasn't expecting.

But Rory Fitzgerald and his board knew the worth of this club. And they knew they had to find a management team who recognised it too.. and could work with ingenuity, creativity and a more realistic budget.

I think Rory knew pretty much instantly, when he met Dean Brennan and his No.2 Stuart Maynard, that he had found his men. A work ethic and unstinting commitment are not unusual among the management fraternity, but this partnership also demonstrated a rare intelligence. And a 'little black book' second to none!

This, however, is written with nine months' hindsight. We know now that Dean and Stuart - and the rest of the management team - have wrought an improvement in every aspect of the club. But back in May 2019, within a week of the Stones crashing out of the play-offs, the scenario was very much like May 2013 as mentioned above.

This is fellow fan Mick Fishman's jaundiced view of pre-season 2019, courtesy of 'Moaners Corner'....

"So Bobby's gone. No tears shed here. Okay, we reached the Trophy semi-final the season before last, but we led a charmed life through a series of home draws, and the first time we faced a decent side, bloody Brackley Town, we were well and truly mullered. Oh yes, and we crept into the last play-off spot

last season and went down heroically at Woking. A tense and emotional season's end, but the football served up for much of the season was about as much fun as a dose of haemorrhoids. No. Tears are absent in this corner.

So who will the Board appoint? Steve King is pretty obnoxious, but his track record is outstanding. Paul Hughes has done brilliantly well at both Kings Langley and Hayes & Yeading. Our old boy James Duncan is starting to look the part at Chesham United. Shame we missed out on Sammy Moore. Could we tempt Dev over from Maidenhead?

Ah, Dean Brennan and Stuart Maynard are announced as the new 'dynamic duo'. Distinctly underwhelmed. They did okay at Hemel but seemed to promise more than they delivered. Then to Billericay where they lasted barely one Tamplin meltdown, followed by a five-minute stint at Kingstonian. Suppose we shall have to give them at least until mid-August before making a judgement.

Looks like Brennan and Maynard will need to put together a squad almost from scratch. Rory & Co sensibly signed up Northy, Jerome, Greenie and Shepp for the new season but clearly were unable to tempt Freddie Grant, Godfrey Poku or Christian Smith (the successes from last season) to stay. Let's hope Connor Stevens will re-sign.

He did. A tiny glint of light. Now new signings are piling in and to misquote dear old Phil Sugden from the 1970s, "Twinkle, twinkle little Southern League stars". Kavan Cotter from Hemel and Jacob Cook from Kings Langley; Afolobi Coker from Ashford United; Michee Efete from Billericay; sick-note himself, Ryan Sellars, coming home from Oop North; and Nick Arnold

from Aldershot Town, a player with a decent pedigree but who has hardly played since the war due to injury. In midfield Connor Smith is back having meandered around the lower EFL leagues and non-league to no obvious effect. Another Ricay reject, Billy Clifford, and Michael Phillips, who had played for relegated Maidstone last season have signed as has Dennon Lewis, a reject from Love Island rather than Billericay. Another slightly odd signing is Jacob Mendy from Carshalton Athletic, apparently either a left back or left winger. The manager appears to have dipped his toe back into the murky waters at Hemel to bring in two fringe players, Sanchez Watt and Matty Saunders.

Replacing the "prolific" David Pratt up front we have youngster Dejon Noel-Williams, recently released by Oxford United, and Reece Beckles-Richards from Wingate & Finchley. One interesting signing is the return of Ross Lafayette after a 10 year absence. Very much proven at our level, but now 33 years of age so will he be turning out puffing a pipe and wearing his slippers?

With a few honourable exceptions this seems to be a squad made up of what are euphemistically called "squad players". Expectations from moaners' corner are pretty low. "

But what about us less sceptical fans? Privately, knowing that the budget was about to be significantly reduced, I doubted that anybody could repeat the ability of Gordon Bartlett (our manager from 1995-2016) to fashion a title-winning team from meagre rations. Bobby Wilkinson had probably the most cash to splash in Wealdstone history (apart from possibly the leeches who

helped us lose Lower Mead 30 years ago) yet even those riches yielded positions of eighth and seventh. Not exactly value for money.

But I had two pre-season programmes to produce in a few hours (pictured here, left and below right) after my day job while editor Mark Hyde was away on holiday, so it was time to turn up the Boris Johnson and apply positive spin. Should I start penning the purple prose, or drive the short distance from my Hertfordshire home to take in the friendly at Hitchin Town in early July? Having missed the first two games under the reign of Messrs Brennan & Maynard - a 4-1 win at Bracknell and a 2-2 draw with Hayes & Yeading - it would be remiss not to have a gander at these new Stones 'stars'.

Ninety minutes later I was driving home, all a-glow. Remove those quotation marks from 'stars' I thought. What were their names again?

In classic first-game-of-the-season style, there I was with 100-odd fellow Stones fans on Hitchin's quaint wooden terracing, peering at the Twitter feed and trying to put names to faces as the boys in blue tore the home side apart. Okay, we were only playing Hitchin, from a level below, but the home side were no mugs. They didn't want to be humiliated but for ten, 15 minutes at a time they couldn't get near the ball.

Billy Clifford? I can't say that his name even registered when we played Billericay last season but here he was drawing players in, playing

little one-twos, setting the wide players free and conducting the pace and flow of the game pretty much on his own.

And Dennon Lewis: I'll remember him. Quick-silver.

And Ross Lafayette: Hugely impressive. I could only remember snatches of him when he last played in a Stones shirt but that was ten years ago, and he was now the complete centre-forward. Yes, I know that was what they called Jonny Wright, Wright, Wright (and I loved Jonny Wright) five years ago when he left Workington for Ruislip but this No.9 was sharp and strong on the floor, devastating in the air and knew exactly what he was doing. He headed two goals at Hitchin and that was something no Wealdstone centre-forward had done in living memory.

We even had a stunning winning goal from Eric Lopes, a graduate from the Stones own academy to prove that we weren't going to have to look far for youthful talent.

Suddenly, there was no spin required. The fact that this one-sided game ended up only 3-2 in our favour was due to some lapses by an experimental defence - and I rushed home to bash out the sort of praise that only too often looks ridiculous when viewed nine months down the line. Happily I was vindicated.

Of course there were pre-season bumps along the road, as people like to say these

days. In fact it was a whole Transit van of sleeping policemen against Colchester United a few days later when our first pre-season run out at Grosvenor Vale ended in a 3-0 win for the League Two side. Dean & Stu had mixed-and-matched our squad that evening and the full-strength Us were good value for the win.

But the following Saturday, for me (never mind the schoolboyish excitement at Hitchin) confirmed the fact that our squad was looking ridiculously good. In my report of the 4-0 win over Watford's Under-23 side I didn't even mention the best player on the park: the midfield 'trillist' who was revealed as former Crystal Palace youth prospect Michael Phillips, who had been mysteriously released by Maidstone United despite being their player of the Year in the Conference National the previous season! This is what I wrote....

"Last Saturday saw the best performance yet by the re-shaped Stones (IMO) as we swamped Watford's under-23s 4-0... and it might even have been more as Reece Beckles Richards was denied a hat-trick by some great goalkeeping and last-ditch defending, and Danny Green, Dennon Lewis and Billy Clifford played keep-ball in the Hornets six yard box before somehow failing to find the net!

It was great to see the joy on players and fans' faces after such an emphatic win. And great news that Clifford signed forms after the match as his energy and close control kept us always one step ahead of the young Hornets.

Greenie certainly deserved his early goal (even if VAR might have made a case for two of our players unsighting the keeper) and it was his cross that led to Dejon Noel Williams heading his first for the club. Jacob Mendy Mendy got all bendy bendy with his deceptive cross



Main narrative by by Tim Parks (far right)

Additional words by Mick Fishman (far left)

Photographs by Adam Williams, Steve Foster, MontImage Media and Dan Finill

Champions!



Stones 4, Dartford 1: The perfect start to the season and a perfect headed goal from Connor Stevens to wrap things up at 3-1....



..... just look at the ball's trajectory as it soars past the Dartford keeper to hit top bins!



Connor celebrates with the crowd.. and so too, no doubt, does photographer Adam Williams!

that floated over the keeper for 3-0, and Lewis wrapped it up with a cool finish from Jacob Cook's clever pass."

Personally, that was it for me for a couple of weeks as we had a family holiday to Menorca to squeeze into the hectic work/football schedule. After completing the next 'double header' programme for the final two friendlies, against Wycombe's League One side and Brentford's second string, we jumped on a plane to the Balearics for 14 days' relaxation....

Except, of course, as you all know, it can never be relaxing when the National League season is kicking off in seven days' time. And there is only twitter (plus the magnificent Syl Allen's 'Stones Goals Live' video feed) to keep you close to the action.

Thus it was that I found myself interrupting a rather lovely meal poolside to check on how things were going in the Tuesday night Wycombe friendly. Aaargh.... no!

One-nil down after four minutes. Northy injured pre-match and 18-year-old Joe Ringer thrown the gloves. It was all unravelling. I went back to my lobster stew in a disagreeable mood.

An hour and a half later I was back on twitter again, fearing the worst... and suddenly things weren't so disagreeable. That early goal was the only one of the night - not so bad against Gareth Ainsworth's full-strength Wanderers - and young Joe Ringer had saved a late penalty (a double save in fact) from the experienced Jason McCarthy to keep it at 1-0.

Now, Joe was obviously even better at keeping out spot-kicks than Northy as he had managed to beat away one of my own just a few months earlier! The teenager stood in for Wales No.1 when my old Sunday team (SFC Wealdstone) staged a 40-year reunion and penalty shoot-out after we'd sponsored the Hemel Hempstead game at the end of the 2018-19

season. Some of the gloss was taken off the occasion when Northy was pulled out of the firing line as he was needed for a minor play-off game at Bath City three days later.

It was satisfying to hear that Joe could not only save feeble pens from dodderly old fools like me, but a proper pro like Wycombe's McCarthy who has made 200-odd league appearances.

Some consolation as the lobster stew wreaked its havoc later that night...

And so to the final pre-season warm-up game. As every boss worth his salt will tell you, this is the game when you play your strongest side; fine-tune the playing system that will be employed during the season; get the crowd excited at the prospect of a successful season and generally try to avoid being left with egg on your face.

But was this going to end up mango-shaped? We were taking on the highly-regarded Brentford 'B' side - formed when the Championship club chose to scrap its youth academy four years ago and instead form a 2nd XI made up of talented teenagers plucked from 'undervalued' countries like Iceland, Denmark and Finland, plus young recruits from Manchester City, Brighton, Chelsea and Celtic. It has been a conspicuous success - and the previous

season we were comprehensively beaten 2-0 by the Bees' Bs in the Middlesex Senior Cup. Playing for Brentford that night was 19-year-old midfielder Kolbeinn Finnsson, who made his full international debut for Iceland a month later... while two Finnish youth internationals in that side later played for the Bees first team.

This was daunting. And we were still missing Northy, whose injury wasn't responding to treatment. Up stepped Joe again, with 3rd choice keeper Dylan Paterson again left on the bench..

but I needn't have worried. The incoming twitter feed (as I nervously alternated between snorkelling and sunbathing) told a story of an authoritative Stones performance. Danny Green and Dennon Lewis were the providers and Ross Lafayette (2) the goalscorer as we chalked up a 2-0 win over very decent opposition.

A long week awaited me, still on holiday, just seven days away from the kick-off to the new Vanarama National League (South) season.

MATCHDAY ONE: SAT AUG 3 DARTFORD (H) WON 4-1

Ever since I was a small boy, I've LOVED the first game of the season. Even if your team is pants, everyone is level on the morning of the first game. You can dream. Maybe for just one day, but you can dream.

It's a bit trickier when you're 1,022 miles away. Yes, I was still in Twitterland and trying to feign an interest in the poolside conversations

while peering at a smartphone screen and wishing I was among the 930 crowd at the Vale (the biggest opening-day attendance since 1974, I'm guessing?) to roar us to victory against Dartford.

But that was definitely not a given. The Darts were one of the three teams whose dominoes fell in the right direction to allow us to sneak into the play-offs at the end of 2018-19. They were in the top seven all season - apart from at 4.50pm on the last day when they found themselves tenth.

That was an extraordinarily unlucky story, but the Darts are a proper, well-supported club with the resources and the players to make life very difficult for us. Especially when you don't have an experienced goalkeeper!

Those few days leading up to The Big Kick-Off were sweaty ones for this holidaymaking dad of five. Not just because of the 30-degree Menorcan temperatures, but because the Stones' new management team seemed content to be starting the new NLS season with

a 'keeper who was younger than four of my daughters! (And yes, I know that's not too hard).

But how could we have doubted Deano and Stu? Cometh the hour, cometh the big man. A chance scouting trip by Dean Brennan to watch Norwich's reserve side the previous season (when he wasn't even our manager) turned up trumps. City were persuaded on the eve of the Dartford game to send their outstanding third-choice keeper, 21 year-old Aston Oxborough on a four-month-long loan to Grosvenor Vale.

And at 6ft 5ins, the giant Norfolkian drew quite a few ooohs and aaahs (I am told) as he trotted out of the Grosvenor Vale tunnel for the first time.

But back in Fornells, Menorca, I was trepidatious. Would he be any good? He had barely been introduced to our back four - how would they communicate?

At 3.09, Ruislip time, my Twitter alert went off. Oh my goodness. Surely not one down?

No! One-up! Penalty from Lafayette! It sounded like a soft decision by the referee, Robert Massey-Ellis, as Michael Efete tumbled over the leg of Darts defender Jordan Wynter, but nobody in the Bulla Stand (sorry, Holywell Skip Hire stand) was at all fussed. A great start. It all went a bit quiet for a while... and then suddenly the Stones Fans twitter was alive with talk of saves by the visiting keeper Mark Smith. Greenie denied. Nick Arnold denied. Sanchez Watt denied. And then Dennon Lewis's shot hitting Lafayette on the bum and being deflected wide...

But you know that sinking feeling when you're making chances but not scoring? Yep, that feeling that always precedes the opposition scoring? Well, that was exactly what happened, just as I was topping up my margarita, poolside.

3.46pm, Ruislip time, first half injury time, Josh Hill has equalised. A kick in the nuts. Josh Hill, who was released by Bobby Wilkinson two years earlier. Josh Hill, never the fastest centre-half, but one who ALWAYS plays well against us.

"Where was the marking? Another bloody dead ball, header from a corner, conceded. Why haven't we learned?" screamed the Twitterati and the sinking feeling intensified.

The omens weren't good: we score far more goals kicking down the slope, towards the Bulla/Holywell Stand, and now we'd not only lost that advantage but we'd been pegged back at 1-1. "Who's Josh Hill?" asked my wife, suddenly appearing at my elbow with her own long, cool drink and wondering why I was muttering, with invective, about some non-League No.5 a thousand miles away.

"Good question" I said, putting my phone away and vowing not to look until full time.

Scene Two: Poolside bar. Time: 4.40pm Ruislip time, 5.40pm Menorca time. Enter 11-year-old girl from offstage right, in swimsuit, clutching dad's phone.

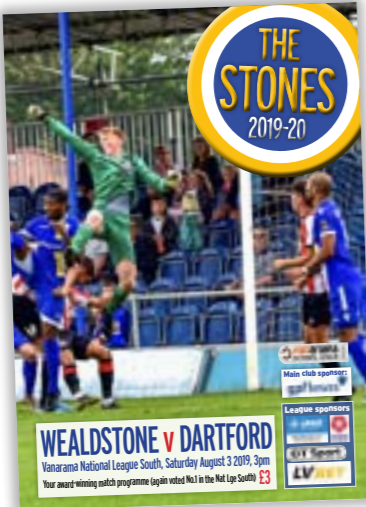
"There's lots of activity on the Wealdstone Twitter, dad" she says.

"Go on then, give me the bad news" I say, resigned to opening-day defeat at the hands of a resurgent Dartford. "No, you'll only blame me if they lose" she says (can't think when that's happened before). Then... "Actually I think there's been lots of goals" she says, shielding the screen from the late afternoon sun. "It's, like, 3-1 to Wealdstone" she says and I prepare to leap up and hug her.

"Oh no, that's wrong" she says and I'm in the pit of despair again. "No, it's actually FOUR-ONE to Wealdstone cos Lacazette has scored again".

Suddenly I was in dreamland. I could even excuse her mixing up her Arsenal and Wealdstone players and anyway, the way Ross had started the season I definitely wouldn't swap him for the Emirates version.

So I gave Eve a big kiss, took back my phone and threw myself onto a sun-lounger to lap up the details of a truly fantastic afternoon. Even if I had absented myself for most of it.



The picture that sums up the joy of a win on opening day. Darts' own goal to give Stones the lead again at 2-1 and the home crowd

Ben Greenhalgh has unwittingly put through his bellows its relief Picture: Adam Williams

Champions!



Braintree 0 Stones 4: Another great sequence of Atticman pictures - a masterclass from Danny Green as he picks up Ross Lafayette's backheel into the box and waltzes around home keeper Michael Johnson...



Johnson is nonplussed as Greenie takes a touch and calmly and happily...



slips the ball into the Braintree net for 2-0!



A lovely picture to end the day as family man Dan is congratulated by his children... and a delighted Billy Clifford (right)

MATCHDAY TWO: TUES AUG 6 DULWICH (A) LOST 0-1

I sense that your interest in my Menorcan holiday may be waning, dear reader. And because I was still in the Balearics when the team and fans decamped to South London to take on Dulwich three days later, I instead pass you over to my compadre, **MICHAEL FISHMAN**. He is much better organised than me, summer break-wise, and he was indeed at Champion Hill along with some 250 other blue & white bedecked Stones in the 1,500 crowd. "We are being pleasantly surprised" said Mick that evening. "The team seems to be employing a short-pass-and move style of football, as un-Bobbyish as you could get. I found myself looking forward to the league campaign kicking off. That in itself is an odd feeling. And then, with a terrific display of controlled, attacking football, to run out 4-1 winners against Dartford was really uplifting. In Moaners' Corner there is some shaking of heads in disbelief. "But then - the trip to Dulwich and phew! the monkey is off our backs. The long unbeaten run of one game has gone with a 1-0 defeat. A frustrating evening because the team played some scintillating football. Particularly galling was that Jeff Monakana (snapped up by Dulwich three months earlier) had one of his infrequent better days and looked dangerous throughout. This defeat raises the question of whether the right players have been signed.

Our team is full of relatively young, skilful lads who revel in playing one touch football, but pitched against teams like Dulwich, populated by big, powerful, physical players, they have come up just short." Back in Menorca, climbing into my winceyette pyjamas (I'm joking; it was now 30 degrees at night and we had cleverly hired an apartment without air conditioning) I had been monitoring Twitter again and resigned myself to defeat once Richard Orlu had netted Dulwich's early goal from a Monakana set-piece. One win, one defeat. It was going to be one of those seasons again, I thought. But we seemed to be playing a brand of football that would at least make it palatable. I comforted myself with the prospect of seeing my first competitive game of the Brennan/Maynard era at unlovely Braintree once our plane had touched down on Saturday morning...

MATCHDAY 3: SAT AUG 10 BRAINTREE (A) WON 4-0

To many of us, Braintree is only a very short distance behind Concord Rangers as the least favourite away venue. Poor crowds; a stadium mainly constructed from shipping containers (it seems); plus it's in Essex. As you can see from the pictures above, there wasn't a huge away contingent but for those at Cressing Road, just seven days into the season, came the first real signs that the 2019-20 campaign could be something special. There was only one change from the line-up at Dulwich but it was a crucial one: Dennon Lewis coming in for Sanchez Watt. Now Sanchez is a very decent footballer but Dennon possesses that deadly asset: Pace. And against Braintree's comparatively leaden-footed defence it was like watching Usain Bolt take part in the dad's race at sports day. This was Mick's verdict...

"The frustration of losing to Dulwich was instantly forgotten by a performance of such quality that it simply blew away the opposition. The goals were cracking strikes from Billy Clifford and Jacob Mendy; a Greenie delight in which he dumped the home keeper on his arse before stroking the ball home; and an unfortunate own goal from The Iron's Ollie Saunders. In common with all Wealdstone matches, I always like to offer some "constructive criticism" of individual or collective displays, but for this match I simply couldn't as the performance was faultless."

For once, I was there alongside Mick and couldn't disagree. Pace, power and purpose. Give 'p's a chance!

MATCHDAY 4: TUES AUG 13 CHIPPENHAM (H) WON 1-0

Okay, now it was time for the Stones to prove that they had consistency in their locker. This game, under the lights

against a lively Chippenham side featuring two of our ex 'stars' (striker David Pratt and wing back Rhys Tyler) had 'banana skin' written all over it. It was a bit of mantra last season that if we scored first we had a good chance of winning. But concede first, and the opposition would shut up shop and we didn't always have the guile or technique to respond.

Trouble is, we were a bit of a blunt instrument under Bobby and often didn't look like scoring... especially at home where the Route One approach was easy to defend. But tonight: bingo! We were ahead within the first five minutes and the goal was testament to the way our midfielders were now finding the energy to get up with and beyond the strikers.

Danny Green wriggled past two defenders and chipped the ball to the far post where Billy Clifford, of all people, threw himself forward to head it past keeper Will Puddy. Here was the mid-field anchor, free from the usual Wealdstone shackles, finding space six yards out to score!

To be fair, we had Connor Smith and Michael Phillips in tandem in midfield so Billy had unexpected licence to roam. Connor was beginning to show the mature talent he had hinted at when on loan at the Vale from Watford's youth team

eight years ago, and struck the post with a venomous shot as we overran 'Chippis' in that first half. Michael Phillips was simply imperious... but I don't think any of us realised quite how good he was until the next game (another cunningly placed banana) at much-fancied Hemel. A tough nut to crack.

MATCHDAY 5: SAT AUG 17 HEMEL H'TEAD (A) WON 3-0

Time to let Mick have his say. Can't keep a good man down, or even a very tall one, and Mr Fishman hit the nail on the



WEALDSTONE v CHIPPENHAM
Vanarama National League South, Tuesday August 13 2019, 7.45pm
Your award-winning match programme (again voted No.1 in the Nat. Lge South) £3

head when he peered over his glasses, later that afternoon as we tripped happily away from Vauxhall Road with three points in our collective pocket, and delivered his verdict. "Tough? We murdered 'em. That Sammy Moore (the new Hemel boss) might have cherry-picked the best players to bring with him from Concord Rangers, but we were a different class."

Michael Phillips delivered a midfield masterclass, scoring one goal and making another for Dennon Lewis, while Jacob Mendy, on as a substitute, completed the scoring with a beautifully judged header. Hemel put about the story that they were shorn of so many players on the day they were fielding a team made up of players dragged from the local recreation ground. Bah! There were a few absences from the squad, but this was still a strong Hemel side. And we annihilated them 3-0 on their own pitch! Moaners Corner diehards are always willing to latch on to any negatives they can find, said Mick, but even they were suspiciously quiet as the Stones slid surreptitiously into top place in the league table.... for the first time ever!

MATCHDAY 6: SAT AUG 24 HUNGERFORD (H) WON 3-1

Now, this was a game I'd been looking forward to for weeks. And an 8-year-old of my acquaintance had been looking forward to it even longer... since Chelmsford away last April.

My grandson George had seen his first Stones game then (as he lives out in Essex in nearby Bishops Cleeve) but he was immediately confused by the solicitous remarks of every Wealdstone fan I introduced him to.

"Why did you bring him today, Tim?" people asked. "This is a dead rubber. And we'll get stuffed". "Why oh why? You'll put him off football for life, let along Wealdstone" were some of the kinder comments.

If you recall, that match did indeed seem to have nothing at all riding on it. Unless we won by a few goals, and then

beat Hemel in our final game with every other result falling in our favour Well, as we all know, that's pretty much how it happened. And George happily knew it all along as he celebrated three magnificent goals at the Melbourne Stadium, which propelled us along an unlikely path towards the play-offs.

I promised him then that a) I'd buy him a proper replica shirt, and b) sort him out as a mascot for a game early the next season. And so George was properly excited to find out that all this was coming true on August 27 against mighty Hungerford.

Even better, this match was, almost to the day, the 50th anniversary of my first Stones game (0-1 at Lower Mead v Sutton United, if you're interested). And even, even better was seeing the look on George's face - all pride and rapt concentration - as he held skipper Jerome Okimo's hand and led the team out of the tunnel. And then took some penalties against Jonathan North. And scored one!

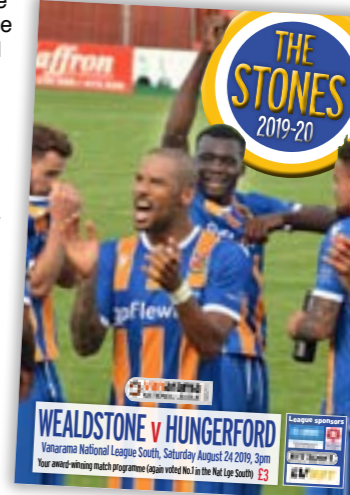
But it was also an eye-opener for me, as I wandered around the pitch before kickoff with my wide-eyed grandson, to see how genuinely interested the players were in him, and keen to chat about the game and the way things were going. And you could see why they rave about the playing surface as it is an absolute carpet. Like George, I was a bit disappointed to have to leave the pitch but it was a relief to shelter from the 30 degree heat and watch, spell-bound, as the boys in blue wove another afternoon of magical football.

I tried to see the game through his eyes. My first games, in the late 60s, were in the Isthmian League and the proximity to the pitch, close enough

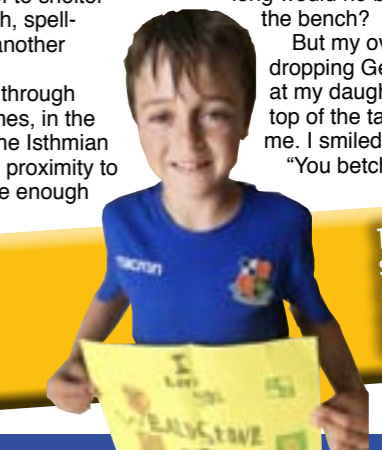
to hear the grunts and the expletives (from both players and fans) and the raw drama was enough to draw me to Lower Mead in preference to Stamford Bridge, Vicarage Road, White Hart Lane or any of the 'bigger' clubs I was taken to.

George was transfixed. The football was beautiful. A delicious Danny Green nutmeg in the first half saw him feed Jacob Mendy Mendy with his second touch on the edge of the box - and a crackerjack of a left footer arrowed its way past keeper Adam Siveter and just inside the post, right in front of where we stood. The Bulla/Holywell Skips stand exploded into noise behind us and the look in George's eyes said it all. Into the second half and (after Oxborough's rare mistake gifted Hungerford a surprise leveller) Dennon Lewis provided another memorable moment as he took Ross Lafayette's pass smoothly into his stride and rifled it past the shell-shocked Siveter.

Temperatures in the Gun Turret stand were becoming uncomfortable - heaven knows how the players were continuing to play at high tempo - and substitute Phil Roberts set up Super Ross for a clinically-taken third. I felt a bit sorry for Roberts, clearly a quality striker who had registered a goal every two games at his previous clubs Dartford, Braintree and Hemel as he had the impossible task of displacing the on-fire Lafayette and Lewis. How long would he be happy just sitting on the bench? But my over-riding memory was dropping George, still buzzing, back at my daughter's house. "Are we still top of the table, Granddad?" he asked me. I smiled at the possessive 'we'. "You betcha" I replied.



WEALDSTONE v HUNGERFORD
Vanarama National League South, Saturday August 24 2019, 3pm
Your award-winning match programme (again voted No.1 in the Nat. Lge South) £3



That's my boy! Grandson George shows his love before the game and (far left) leads the team out as a proud mascot against Hungerford

Champions!



**MATCHDAY 7: MON AUG 26
WEYMOUTH (A) WON 4-3**

Top of the table and heading down to the Dorset coast to play Weymouth on a baking hot August Bank Holiday Monday afternoon. For a football fan it doesn't get much better than that!

What about winning a seven-goal thriller with the decisive goal coming in the final minutes? And your star striker scoring the perfect hat trick (left foot, right foot, header)?

Well, all these dreams came true as Stones faced the toughest test of our title credentials against the high-flying Terras, who were riding the crest of a promotion wave and making a strong bid to get back to where they were in the mid-noughties. Remember how Steve Claridge-inspired Weymouth had gatecrashed the Conference National and almost made it into the Football League? Overspending and back-stabbing had seen their downfall but this present reincarnation had bounced back into the Vanarama National League South, playing a brand of football that guaranteed a 1,500 crowd for this early clash of the table-toppers.

It seemed every one of the 350 Stones fans who had made the similar trip to Torquay last season were on the mid-morning train to Dorset. And every one was fretting (at least, the sober ones) when problems on the tracks meant the train decided to go the pretty way through the New Forest, rather than the direct route via Southampton. It's all very well seeing ponies and trees through the train window, but we would be missing our pre-match fish & chips on the seafront at this rate!

But we made it. In fact, with the station right in the middle of town by the seafront, we had time for the essential F & C before jumping in a cab for WFC. Everybody seemed to have the same idea... it was a gorgeous day by the seaside, with the beach rammed, but people were queuing by the taxi office to make the two mile journey to the Bob Lucas stadium.

This had the feel of a proper game and, in hindsight, was the first of a whole reel of matches watched by four-figure crowds as our season really took off. Who could have been present at this show-stopper and not wanted to see the Stones again?

Let's ask Michael I Fishman for his view...

"For us old gits it had the feeling of the 70s and 80s, with two serious clubs going toe to toe in front of a large, loud crowd. The Terras deservedly took the lead via Yemi Obudabe before the Stones, in a wonderful display of attacking football, came back to move into a 3-1 lead. A brilliant ball from Billy Clifford whipped into the net by Dennon Lewis... then a header from Ross to stun the home end. Then Ross reacted first to a half chance to bang in his left-footer and send the away end into delirium. A strong shout for a penalty that would have made it 4-1 was dismissed by the referee who rubbed salt



It's the Ross Lafayette show at Weymouth as he scores left-footed (above) to make it 3-1 having headed in earlier for 2-1; and then pokes in right-footed (below left) and celebrates the late winner!

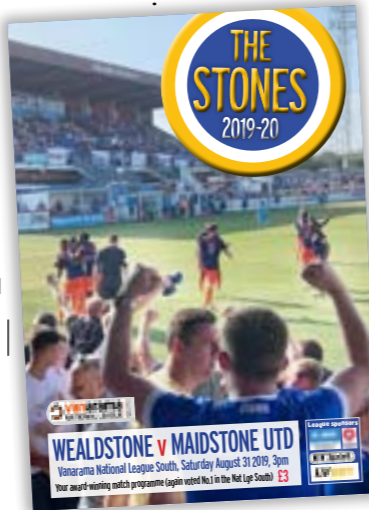


into the wounds by booking Ross for diving. The big man knows all the tricks, but this really didn't look like a dive. Unfortunately Terra's manager Mark Molesley clearly knows his stuff and an inspired substitution saw him introduce midfielder Cameron Murray to the fray. The diminutive little bugger took the game by the scruff of its neck and created the home side's second goal, scored by Abdulai Baggie, and an equaliser from the penalty spot. Both teams were now straining for the winner which the Stones scored a minute from time, when Ross got in front of defenders to turn in a near post cross from Dennon Lewis following his wonderful inter-change of passes with Billy Clifford. The icing on the cake (for me, anyway) was Nick Arnold wasting an opponent on the half way line as the home player was breaking away to most likely score an equaliser. Nick received just a booking. Cynical and quite brilliant and one of the top moments of the season."

I left the ground with a feeling I'd probably not experienced for 35 years. Pride, exhilaration and sheer excitement at what the following eight months would bring. Soon brought down to earth, of course, by the incompetence of Southern Railways who managed to

break the air conditioning on our train out of Weymouth. A 45 minute wait in 40 degree heat. 'No problem at all' said our companion, the equable Stephen Paull. Or something like that.

**MATCHDAY 8: SAT AUG 31
MAIDSTONE UTD (H) WON 2-1**



Well, they don't get any easier, do they?

That was the gist of the pre-match conversation five days later as Maidstone United rolled into town - relegated from the Vanarama National but still a full-time set-up with expectations of yo-yoing straight back up.

Now, like Weymouth, Maidstone are a 'proper' club with real history and tradition... but I cooled on them a few years ago as their fans began to show signs of entitlement. Crowds of 3,000 had fuelled a surge into

the National division, two impressive new stands to go with their 3G pitch and big expectations. On the way, they completed the double over Gordon Bartlett's side yet some members of their Fans Forum coveted our winger Shaun Lucien. "Well why don't we sign him?" they said. "He would jump at the chance to play for a decent club".

That sort of attitude stank. And it's not easily

forgotten. 'Real Stones' supporters couldn't wait to put the 'Plastic Stones' in their place and this was our big chance.

The first Grosvenor Vale crowd of over 1,000 weren't disappointed as we took a 2-0 lead into the break and might have had six or seven by the 86th minute - when Dan Wishart, Maidstone's one decent player, pulled a goal back from close range.

Clifford had scored straight from a corner, and then Mendy Mendy with another whizz-bang effort from 18 yards, and the difference in quality was obvious even to the Maidstone fans who I found myself talking to as I left the ground en route to Ruislip Station. "Your team are very good", they said simply. "Our manager John Still thought we'd bounce straight back but there are some very decent teams in this division. We haven't got a hope if we play like that".

A bit of humility at last and, to be fair, Maidstone have a lot to be humble about. I set my mind to thinking about the penultimate game of the season, when we'd be travelling to their Gallagher Stadium and hoping to clinch the title in front of a huge, antagonistic crowd. Here's hoping!

**MATCHDAY 9: TUES SEP 3
ST ALBANS CITY (A) WON 3-2**

When it comes to nemesises (or nemesii?) our near neighbours St Albans are right up there. Up until February 2015, we hadn't beaten them in a league match for 46 years!

If you read my 'Rewind' columns in the

Stones programme you'll be aware that my regard for the Saints is barely higher than for Maidstone.... even though I live just up the road from their ground. As a result, any sort of victory over the Clarence Park side is to be savoured - as this one definitely was.

After six successive wins, the Stones were stepping out onto the pitch with a mantle of invincibility and it was good to see the emergence of a devastating 'Plan B' when the opposition managed to stop Messrs Clifford, Green, Lewis and Phillips from playing through them.

The simple tactic of a long, arrowed 40-yard ball from Jerome Okimo in central defence onto the chest of Lafayette, and his lay-off rifled into the net by Jacob Mendy Mendy proved too much for Maidstone on the Saturday - and now, three days later, an identical move saw Mendy Mendy crash an identical shot past home keeper Dean Snedker to give us the lead.

Albert Adu booted in a surprise leveller for St Albans before the break but a moment of genius from Danny Green tipped the balance back in our favour. It was seemingly effortless as he looked up and swept a stunning 35-yarder over the stranded Snedker for 2-1. A Lafayette penalty made it 3-1 and it was game over - although Rhys Murrell-Williamson netted a very late consolation. I again found myself wandering out of the ground amongst opposition supporters, bemoaning their team's lack of ability and the over-priced ticketing (£18 for adults, the highest in the division).

"Highest prices and the worst team - what's not to like?" said one, heavy on the irony. Did I have any words of comfort? Certainly not.

**MATCHDAY 10: SAT SEP 7
OXFORD CITY (H) WON 1-0**

Seven points clear! That was the faintly ridiculous outcome at 4.50pm after this hard-fought and thrilling late-goal win over Oxford City. Weeks come and go, and the Stones seem to find a way to pick up maximum points - this time when, for once, a stalemate seemed certain.

It was a story of two goalkeepers: City's Harry Isted (who was on loan from Luton Town and who would, of course, later join us on loan when Aston Oxborough was injured) and the Ox, who produced one of the best saves I've EVER seen to keep the scores level at half time. How he twisted his 6ft 5in frame in the air and clawed Josh Ashby's brilliant 25-yard free kick over the crossbar was nothing short of miraculous.

And Isted's display must have been the reason that Gaffer Deano went straight to his old club and asked to take the young keeper on loan when Oxborough broke his thumb a few months later... it was like watching a showreel as Isted plunged to his left, right, and all over the place for 83 minutes before finally tipping Danny Green's powerful header over the crossbar. It seemed he would never be beaten - but from the resulting corner Michee Efete nudged a soft header goalbound and as the full-back hesitated on the goalline (and goallie Harry



Save of the season? Aston gets across acrobatically to claw away this Oxford City freekick, somehow flipping the ball over the crossbar. Awesome!

hesitated expecting the No.2 to clear it) the ball plopped, almost apologetically, over the line. The crowd burst with relief as Michee cavorted back to the centre-circle, submerged under a sea of grateful team mates. As the old adage goes: It doesn't matter how you win it... just so long as you win it.

**MATCHDAY 11: SAT SEP 14
WELLING UTD (A) WON 2-1**

Let's go over to my co-commentator Mick the Fish for this trip to North Kent and our surprisingly happy hunting ground of Welling United. Since our promotion to the National League we've won three and drawn one of the four games at Park View Road - and often The Wings had gone into the game as pre-match favourites.

Not this time. But the Stones really weren't on their game.

"Is there a little bit of complacency setting in?" asked Mick afterwards. "To date we have looked a class apart from just about everyone, but today the first half largely belonged to United who played some very decent football. Fortunately they failed to capitalise on their excellent approach play and the Ox made a couple of very good saves to keep the game goalless at the break. The second half saw the Stones get a grip on proceedings and excellent goals from Michael Phillips and Dennon Lewis secured the points. Dennon's goal in particular was a sublime finish and worthy of a game much further up the football food chain - a wonderful ball by Billy Clifford played inside the Welling full back saw Dennon cruise in from the left touchline and curl a shot past the despairing dive of the home keeper. A small gaggle of home fans gathered nearby actually applauded the goal. Such magnanimous behaviour is quite alien to us."

Aston Oxborough also made one great one-on-one save from Wings' sub Aaron Cosgrave in the dying seconds to preserve



Usually, a day out by the seaside is spoiled by the football. Not so Weymouth! Pre-match fish & chips on the seafront, enjoyed by (from left) Messrs David Leigh, Tim Parks, Michael Fishman and Steve Paull were but an aperitif for the fun to come

Champions!



Pretty in pink: Keeper Beach is grounded as Ross Lafayette opens the scoring at Farnborough and (above) their ground really IS too big for them. Even Stones struggle to fill the away end



Pictures: Steve Foster and Adam Williams



Chelmsford keeper Pentney is beaten by Clifford's great freekick..



and skipper Okmo is buried after his late goal

daughter and two grandchildren. Last season, with just George, I got in as a £9 over-65 'senior' while George was free of charge. This time, Eve piped up "How much is it for us children, dad?" just as I was shepherding eight-year-old George and six-year-old Daisy through the cheap-and-cheerful gate.

"Er, three children and one senior please" I mumbled. The turnstile man still let me through as an oldie. I didn't know whether to be pleased or offended.

Anyway, back to the football. And you'll be pleased to hear that the kids enjoyed it - close to the action behind the goal in the first half, trying to shield their ears from the occasional ripe language, and then up in the main stand (with pocketfuls of sweets from the popular CCFC confectionery stall) to shelter from the rain after the break.

Danny Green converted a terrific bendy bendy cross from the impressive Nick Arnold to give us a 17th-minute lead, but we were up in the Gods with our sherbert dib-dabs when Billy Clifford provided the game's talking point mid-way through that second half.

Daisy had just dropped a Twix on the floor, and I was trying to persuade her that it was even tastier with a bit of a Woodbine wrapper stuck to it, when George pointed out that we had a free-kick within shooting distance.

"I don't think so George, unless we've just signed Roberto Carlos" I replied, peering up and spotting our ace midfielder carefully placing the ball 40 yards out.

Chelmsford barely bothered to erect a defensive wall. Keeper Carl Pentney was shouting instructions but they were so far away I doubt they heard him. Up in the stand, the other side of the running track, **WE** were almost as far away.

"Billy Clifford's taking it, Grandad" announced George and I was just about to commend him on his eyesight when 'Max' stepped up and comprehensively bent the ball up, down and over the wall, and just inside Pentney's left hand post. There was a moment's delay (maybe we were so far away that the sound took a second longer to travel) but suddenly the fans behind the goal were leaping up and down and shaking their umbrellas with joy as Billy slid on his knees in front of them in celebration.

Up in the stand, surrounded by grumpy old men in claret scarves and pipes, all was calm except for a small knot of four with their arms (and quite a lot of sherbert) in the air.

Not long after, Clifford eschewed a shot from a similar position, his cross picking out Connor Stevens who headed across for a jubilant Jerome Okimo to bundle in a clinching third goal.

"Do Wealdstone win every game, Grandad?" asked George as we were making our way back to the car. "Well, they seem to when you're watching" I replied, making a mental

our slender lead and chalk up a NINTH successive league win. Walking back to Welling station afterwards, with the euphoria of following the most successful team in English football (except for perhaps Liverpool) was a slightly surreal experience for the dozens of Stones fans more used to a dismal start to the season followed by a steady climb to safety.

MATCHDAY 12: SAT SEP 21 FARNBOROUGH (A) FA CUP 2ND QUAL RD WON 5-0

When we were drawn away to Farnborough for our first FA Cup adventure of the season, I must admit I was a bit trepidatious. I still recall our FA Trophy trip there in 2009 when Gordon Bartlett's FA Cup heroes (we'd only just lost 3-2 to Rotherham the week before) were spanked 3-0 by big-budget Borough, crowing about the money they were spending and the big stadium they were building.

It was humiliating. But we never forget - the Stones Old Moaners reserve a particular dislike for boom-and-bust clubs. Once Farnborough's cash had dissipated and the bubble burst (on more than one occasion) it left a string of creditors very much out of pocket, but at least they were now attempting to live within their means and naturally were not enjoying much success on the pitch. It was thus deeply satisfying to witness a hugely one-sided game which the Stones won at a canter... indeed a double digit win could easily have resulted had we not been so profligate in front of goal.

Home keeper Liam Beach, resplendent in a pink and white candy-striped kit that must have had Northy looking on enviously from the dug-out, kept us out almost single handed in the first half before Lafayette dumped the keeper on the floor like a, er Beached whale, and scrambled in the first. Then Lewis hit a screamer for 2-0, Super Ross headed in a third and it was all over by the break.

The crowd could relax - indeed, the team could relax - and enjoy the second half in which Mendy Mendy and Sanchez Watt (his first for the club) rounded off the scoring and we could sit back in the cavernous stand and anticipate the following week's visit of title rivals Havant & Waterlooville.

That would be a **REAL** game....

MATCHDAY 13: SAT SEP 28 HAVANT & W (H) LOST 1-4

And so: the acid test. Havant & Waterlooville were in town. Relegated the previous season from the National League top division, they had remained full-time and recruited the vastly experienced Paul Doswell from Sutton United as manager. "Dos" had effectively put together a squad made up of players from the higher division and were quite rightly seen to be title favourites. Was this the point when reality struck?

For the first 15 minutes it didn't look like it. The Stones flew into the visitors from the start and had the Hawks defending desperately. Within 5 minutes Jerome Okimo had the ball in the net but was flagged for offside. It looked the correct decision at the time, but subsequent film of the match showed him to have been onside. Ross Lafayette then scored with a cracking header at which point we were well in control.

But the match was turned upside-down by a rare error from The Ox who had a clearance charged down by the opportunistic Jonah Ayunga - the ball rebounding into the empty net. It reminded me of Rotherham's opening, gut-wrenching goal 11 years ago (mentioned left) as Adam Le Fondre did something similar to Sean Thomas. And even before the visitors went ahead, slicing through the Stones defence from a breakaway, their keeper Ross Warner pulled off a fantastic save to deny Lafayette his second goal. The 2nd half saw Havant manage the game extremely well as they added two further goals to inflict a potentially damaging 4-1 defeat, the first at home of the season.

Yet oddly we didn't feel as deflated as we might have done. Yes, Havant are a good side with good players. Yes, they managed the game very well once they had sneaked in front. Yes, we piled forward naively at times. But at critical points of the game we failed to get the "rub of the green". Doswell said as much in his post-match interview. We would have liked to have ratcheted up our moaning at the team's deficiencies, but we couldn't bring

ourselves to do so. A bit disappointing in that sense!

One issue that had not been resolved was the left back berth. Ryan Sellars unfortunately had suffered a long term injury so Michee Efete, a right back, had been filling in - pretty successfully. Manager Brennan acted and brought in George McLennan from Aldershot to fill the left back position. McLennan made a brief appearance off the bench at Farnborough, but his contribution was brutally ended in the home game against Havant (after a couple of impressive runs) where he was the subject of a horrible challenge from the away side's Alfie Rutherford that resulted in his suffering a broken ankle. It put the unfortunate left back out of action for the rest of the season.

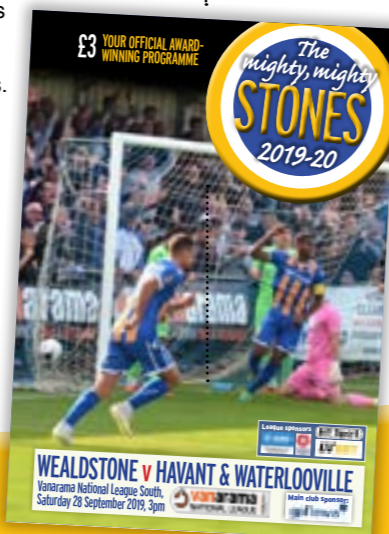
There are disappointingly few players in the modern game for whom fans can work up a healthy dislike, but Alfie has instantly found himself a place in that pantheon of hate figures that Stones fans have kept, fastidiously, for decades.

MATCHDAY 14: SAT OCT 5 BRISTOL MANOR FARM (A) FA CUP 3RD QUAL RD DREW 0-0

Whoever coined the phrase 'The magic of the Cup' must be living very handsomely off the royalties - and very well deserved it is too. For the FA Cup **IS** magical for non-League clubs. Yes, it's a pain in the a**** for your Big Time Charlie clubs, but we're not remotely interested in them are we?

Probably the only disappointing aspect of moving up the non-League food chain is that we don't enter the FA Cup at the very early stages any longer. And more's the pity. For there are few things lovelier than a trip to face a team with little more than a rope around a pitch, a pitch-side fete and bunting as you arrive in the car park... witness Brockenhurst a few years ago.

Well, all this was re-enacted when our name came out of the hat against the Southern League Division One South club on the banks of



Eve (on the left), Daisy and George are ringed as they bang on the hoardings to celebrate the opening goal at Chelmsford. Who says they didn't get excited?

Champions!

The mighty, mighty
STONES



Main men: Clifford and Green dominated the game at Maidenhead, but we didn't win



Christ normally saves, but this time he scores - an own goal for Tonbridge - and the crowd go wild

Pictures: Montage Media and Adam Williams



Dejon Noel-Williams (No.16) sticks the ball in the Tonbridge net for 3-1 and it's all over....



... bar the drinking. The Lyons brothers get a rainwater top-up!

note to get him along to the FA Cup game at Maidenhead the next week.

We would need all the help we could get.

MATCHDAY 16: SAT OCT 19 MAIDENHEAD (A) FA CUP 4TH QUAL RD DREW 1-1



In the final qualifying round of the FA Cup you need a bit of luck. With the draw, mainly.

What you really **DON'T** want is an away tie at a club in a higher division... but, of course, this is what we were handed with this trip down the road to National League side Maidenhead United. What it would provide, though, is a clue to how the Stones would measure up against a big, strong NL outfit... and for 85 minutes we measured up very well indeed.

Playing against three of our ex-stars (ex-skipper Alan Massey, right wing back Ryheem Sheckleford and left-back Freddie Grant) we might have been at least a goal to the good before Ross Lafayette fired Stones ahead early in the second half. Jerome Okimo was particularly unlucky, heading against the post and the rebound somehow evading Connor Stevens, following up, as we generally gave the Magpies the runaround.

But 1-0 is not much of a cushion. In fact it's barely an IKEA seat covering, and when Maidenhead mounted their predictable late barrage of high, Route One balls into our box we began to look ever so slightly vulnerable. Finally, a dangerous freekick found the powerful (and offside, it later transpired) Joe Ellul lurking at the back post to head across the six yard box to a possee of black & white striped strikers. But whereas Maidenhead had the luck with the rebounds earlier, we didn't - the ball cannoned off The Ox in goal, struck Ryan Upward on the leg and ricocheted into the net.

So we departed York Road with a Tuesday night replay, but with a bitter taste in the mouth because a) We should have won; b) the crowd segregation was laughable, penning our fans

next to the 'orrible teenage Maidenhead contingent so everyone was at the same end; and c) the crowd was given as under 900 (sharing gate receipts) when every Magpies fan I spoke to reckoned it was at least the same as their league average (1,500). Oh, plus our programme team was now lumbered with producing another on-the-hoof issue for the replay, as we had to do for the Bristol Manor Farm game. Another late night at work for me on Sunday then.....

MATCHDAY 17: TUES OCT 22 MAIDENHEAD (H) FA CUP 4TH Q REPLAY LOST 0-2

Well we got the programme out, you'll be glad to hear (pictured below) and all the effort would be worth it if we won. At least, that's the normal train of thought, but a lot of the excitement of the FA Cup (for me, anyway) is hearing the draw for the next round.

In the olden days, yawn yawn, it would be waiting for the Evening Standard or Evening News on a Monday evening to give the glorious or dread news. Or the club 'Stonesline' service in later years. Or, these days, hearing it live on TALKSport.

The Stones' most famous, and heartwrenching, draw anecdote was when we drew at Harlow Town in the 4th Qual Round in November 1980... and found out the winners were to play top-of-Div-3 Charlton Athletic at home in the First Round. The Harrow Observer reporter spent the whole of that Monday chasing around for quotes from Charlton manage-

ment, procuring team pictures and writing the big match preview. And then, of course, we lost the replay that evening 1-0, devastating the journalist (me, if you hadn't guessed) who had been salivating about facing the Div Three leaders at Lower Mead.

This time, the winners of Wealdstone v Maidenhead would face... Rotherham United

(League One) at home. And, to be honest, I didn't know what think. We'd played the South Yorkshire side at the Vale in the First Round 11 years ago and it was a pulsating, brilliant and eventually frustrating tie as we were squeezed out 3-2.

Why couldn't we be drawn against somebody different? In the 1970s and 80s, the Stones most prolific years in terms of FA Cup appearances in the First, Second and Third rounds, we played eight matches against league teams... and three of those were against Reading. On the third occasion (1985) they were top of Div Three after something like fifteen successive wins. How could we have been so unlucky as to draw them **AGAIN?**

Anyway, enough of the history lesson. If we got past Maidenhead - and we should have done so three days earlier - Rotherham it was. If the fans were nonplussed by the draw (and one of the guys, no names, was desperate for a trip to Sunderland) the players were also, it seemed, similarly underwhelmed if the performance was anything to go by.

We simply lacked the intensity of the first game. Maidenhead looked more focussed and took a 15th minute lead through Josh Kelly, worked really hard and closed down Clifford and Green far more effectively than they had on Saturday. The wily old warhorse Alan Devonshire had done his homework - but he can't have expected the added bonus awarded by referee Paul Howard moments from half time.

Our left-back Jacob Mendy Mendy had an awkwardly high, bouncing ball to deal with on the edge of his own box, under pressure from the muscular Remy Clerima, but appeared to have dealt with the danger as he headed the ball back to The Ox.

But Mr Howard decided that Jacob had made contact with the unprotesting Clerima as he headed the ball safely back... and dumbfounded everybody in the ground by sending off the Stones No.3.

Now, I've watched the incident back many, many times. And I'm sure our management team has also watched it many, many times. And I'm still convinced that - at the absolute worst case scenario - the two players have collided at the same time. But hey, the unsighted ref knew best.

The game was spoiled, Josh Kelly made it 2-0 with a well-taken goal and the dreams of Rotherham were over.

MATCHDAY 18 SAT OCT 26 TONBRIDGE (H) WON 3-1

The first one who mentions 'concentrating on the league' buys the first round. That was the talk in the bar pre-match as we tried to bite back the disappointment of the FA Cup exit... not least the financial implications. The club pocketed £18,000 by winning two rounds, but would have doubled that by beating Maidenhead. Plus the thought of a money-spinning full house at The Vale for the First Round game, with £36,000 prize money also at stake.

But, silver linings and all that. The bigger picture is promotion, and we went into this game against 19th-placed Tonbridge Angels five points clear of Hemel Hempstead at the top.

At 4.50pm that was now seven points clear and 'Fortress Vale' (the same nickname we'd given, jokingly, to our Ruislip ground following our dismal home record in the first three years after promotion) was now looking exactly that. Assistant manager Stuart Maynard gave a telling insight into the unprecedented success in an interview in the programme, when he stated that "It's crazy really that Michael Phillips is at this level. The very first game he played, in pre-season, we noticed that the opposition weren't running at our back four any more. He allows guys like Billy Clifford and Greenie to play. He's hugely important to us".

And Phillips was influential in this dominant Stones performance. We took the lead when Michee Efete wreaked havoc in the Angels' defence with a run deep into the box and the splendidly-named Christ Tiehi cracked the low cross past his own keeper. It might have been more but for the acrobatics of visiting keeper Jonathan Henly - and the goalie seemed to have denied us again when Dennon Lewis's quick feet earned a second-half penalty.

After Lafayette's spot kick miss at Bristol MF, it was Billy Clifford's turn from 12 yards... but Henly guessed right, plunging to block the shot, only for 'Max' to slam the rebound

high into the net. Phew! Tonbridge hit back with their own penalty after skip Okimo's clumsy challenge, but the game was settled by an outrageous 40-yard sprint from Dennon Lewis in added time. Like 70's Disney character Roadrunner (watch it on You Tube, kids) he simply accelerated past four defenders and slipped the ball to substitute Dejon Noel-Williams - who still had a lot to do, 20 yards out at an angle. But the young striker set himself and fired across Henly to the far corner. Game over!

MATCHDAY 19: SAT NOV 2 DORKING WAND (A) DREW 2-2

In the week leading up to this much-anticipated trip to Dorking Wanderers, Dean & Stu gave the lesser-used squad members a run-out against CB Hounslow United in the Middlesex Charity Cup 1st round - a match that should have been played right at the beginning of the month but had been postponed after heavy rainfall.

Hounslow play in the Combined Counties League Premier Division - three divisions below the Stones - and a 5-1 win was proof of our strength in depth. Most interestingly, there was proof that the 20-year-old Dejon Noel-Williams might cut the mustard (Dejon..mustard... geddit?) at NLS level when he followed up his assured late finish against Tonbridge with two quick goals against Hounslow.

He looked strong and pacy, a bit raw perhaps, but he clearly knows where the goal is. Dejon started his career at Watford, like his striker dad Gifton, and then moved to Oxford United and then Gloucester City, on loan. Talk got round to suggesting that he might be starting the game when we faced sixth-placed Dorking - especially as Ross Lafayette's twisted knee (an injury he picked up in the Maidenhead replay) was not responding quickly to treatment.

Well, what a start Noel-Williams had! Dorking, freshly promoted with a

terrific playing record in the Southern Prem last season, were dangerous opponents on their plastic pitch but Stones produced a devastating first half. But for home keeper Slavomir Huk it might have been 5-0 at the break as he denied Sanchez Watt, Noel-Williams and Danny Green before a wicked Greenie freekick saw Dejon bundle the ball past the keeper for 1-0. And right on half time it was two for Stones and two for Noel Williams as Dennon Lewis's pace and cut-back set up the young striker.

"Dejon Noel-Williams, he's mustard you know" we sang from the terraces, only wishing that Geoff Coleman* was still our manager.

"A bit raw? Are you sure?" chortled fellow fan Mick during the half time break. "One more goal and it's another away win" he grinned... but that smile became a bit forced when Dejon, clean through from Greenie's sublime pass, pulled his shot wide with just the Slovakian keeper to beat. "Oooh, might have been a hat trick" said Mick. "He'll put the next one away".

But another great chance came and went. And another. And when Jack Barham pulled a controversial goal back for Dorking with a beautiful chip over the committed Ox (compounded by an obvious foul on Watt moments earlier which the referee ignored, despite every player stopping for the whistle) the momentum was swinging back to the home side.

It was the sort of open game that drives most coaches crazy, but Marc White for Dorking and Dean & Stu seemed happy to enjoy the ebb and flow. We (sort of) were!

Eventually the home side's James McShane drove in a superb equaliser... and even then Lewis sidefooted over a gaping goal after a great cross from sub Reece Beckles-Richards that would have concluded a cracking match.

So: Our first league draw after 12 wins and two defeats. We were still seven points ahead so nobody was too concerned at the cavalier display - and Dorking's pitch was apparently a pleasure to play on, the 3G surface enabling them to get the game on when nearly every other one in our division fell foul of the rain.

But there was now a lurking doubt. Could the beautiful football continue now the weather was changing? Would the Moanometer soon get another airing?



WEALDSTONE v MAIDENHEAD UNITED
Emirates FA Cup 4th Qualifying Round replay Tuesday October 22 2019, at 4.50pm



WEALDSTONE v TONBRIDGE ANGELS
Vanarama National League South, Saturday 26 October 2019, 3pm

*As every long-in-the-tooth Stones fan will know, Geoff Coleman was the Brummie manager hastily brought in (with his sidekick Alan Fogarty) from Nuneaton Borough to replace Eddie Presland as the Stones looked doomed to relegation from the Southern League Prem in March 1976. Quite recently really. The play worked as we just about stayed up.

Champions!



Jacob Mendy Mendy had a contrasting afternoon as we sunk Concord Rangers 3-0... far left, failing to connect (twice) in front of a gaping goal but making up for it in the second half (above)



Pictures: MontImage Media and Adam Williams



Wonder goal: Michael Phillips leaves a Concord possee in his wake before planting the goal of the season past keeper Haigh

who had waited patiently for his chance.

There was an intake of breath when we clocked that both Green and 'Max' were left out. And that there was also a first start for William Edjenguete, the French centre back formerly of Coventry City and Dundee, whose signing would free Skipper Okimo to move across and provide solidity at left back.

Immediately the pass and move football was back in evidence. How could we play this way without The Big Two, and with Connor Smith also absent?

It just goes to show what canny and confident management can do. The new guys seized their chance to prove Dean & Stu's faith in them, and three goals in the second half put the game to bed to settle those nerves. Who can remember those first half misses, though, attacking up the slop to the Gun Turret end? Jacob Mendy Mendy twice just failed to make contact from just two yards out (very Gazza-esque, Euros semi-final, Wembley 1996) and you could see that he was just as agonized as we were...

So how delighted was he after 53 mins when he raced onto Jebb's inch-perfect through ball and slipped the ball past advancing keeper Chris Haigh into the Holywell Skip Hire net? Once again, the crowd roared its belief... and the volume even ratcheted up another level or two when Lafayette turned to thump home sub Clifford's pass on the volley for 2-0.

Actually, it was great to see Greenie and Billy Clifford (both on as subs) finishing the game with broad grins, while the man who had quietly gone about his business all season in the holding role, Michael Phillips, ended the game with an eye-popping flourish.

It was in the 92nd minute and pretty much passed us by at the time... but if you watch the video highlights you'll appreciate what a sensational run, half the length of the pitch, it was. He fastened onto a loose ball in his usual effortless style ten yards inside his own half but for once, instead of pinging it out wide or exchanging passes through mid-

field, he saw a gap through the middle and went for it. Four players were bypassed before they knew what had happened; another two made feeble attempts to deflect the rapier like thrusts, a bit like nurses wearing headscarves in Covid-19 wards in the early days of inadequate PPE.

In moments, Phillips was through to a face-off with keeper Haigh, and almost contemptuously passed the ball wide of the keeper's left hand and into the net. Don't forget this goal! Stones hit the net an awful lot of times in this abbreviated campaign, but this (in my humble opinion) was the best.

PS: My favourite memory of this game was having tracked down a Stones' centre-back of the 1970s, Dave Parratt, via a chance message on Twitter from his son Jake. I was convinced that nobody at Wealdstone would remember him, or be interested in him, but when I ran a nostalgic interview with him in the programme for the



The Corleones, alias Dave Parratt and family

MATCHDAY 20: SAT NOV 16 HAMPTON & RB (A) LOST 0-2

What happened to November 9? you're probably thinking. Ah yes, the rain. It was tipping down then, no surprise the flood-prone Vale couldn't cope

But in fact the lost Saturday, when we were due to face Eastbourne Borough at home, would have taken place but for a freak power cut that caused the floodlights to be non-operable. For a long time now, thanks to improved drainage and the skill of the WFC groundsmen, a first-team game at the Vale being called off is a very rare occurrence.

But when the floodlights are without power in November you have a problem. How strange it was, having checked on Twitter that the game was definitely on before I left home at 1.30pm, to arrive at 2.15 to be greeted by a stream of cars exiting Shenley Avenue and Cranley Drive. Uh-oh. Apparently water had seeped into the cable boxes along Grosvenor Vale and the power company had had to pull the plug, as it were, on all those properties as water and electricity are not good bedfellows.

The disappointment was eased by a couple of beers (ahem, one pint as I was driving) in the social club and the chance to chat with a) the players, who were very happy to hang around and socialise, and b) one of our longest-distance fans, 63-year-old Pete Thomson from Edinburgh who had got up at 5.30 that morning to travel down by train to Kings Cross. He was introduced to the Stones when working with long-term supporter Chris Cone, and makes a weekend of it whenever he has the chance... so if 1,000 nearby fans were disappointed at this game biting the dust, imagine how gutting it was for Pete!

But I did ask Pete (who also follows Hearts) if he knew fellow Edinburgh resident Jim Sorrell, who also regularly makes the 400-mile journey to the Vale. "What, another ee-jit?" he laughed. "Is that right, is there another Stones fan up there? No, I don't know about Jim". So I gave him the lowdown on 55-year-old Jim, an old school pal of our own Sudhir Rawal, who was a regular in the 70s and 80s before moving to

the Scottish capital.

He was sponsoring the Concord Rangers game in December and would be appearing as the 'Fan in the Stand' in that programme. So I had the perfect opportunity to feature Pete as part of a Caledonian Double Bill... you get one Stones fan from Edinburgh and then another one comes along at once!

Pete and Jim have since met up on home turf and were planning to travel down together for games until the Covid-19 crisis took hold. Maybe next season?

Anyway, enough of games that DIDN'T happen. At ten to five a week later we were all wishing that the game at The Beveree, quaint home of Hampton & Richmond Borough, had also been rained off, or powercutted off, or even Corona Virused-off.

Let's get Mick's view

It wasn't ideal for a rather 'ring rusty' Stones to then have to face Hampton. Similarly to St Albans, The Beavers have long presented themselves as a deeply irritating club. They always seem to carry with them the air of gifted amateurs defeating scowling, scurrying professionals quite effortlessly - and that has acted as an annoying subtext to many a season for Stones fans.

"Despite having started the season poorly, Gary McCann had started to construct the type of team he had successfully managed at Hendon over many years - tough, belligerent, hard-working and with enough pace in attack to worry defences. Relentless harassment of the Stones midfield artists too often resulted in high balls being lumped into the Hampton defence where Charlie Wassmer and Dean Inman won absolutely everything. From that base the home side increasingly broke with pace and purpose and deservedly ran out 2-0 winners.

"The Moanometer has been taken from the cupboard and dusted off. Leaving The Beveree following the

Hampton mauling brought back the too familiar feeling of countless defeats over numerous seasons in which a lightweight team had been bludgeoned by a bigger, stronger, harder working set of players. The next match, at home to Royston Town in the FA Trophy, was an opportunity to dust ourselves off and set about a team from the division below to launch a money-making FA Trophy run..."

MATCHDAY 21: SAT NOV 23 ROYSTON T (H) FA TROPHY 3RD QUAL RD LOST 2-3

Trophy run? That would have been nice! What transpired was a first half performance so lacking in work, desire and pace that the opposition completely murdered us.

Quicker and sharper all over the pitch, it looked at times as if Royston - from the league below us, the BeVictor Southern Prem - had twice as many players on the pitch. The fact that half time arrived with the visitors just two goals to the good was down to some excellent Northy saves (Northy? We'll come to that later), some last-ditch defending and several slices of luck. Thankfully the 2nd half saw the team click into gear and totally dominate proceedings. But, having clawed ourselves back to 2-2 with Lafayette and Okimo scoring, we fell for a sucker punch break at the death as Brandon Adams fired home for 3-2.

Mick chimes in: "From the very beginning of the season rumours had circulated of Dean Brennan teams starting well and then fading away to mid-table positions, and that the highly skilful and relatively young players he had recruited would not be able to cope with the heavier pitches in mid-winter. The Hampton and Royston defeats appeared to offer some evidence for that. The



Moanometer was now starting to register a significant reading. It had all seemed too good to be true. Dean's predecessor Bobby had produced football of the Neanderthal type,

JIM SORRELL

Fan in the stand

All the way from Edinburgh... Jim's at the Vale today making up for 25 years of missing matches!

Jim Sorrell is a 55-year-old Edinburgh resident who has been a regular in the 70s and 80s before moving to the Vale. He was introduced to the Stones when working with long-term supporter Chris Cone, and makes a weekend of it whenever he has the chance...

PETER THOMSON

Fan in the stand

You get one fan from Edinburgh and then they're bused! Meet Pete, who sets off at 5.30 in the morning to make it for a Stones home game...

Pete Thomson is a 63-year-old Edinburgh resident who has been a regular in the 70s and 80s before moving to the Vale. He was introduced to the Stones when working with long-term supporter Chris Cone, and makes a weekend of it whenever he has the chance...

but his teams could grind along and do to others what Hampton and Royston had done to us. Had we peaked? This was Wealdstone after all, and the almost unremitting set of wins attained via beautiful football had effectively deprived us moaners of our weekly staple diet of misery."

Personally, I was impressed with Royston (who went on to reach the quarter-finals with even bigger scalps) and had we kept the scores at 2-2 I believe we would have progressed. Crucially, though, it was a cruel blow when, on the eve of the Hampton game Aston Oxborough - in superb form - broke a thumb while training with his club Norwich City. No worries, we thought - didn't we have the legendary Jonathan North as back up? Northy had been given game time on loan at Chesham United, but during the Hampton and Royston defeats he looked physically less imposing than the Ox and probably suffered in comparison rather than on his own merits.

It was bad luck for 'Wales No.1' that his two appearances coincided with the team's two worst performances so far. And we feared for his future knowing that Dean Brennan has long been a fan of taking a Football League club's keeper on extended loan for reasons of quality (with EFL and Prem keepers having access to top quality coaching) and finances, as loan keepers come essentially free of charge. All you need as a manager is contacts and a good reputation... and of course, Deano has both of those qualities.

After the Royston exit, Harvey (Harry) Isted was recruited on loan from Luton Town. Sadly this signalled the start of the end of the marvellous 10-year association of the wonderful and popular Northy at the club. But football is a pragmatic, success-driven game and we knew how good Harry was from his display against us for Oxford City (where he was then on loan) back in September. A quality loan signing to be sure...

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WEALDSTONE v ROYSTON T
The Buildbase FA Trophy Third Qualifying Round
Saturday 23 November 2019, kick-off 3pm

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The mighty, mighty STONES 2019-20

WEALDSTONE v CONCORD RANGERS
Vanarama National League South,
Saturday 30 November 2019, 3pm

Isn't it typical... the curse of the Big Interview struck again in the Royston programme (far left) when Billy Clifford was immediately dropped from the team. But how he bounced back!

Champions!



Notice the subtle (and not-so-subtle) tugs on Adam Coombes, Mich Efete (twice) and Dennon Lewis as we fell to defeat at Slough Town on Boxing Day. Not my favourite game of the season

Pictures: Adam Williams



St Albans' keeper Dean Snedker leaves the crowd open-mouthed with this save from Dennon Lewis... who later scored

the Concord game (and he turned up together with his wife Jackie) there was a constant clamour from older fans to talk to him and share reminiscences. Jackie later emailed to say how touched they both were by the reaction from everyone at the club... and I was surprised when George Duck (now an official ambassador for the Stones) told me that Dave was Godfather to both his children. "Although that's no surprise as he looks more like Al Pacino or a member of the Mafiosa than an ex-footballer from St Neots" laughed George.

Dave played alongside George when the Stones enjoyed their best-ever FA Cup run (a 3rd round defeat at QPR) in January 1978, so it was no surprise really that he was immediately recognised, even without the luxuriant moustache he sported 42 years ago. It reminded me of the warmth our fans showed Nigel Franklin, another star of the 1970s who was entertained in the boardroom a couple of years earlier and who has now become (together with son Paul and his grandchildren) a regular fixture at The Vale.

MATCHDAY 23: SAT DEC 7 BATH CITY (A) DREW 0-0

In between the win over Concord and the always-exciting trip to Bath, the Stones overwhelmed Hayes & Yeading United 6-2 in the Middlesex Senior Cup. Our squad was augmented by the diminutive ex-Barnet winger/striker Fumnaya Shomotun (who had starred briefly while on loan at the Vale two years earlier) and another winger/striker Eric Lopes who had emerged from our own academy over the summer.. and both scored in an impressive victory.

But when we arrived at Twerton Park, it seemed the last thing we needed was a surfeit of forwards. Centre-back Connor Stevens had picked up an injury, and with Okimo preferred as a left back who would be partnering new man Willie Edjenguete in the centre of defence? Step forward Michael Phillips. Just as we thought the 21-year-old couldn't be any more impressive, he now proved his versatility by stepping in at sweeper and controlling the game from his new position.

Bath were in sixth place and with just one home defeat, but in a tactical game of cat and mouse the Romans were unable to get behind our back line and seriously trouble keeper Harry Isted. In fact it was a game unlike any other that season... travelling back on the train, we struggled to think of more than a couple of half chances at either end whereas every other game thus far had been peppered with opportunities. Both Jerry Gill (Bath manager) and Dean Brennan acknowledged this, with Gill expecting the return match in five or six weeks time to be a similar game of chess. Ha!

MATCHDAY 24: TUES DEC 10 EASTBOURNE (H) WON 2-0

I'm hoping that we will look back on this game, played on a cold, wet and windy night at the Vale, as the last-ever truly low-key league match our club is involved in.

There were extenuating factors (such as live Champions League football on telly, one of the reasons why we've played home midweek matches on Mondays for over a decade) but it was disappointing that just 670 people bothered to attend. Having said that, it's not long since it was a triumph to break the 200 mark on a Tuesday night when we were playing at Edgware or Northwood.

So let's look at the positives. We'd never beaten Eastbourne at home before in five attempts since we were promoted to the National League South, so it was good to end that bogey run. And the team were still not playing with the fluency and penetration of the opening weeks so our eighth home win in nine outings was not too shabby.

We battered Eastbourne in the first half with the wind at our backs, attacking up the slope and it wasn't long before a sharp turn and 20-yard shot from Dennon Lewis saw the ball spinning through the hands of keeper Tom Hadler and into the net. The red-faced keeper then pulled off three or four much more difficult saves before Jerome Okimo notched a rare goal to put us two up, pirouetting with ballet-like grace to fire left footed past Hadler from a difficult angle. The second

half? Mmmm. Can't remember much happening. Except reminding myself we were now seven points clear at the top with a game or two in hand on the clubs around us... a fairytale position to be sure, to be sure (as Deano would say) :)

MATCHDAY 25: THUR DEC 26 SLOUGH TOWN (A) LOST 1-2

Oh how I hate blank Saturdays. Especially when it's because we've been knocked out of the FA Cup or FA Trophy unfeasibly early.

Well, that was the case on December 14, Trophy First Round Proper day (which I spent putting up the Christmas Tree) and then again on December 21 when our home game against Welling United was rained off (is it time to bring the tree down yet?)

And so the next Stones action was on Boxing Day at Slough Town's pretty-much gleaming new Harbour Park stadium, KO 1pm. Personally this was good news, as I was due to work in central London late afternoon and it would mean that I could see the whole game (normally 3pm kick offs on Boxing Day mean an early departure, not always a bad thing). But of course, it turned into very bad news on a couple of fronts.

Firstly, the game. How unpleasant was this! A slippery, plastic pitch; squally rain; belligerent opponents; a goalkeeper who kept rolling around, feigning injury; an elbow in the mouth that cost Jerome Okimo a couple of teeth; and then conceding two poor goals to leave the home fans chortling at our discomfort.

I had a look at Slough Town's video of this game (complete with commentary) for confirmation, and in fact it was a decent performance from both sides that could have gone either way. The commentator, who sounded disconcertingly like Paul Merton, enjoyed a half dozen different pronunciations of our No.3 Edjenguete - ranging from Eggen-boolie to Edjen-goolie to Eddiejen-brahooley - and while our French defender had a pretty torrid afternoon he clearly did not foul Slough's Ben Harris in the incident that led to the home side going ahead from the penalty spot. A gleeful Harris crashed the ball home.

We had a perfectly legal equaliser from Dennon Lewis chalked off too, the linesman missing the speed of his run onto Clifford's pass and wrongly raising his flag (not for the first or last

time this season) but I'm well aware that my unhappy recollections are more down to the terrible evening that was about to unfold.

I marched back to my car in the bitter cold, poorly protected against the wet weather, and drove into work for the late shift at the Daily Mirror - where, at 11pm, I decided to call it a day as my teeth were chattering, I was gripped by fever and my hands were shaking too much to even hold a coffee mug.

The hour-long drive home should have been fine, with the heating turned right up. But, at about midnight on the A5 I managed to hit the kerb while peering at the SatNav. And, disaster, I had a puncture.

The AA predicted a two-hour wait as it was Boxing Day night. Three hours later I realised that my phone was out of charge and, inexplicably, so was the car's battery (I later found out that the little battery in the car key had expired, preventing the engine from being turned on). So there I was, no phone, in a freezing cold car with a raging fever, unable to change the wheel myself as the car wouldn't start and imagining that the rescue services had somehow lost my details.

It was now 4.45am... but possibly the worst night of my life was finally ended when the rescue van turned up with no word of apology, quickly changed the wheel and my key battery and drove off again.

MATCHDAY 26: SAT DEC 28 ST ALBANS CITY (H) WON 1-0

Covid-19 supposedly hit these shores in early February, but was this an early foretaste?

Flu symptoms, high temperatures and a hacking cough were nothing more than "a virus" according to the doctor I saw on the morning of the St Albans match. I never, ever miss a game through illness (happy to share it among my fellow fans) so you can imagine how bad I was feeling to actually stay in bed all day while the Stones took on my local side at The Vale.

Even Twitter barely registered. Okay, I was spotted with

a smile when news filtered through that we had won the points thanks to a genius through ball and an adroit finish from Dennon Lewis in front of the Bulla fans in the 1,067 crowd. But I was seriously contemplating also missing the next home game, the grudge return against Slough.. not just because I was feeling rough, but because I was loathe to pass on whatever I had to friends and family.

Self-isolation before the end of 2019! It turns out that I was acting more responsibly than a senior Government advisor, before even one of the 60,000 subsequent extra deaths were registered.

MATCHDAY 27: WEDS JAN 1 SLOUGH TOWN (H) WON 2-1

The country was still ten weeks off lockdown, but should I stay at home or travel the 25 miles to Grosvenor Vale... or should I go via Barnard Castle? Just to check that my eyesight was unaffected, of course. Now, if Barnard Castle were at home that afternoon I might have been tempted, but their Northern Prem game was called off. So yes, I would be on my way to The Vale.

I isolated myself among some very tall fans by the touchline and kept my mouth closed at all times. In fact I had developed a form of laryngitis after all that coughing, so I couldn't speak even if I'd wanted to.

Mute and under the weather, this win was a fantastic tonic and we didn't have to wait long for the first goal of the New Year. Dennon Lewis swapped passes with his mate Michee Efete (who had scored our late consolation at Slough), releasing Mich into the space behind the Rebels left back... and the majority of the 1,289 roared its relief as the right wing back drilled his hot past the odious Jack Turner and into the far corner.

The last time Turner and Efete had come up close and personal

the shaven-headed keeper had rushed out to the his box, collided with our No.2 and rolled around like an amputee in a desperate attempt not to give away a penalty or be red-carded. The ref was taken in and booked Efete instead... and then of course Turner leaped to his feet and carried on as normal.

So how sweet was Mich's revenge! That was after just two minutes, and on 29 mins it was a deserved 2-0 as the gap-toothed Okimo galloped down the left and fed Ross Lafayette... who greedily beat Turner on his near post from a seemingly impossible angle.

Second-placed Slough had reduced our lead at the top of the table to four points after the win on Boxing Day, but their title challenge looked laughable as Stones poured forward in that first half.

Somehow, though, it stayed at 2-0. Shots fizzed high and wide and Turner scampered about to keep us at bay. And when Ryan Bird smacked a terrific header past Harry Isted in the 81st minute the misery of December 26 came to the front of our thoughts. But not for long!

MATCHDAY 28: SAT JAN 4 OXFORD CITY (A) LOST 2-3

My spirits lifted by the win over Slough, I foolishly decided to drive (alone) to Oxford. What a mistake that was.

Another cold, windy afternoon. Despite pulling a scarf over my face I knew that with my upturn in temperature and worsening cough this was not the most sensible place to be. And the events unfolding on the pitch only worsened my mood: the outstanding Mich Efete having to leave the field with a twisted ankle; conceding a goal just before half time with an uncontested header; a lethargy all over the pitch that was punished by a goal from (of all people) our ex striker Elliott Benyon in the second half; a comeback of sorts, Mendy Mendy and new signing Adam Coombes bringing the scores level; and then more narcolepsy at the back allowing Finn Tapp to head the winning goal.

Was this another case of plastic pitch syndrome? Dorking away, drew. Slough away, lost. Now Oxford away, lost. At least our next game, at Billericay, would be on grass. Or so we thought.

MATCHDAY 29: TUES JAN 7 BILLERICAY (A) LOST 1-3

More foolishness. More self-flagellation afterwards. This Tuesday night trip to Essex, in more cold and rain, was the precursor to another three days in bed and more raised eyebrows from Mrs Parks.

But this was Billericay, the scene of our memorable FA Trophy win two years ago and I was convinced that we'd bounce back from the Oxford debacle with three points and a restoration of the bragging rights with my mate at work who's a Riccay fan. But the humiliation was mine.

The whole evening was miserable, from being segregated along with no more than 200 Stones fans in a miserly crowd of 700, tops, to probably the worst cup of tea I've ever tasted from the BTFC catering van. Or maybe it was just my Covid-19 tastebuds.

Stones were abject all over the field, much to the dismay of our management team who were no doubt hoping to impress on their return to the



Ah, the joy of a 'double header' programme. I'm sure the average fan doesn't enjoy it, but for your production team it is a Godsend when the matches come thick and fast over the Xmas holiday period. Notice how I brought God into Christmas. Unfashionable, I know

CHAMPIONS! The stats that matter...

RESULTS

AUGUST				League Position		Wind/Sky/Temp		1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10		11		12		14		15		16		17		
3	DARTFORD	NLS	4-1	930	2	5	☉	23c	OXB	ARN	EFE	CLI	STE	OKI	PHI	SMI	LAF	GRE	WAT	LEW	RBR	SHE	MEN	RIN	OXB	ARN	EFE	CLI	STE	OKI	PHI	SMI	LAF	GRE	WAT	LEW	RBR	SHE	MEN	RIN
6	Dulwich Hamlet	NLS	0-1	1484	10	10	☉	20c	OXB	ARN	EFE	CLI	STE	OKI	PHI	SMI	LAF	GRE	WAT	LEW	RBR	SHE	MEN	RIN	OXB	ARN	EFE	CLI	STE	OKI	PHI	SMI	LAF	GRE	WAT	LEW	RBR	SHE	MEN	RIN

APPEARANCES

A = Appearance as Starter S = Appearance as Substitute G = Goals

PLAYER	NATIONAL LEAGUE SOUTH			FA CUP			FA TROPHY			MIDDX SENIOR CUP			MIDDX CHARITY CUP			2019/20 TOTALS			WFC CAREER			
	A	S	G	A	S	G	A	S	G	A	S	G	A	S	G	A	S	G	A	S	G	
Andoh, Enoch																						
Arnold, Nick *	17	2		3			1			1										22	2	

LEAGUE TABLE

Rank	Team	ALL FIXTURES										HOME					AWAY					FNP	Pts	Results
		P	W	D	L	F	A	P	W	D	L	F	A	P	W	D	L	F	A					
1	Wealdstone	33	22	4	7	69	35	17	15	0	2	39	12	16	7	4	5	30	23	34	70			
2	Havant & Waterlooville	34	19	10	5	64	37	17	8	4	5	28	20	17	11	6	0	36	17	27	67	1-4	4-2	

ABC = Three-letter Player ID (See list below) ○ 1st substitution ● 2nd substitution ● 3rd substitution
 ■ Caution ■ Red Card ■ Straight Red ● Goals ○ Penalty ● Goal + Pen

Key to Player IDs

AND Enoch Andoh	EKO Enoch Ekoneo	MAT Daniel Matsuzaka	RIN Joe Ringer
ARN Nick Arnold	EMM Moses Emmanuel	MCC Oily McCoy	ROB Phil Roberts
CHA Ashley Charles	EVE Lewis Everett	MCL George McLennan	SAR Elliott Sartorius
CLI Billy Clifford	GRE Danny Green	MEN Jacob Mendy Mendy	SAU Matthew Saunders
CAD Kieron Cadogan	IST Harvey Isted	MND Douglas Mendes	SEL Ryan Sellers
DNW Dejon Noel-Williams	JEB Jack Jebb	NOR Jonathan North	SHO Jake Sheppard
EDJ William Edjenguélé	KRA Kreshnic Krasniqi	OKI Jerome Okimo	SHO Fumnaya Shomotun
EFE Miche Efete	LAF Ross Lafayette	OXB Aston Oxborough	SMI Connor Smith
	LEW Dennon Lewis	PHI Michael Phillips	STE Connor Stevens
	LOP Eric Lopes	RBR Reece Beckles-Richards	WAT Sanchez Watt

FIXTURES NOT PLAYED

BRENTFORD 'B'	MSCSF	April 10	Hungerford Town	NLS
BRAINTREE TOWN	NLS	April 13	WEYMOUTH	NLS
March 24 Eastbourne Borough	NLS	April 18	Maidstone United	NLS
March 31 Tonbridge Angels	NLS	April 25	HEMEL HEMPSTEAD TOWN	NLS
April 4 HAMPTON & RICHMOND	NLS	April ??	Concord Rangers	NLS

WEALDSTONE FOOTBALL CLUB 2019/2020



Champions!



It's Havant (away) and look at the horror on keeper Ross Warner's face as Greenie is about to make it 4-2.... and among the celebrating away fans is one home supporter and his cups of tea!



Pictures: Adam Williams

club they'd left acrimoniously a year earlier. Things weren't helped by the bizarre patch of brown sludge that covered a large part of the New Lodge pitch, mainly by the away end corner flag stretching across to the 18-yard box, that was caused by vandals driving a vehicle over the pitch during the worst of the bad weather a month earlier. Surprisingly, the referee thought the surface was okay and in QPR loanee Odysseus Alfa, Riccay possessed the one player capable of skating over the cloying surface.

This was an Odysseus who might have won the Trojan War (possibly the only time Homer's Iliad is mentioned in a non-League football publication) as he had the nous to skip away from our leaden-footed defenders and put Billericay ahead, right in front of us away fans.

Even Billy Clifford, who had played for Deano & Stu at Riccay, was struggling to get his passing going and he was replaced by sub Jack Jebb on the hour mark... but within five minutes Jebb leaned into a home striker as the ball flashed across our box and the referee awarded Billericay a penalty AND showed JJ a red card.

And that was effectively that. Jake Robinson fired home from the spot for 2-0, and although Okimo pulled one back following Connor Smith's clever cross, we were stretched at the back in the dying minutes as Akinwande broke free to beat Isted on his near post.

Willie Edjenguele was particularly discomfited by fast-raiding Riccay, which was disappointing as I had interviewed the centre-back earlier that week and had planned to publish it in the next programme.

"Is William likely to be with us long-term?" I asked Dean Brennan the day after this defeat, knowing that Edjenguele (on a match-by-match deal) was angling for a contract. "Or should I hang onto the interview for the time being?"

"Hang onto it" said Deano, and I knew that Willie's days were numbered

MATCHDAY 30: SAT JAN 11 WELLING UTD (H) WON 1-0

It is the test of real management to be able to adapt and change for the better when things are going wrong. And undoubtedly we had hit our second 'blip' of the season.

We had again registered back-to-back defeats and Dean and Stuart knew they had to freshen things up at both ends of the pitch. We were becoming predictable and ineffective in attack, and decidedly vulnerable at the back, particularly down the left hand side.

Yet the limited budget surely meant very little

wriggle room.... Which is why the announcement that we'd signed Moses Emmanuel was a genuine shock.

Now, I'd just finished reading Dave Roberts' latest book about Bromley FC. His first, *The Bromley Boys* (about growing up as a fan of the terrible BFC of the 1960/70s) had just been made into an indie film and his new offering, *Home & Away* covered the Ravens first-ever season in the Conference National back in the 2014-15 season. And the undoubted star of that successful Bromley side was Moses Emmanuel.

Having become friendly with author Dave over the past few years, sharing reminiscences of the late 1960s and 70s, I immediately emailed him to ask about Moses. "Can he still do a job? How good was he in a Bromley shirt?" and Dave immediately shot back "My all-time Bromley hero! He scored 35 goals across two seasons for us in the National Premier, and that 7-2 win at Torquay when he scored a hat trick was the best Bromley game ever... so yes, he was pretty good for us!"

And Moses had done pretty well in the interim, scoring for fun under Dean & Stuart at Billericay (22 goals in 49 games) before leaving for Welling... where wage cuts had made him suddenly available.

And now he was lining up in a Wealdstone shirt.

With Ross Lafayette struggling for fitness after a long season leading the line, Moses came in and offered a whole new dimension. I've honestly never seen a Wealdstone forward with the ability to play on the half turn so effectively, endlessly putting defenders under pressure and using his electric pace to fizz into the most damaging areas.

He was involved in the only goal after 29 minutes, the culmination of a 20-pass move that began with Jake Sheppard at left-back, moved across through Clifford, Connor Stevens and Danny Green and a right-wing cross was deftly laid off by Emmanuel into the path of the surging Michee Efete who shot past keeper Daniel Wilkins into the Gun Turret net.

Moments later, Moses had the crowd on their feet again with a quicksilver turn

and shot that cannoned back off the crossbar. Sheppard had been brought into the defence to add solidity, but it was only after Jacob Mendy Mendy came on at half time that we saw what a natural left back the young winger was. Suddenly we had balance, tenacity and a real threat down both flanks as Mendy Mendy and Efete were wing backs with bells on.

Things became a little trickier when Michael Phillips, already booked, was shown the red card for talking back to the referee - and although we saw the game out comfortably enough, next up were two big, big games at third-placed Havant & Waterlooville and then at home to Bath City in second place...and Phillips would be suspended for both. Not very clever.

MATCHDAY 31: SAT JAN 18 HAVANT & W'VLE (A) WON 4-2

This was the acid test. Away to the team who had beaten us comprehensively at The Vale, were the division's big spenders and still (just about) the favourites to win automatic promotion. If they won, they'd be five points behind but with three games in hand and a better goal difference... there was the real prospect that the winners would have one hand on the NLS championship trophy.

The Non-League Paper recognised the importance of this game (how could they not?) and the match report (reproduced right) was right on the money. If we'd felt proud four and a half months earlier, as we stumbled out into the sunshine at Weymouth's Bob Lucas stadium, how unreal did it seem to have stuck another four goals on our nearest challengers on their own ground? Especially after falling behind twice and looking likely to be swept away by Paul Doswell's resurgent side?

This was one of those games when you experience the full range of emotions: Despair, acceptance, joy, amazement and sheer exhilaration - all in the space of 90 minutes. First of all, the as-

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HAVANT & W 2 WEALDSTONE 4



FINE FEAT: Michee Efete celebrates his goal and right, Royals keeper Harvey Isted toils the Hawks

PICTURE: Ian Christy

EMMANUEL'S Royals rally after the break

WEALDSTONE produced a stunning second half comeback to consign Havant and Waterlooville to a home defeat.

The Hawks got off to a flying start as Andy Drury's fourth-minute corner was met firmly at the far post by Dean Beckwith.

The home side continued to attack. A ball over the top from Danny Kedwell fell to Jonah Ayunga who surged into the box, but Jerome Okimo produced a vital

By Trevor Brock

late tackle. Moments later Drury curled in a cross that Ayunga powered over.

The Stones got back into the game on 25 minutes with only their second foray into the penalty area.

Jacob Mendy produced a superb cross for Michee Efete who sent a bullet header past Ross Warner.

The Hawks got off to a cracking start in the second half after Drury whipped in a cross and skipper Danny Kedwell headed home.

The visitors adapted well to going behind and they equalised in the 58th minute. Clifford drove in a free-kick and striker Moses Emmanuel found room inside the box to shoot past Warner in net.

With their tails up, Emmanuel was gifted two more presentable chances within two minutes to put the Stones ahead.

On 59 minutes, Wealdstone took the lead and again it was Clifford who won the ball in midfield and drove forward before find-

ing Emmanuel who once again easily slotted past Warner.

It wasn't all one way traffic and substitute Nicky Bailey sent in a ball that was met by the head of Sam Magri but Isted won the race for the ball to clear.

It was the away side who were now well on top. Emmanuel drove to the by-line before firing in a cross but Efete couldn't capitalise.

The game was safe with 15 minutes to go as it seemed inevitable that the visitors would grab another

MATCH STATS	
HAVANT V WEALDSTONE	
7	SHOTS ON TARGET
5	SHOTS OFF TARGET
6	CORNERS
8	OFFSIDE
10	FOULS CONCEDED
4	YELLOW CARDS
0	RED CARDS



THE MAN to seal comeback win

goal and it eventually came when Danny Green poked home a fourth.

The visitors still looked the more likely to add to the scoreline as they convincingly held on to the end.

Winning manager Dean Brennan said: "This was a great comeback by my lads to gain a fantastic win. Our performance was outstanding. To come back from behind showed great character and we've now put ourselves into a great position."

Defeated manager Paul

Doswell said: "I'm bitterly disappointed but we were beaten by the better team. From 2-1 up you have to defend much better than we did. You could say we committed football suicide."

"Goals change games but I have to say you got a real chasing in the last half an hour of the game."

"However, you don't win or lose titles on a single day but this result has made it really difficult for us."



STAR MAN: Moses Emmanuel (left) celebrates the fourth goal

tonishment of seeing over 400 Wealdstone fans (perhaps even 450) in the 1,749 crowd filling the away end and creating a barrage of noise and level of support that Doswell described as 'phenomenal' in the post-match comments.

Yet there was a danger that all the positivity would be blown away by a home side who exploded out of the blocks.

It was looking like Billericay all over again - heavy pitch, a fast, direct style of play and Stones struggling to impose themselves anywhere on the pitch. And a soft goal after just four minutes (right in front of the away end) when a floated right-wing corner saw the muscular Dean Beckwith shoulder his way past four players and plant a header just inside the upright as Billy Clifford, guarding the post, was desperately unable to clear.

That was the despair. Then grudging acceptance that we were second best as only some last-ditch defending and a wayward Jonah Ayunga header kept the score at 1-0.

Still the fans urged our boys on. And over by the far corner flag, at the top end of the pitch, we mounted only our second attack of a one-sided game as Jacob Mendy swapped

passes and whipped a cross towards the near post. Huh? There was nobody there a moment ago, and Moses Emmanuel had tracked to the back post... then in a blue and amber blur, the ball was rocking the net behind home keeper Ross Warner.

What on earth?! Michee Efete had made the diagonal run across the Havant box and met JMM's cross perfectly with his head... and moments later the crowd around me reacted in joy and puzzlement. 1-1!

To be fair (which is a rare sentiment expressed by any football fan) we were lucky to be level at half time. But after that opening spell, Ashley Charles was filling Michael Phillips' midfield anchor shirt admirably, Connor Smith and Danny Green were using the ball expertly and Moses and Dennon were pulling the plodding Havant defenders into the sort of areas they didn't want to be in. Jerome and Connor Stevens were getting a grip on Messrs Ayunga and Danny Kedwell... and wing backs Mendy Mendy and Efete had the pace, power and trickery to cause all sort of discomfort in the wide areas. As the refreshingly honest Doswell

admitted afterwards, his team were afraid to pass the ball on the ground on the difficult surface while 'Wealdstone were brave enough to move it around and prove that it was possible to play football on that pitch, so all credit to them'.

The heavyweight Kedwell actually put Havant ahead again in a repeat of their whirlwind start to the first half, a powerful header beating Harry Isted, but from that point the Stones took over. And we just stood back, singing ourselves hoarse (although in my case, with the laryngitis I was hoarse even before the game started) as Clifford and Green unravelled the home defence.

The quicksilver Emmanuel somehow missed two one-on-ones with Warner - one when the keeper was already on his a*** - before Billy's arched freekick to the near post was thumped into the net by the persistent Moses. And then it was Moses again, firing into the top corner after Clifford had robbed the lumbering Simon Walton in midfield.

How jubilant were we?! And then the icing on the cake as Greenie scrambled the ball over the line for 4-2. Could things get any better? ...

Champions!

MATCHDAY 32: SAT JAN 25 BATH CITY (H) WON 7-0

Sometimes I wonder how much less complicated life would be like without children. Then I think of my five offspring and, well, I think how much more dull it would also be.

Their birthdays, through the years, have all sorts of associated baggage that could prove deleterious to football. Saturday afternoon birthday parties; trips to the cinema and theatre; shopping expeditions. Thankfully two of my older daughters have summer birthdays; two

more in March and December (potentially tricky) but they are now in their twenties and can organise their own cake-and-candle celebrations.

But now Eve (my youngest) needed my involvement in her 12th birthday shenanigans. "Daaaaaad" she began. "You know that for my birthday this year I want a climbing party..."

"Yeeeee", I replied, half-listening and half-watching the news on telly. "Well, I want to invite eight of my friends and I think we'll need to give four of them a lift home afterwards".

"No problem" I said, concentrating on the revelations that a mystery virus was hatching in China, and quickly spreading. "I can make two trips if necessary. What day is it?"

"It's on my birthday dad, January 25th. It's a Saturday".

Now, suddenly Eve had my attention. In the way my antennae had sprung up early in 1985 when my brother announced that he was getting married at 3pm on May 11th that year. Which turned out to be FA Trophy Final day, Wealdstone v Boston United.

"Er, what time is the party Eve?"
"12 o'clock Dad. We're having burgers half-way through. It'll finish about 2.30".

My mind was quickly calculating how long it would take to get from the Hemel Hempstead climbing centre to Ruislip, bearing in mind having to go via Harpenden and dropping off a gaggle of 12 year olds.

My hopes of seeing the top-of-the-table clash

WEALDSTONE 7 BATH CITY 0



ROUT: Bath's Frankie Artus puts into his own net, and, right, Daniel Green scores Stones' sixth

MATCH STATS	
WEALDSTONE V BATH	
11 SHOTS ON TARGET	0
4 SHOTS OFF TARGET	0
8 CORNERS	3
3 OFFSIDE	2
12 FOULS CONCEDED	10
1 YELLOW CARDS	1
0 RED CARDS	0



STONES HIT A ROMAN

WEALDSTONE recorded their biggest ever National League South win with a dismantling of nearest challengers Bath City. Dean Heenan's men outplayed the Romans, who suffered their heaviest defeat since September 2000, losing their 12-game unbeaten run. Heenan was delighted: "We just continued on from the standards we set at Havant. We were outstanding there and continued it on."

SEVEN FOR THUMPING

Gill's men allowed him to nod home from six yards despite Clarke's efforts. The Stones didn't let up after the break as they hurried and stomped their crystalline opponents. Dennon Lewis added a fourth on 54 minutes, thumping into the roof of the net from 10 yards. Lewis netted another seven minutes later. More defiance at the back was picked upon by Clifford, who laid off for Lewis inside the box. The winger slipped when shooting but still did enough to wrong-foot Clarke. The winger turned provider for Wealdstone's sixth. Green followed up on his goal against Havant last week with another tidy finish, a low curler from 20 yards out. A magnificent seventh arrived with ten minutes remaining, and Clifford was involved again. This time his shot was parried by Clarke and Michael Phillips, who'd only been on the pitch for three minutes, tapped in the re-

with second-placed Bath City were receding by the minute. At this rate I'd be lucky to get to the Vale by half time.

But I had one final hope. Could I persuade my Harpenden mate Giles, dad of one of Eve's best friends Mathilda, to come to the game and give me a lift while my missus drove the girls back home?

It was a long shot. Giles is an Exeter City fan and I just hoped he was not toying with the idea of driving down to their home game with Colchester. But he'd been to half a dozen Stones games with me (Hereford at home, Maidenhead away among others) and never seen us lose - definitely a lucky omen.

"Oh alright then" he said. "But if the Bath game is less exciting than our game with Colchester you can drive me to the next Exeter match".

Blimey. "Okay then... it's a deal". Well, everybody knows the result by now and yes, it was marginally more exciting than the Grecians' clash with Colchester which ended 0-0. Even Giles had to concede that.

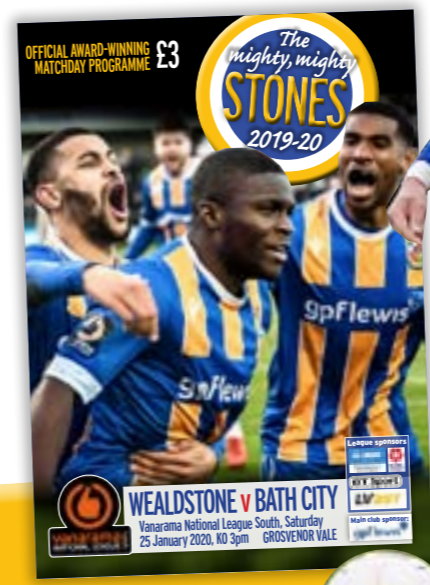
The Non-League paper was back in force for the game, and again the report was a true reflection of one of the best 90 minutes in Wealdstone history. And that report was written by Bath's press officer Mark Stillman, who might have been expected to exercise a bit of damage limitation in his prose (below left) but instead described it as a "stunning display that left the majority of the 1,343 crowd inside Grosvenor Vale bouncing".

It was simply breathtaking. I'm now going to shamelessly lift a few comments about the game from the next home programme, when we asked the question: "Was this the most dazzling Wealdstone win of all time?"

The reality was that never before had a 1st v 2nd League encounter ended up in such a resounding win in our history. It truly was a one-off, with the icing on the cake the fact that it was watched by the biggest home crowd for a league match since 1988. So let's get some reaction from Stones fans, players and luminaries, both by word, email and from the Fans Forum....

GEORGE DUCK, Wealdstone goalscoring hero of the 70s (and who also spent a

short time on loan at Bath) was at the game with our ex keeper John Morton: 'I said to Morty at the end, I've never seen a non-league team play like that for 90 minutes. They were so quick and clever with pace everywhere, up front and at the back. That was as close as you can get to a perfect performance... and when you play really well the goals don't always come but that display was so impressive I couldn't hold back the emotion - I was up out of my seat when every goal went in!' **MARK STILLMAN** (the Bath City Press officer, in an email on the Sunday morning) 'I woke up half an hour ago. Dreamt that my team got annihilated by the league leaders and barely had a kick. One of those days where we were useless for whatever reason and Wealdstone had the game of their life. "Go on and win that league now. If Havant do I'll feel sick - your club do things the right way and yesterday, in the press box you wouldn't have known who had won or lost 7-0. I remember things like that, and it was the same after our play-off defeat to you last season" **MARTIN POWELL** (a long-time Bath fan who was a school teacher in Pinner in the 1980s): "I saw quite a bit of the Stones during their glory days 35 years ago and I don't remember a performance like yesterday's. As for big City defeats, well we lost 7-1 in the Trophy to East Thurrock the year before they were promoted - as they were lower level that was more of a shock than yesterday. We've had a few hammerings in the league over the years but not when we've been high placed in the table and on a good run. **PETER JOHN-BAPTISTE** on the Forum: 'I have to agree with Charlie. Some of the football was sublime. All the little one-tuos



Billy Clifford was simply magnificent against Bath ... his 25-yarder got the party started and set the tone for the whole game

Holy Grail at the Vale: A game we'll never forget

- 1-0** Billy Clifford (4) started the ball rolling...
- 2-0** A Frankie Artus own goal made it 2-0
- 3-0** ...and Connor Stevens headed in for 3-0
- 4-0** Dennon Lewis decided to get among the goals with a right-foot blast....
- 5-0** ...and then one with his left to make it 5-0
- 6-0** Greenie banged one in from 20 yards for number six...
- 7-0** ...and Michael Phillips rounded it off after Billy Clifford was denied another long-range goal

Champions!



It's only a video grab but I love this image of the opening goal against Billericay: Dennon Lewis arcs the perfect cross into the danger zone for Moses Emmanuel (right) to leap and head in



Riccay despair and Ross Lafayette joy as he scores twice to seal 3-0 victory

Pictures: Montimage Media

and triangles. Beautifully simple... simply beautiful."

DARREN LINDEN (also on the forum): "That was the complete performance from the best Stones side since the double winners of 1985. The quality was astonishing and Bath can have no excuses, they were blown away by the pace, tempo and ability we had on the ball. Billy Clifford was majestic - he ran the game from the first minute until the last but that shouldn't detract from everyone else who were flawless. Bath looked punch drunk with no answer to what we threw at them. Brennan, Maynard and the current board deserve a huge amount of credit for what they've managed to put together on the pitch... I never thought I'd see a Stones side with so much quality playing such attractive football. If last weekend was like following a Football League club, today was like watching a Football League side."

'ROYAL BLUE' (another on the busy forum): "Yes, an astonishing performance and indeed atmosphere. The Romans absolutely routed by the best Wealdstone FC football ever seen. We should remind ourselves that Bath had only conceded 23 goals in 26 league games before today - the tightest defence of them all. Today, they took it seven times and the manner of it.. Great scenes, special scenes - some new fans, young fans and the rest of us in a little bit of shock at those numbers on the scoreboard."

SUDHIR RAWAL (also via the Forum): "Darren mentioned that this was our best performance since the Conference days; I'd certainly say that you need to go back to 1997 when we played Braintree in the Ryman League Div 3 at the White Lion Ground for a performance of this nature in a game of such importance. Braintree came to the WLG in second place, just as Bath did today, and were blown away 6-0. When you consider Bath's travelling support, there were over 1,200 home fans at the Vale. Many more performances like this and we could well be welcoming Barnet for a league game!"

'SIGN HIM UP' (another one on the Forum): "That performance yesterday was

simply breathtaking! Just wow! I'm not sure we've seen a better performance from any team in the National League South since we got promoted. Torquay were very good at our place last season, Bromley and Sutton both very good the season they won the league but we were simply rock solid at the back and absolutely devastating going forward. Bath seem to be pointing the finger very firmly at themselves but to be honest I don't think any team in our division would've fared any better against the quality we showed yesterday."

MATCHDAY 33: SAT FEB 8 BILLERICAY T (H) WON 3-0

The two weeks between the Bath game and this next home appearance passed by in a tingle and a blur.

We were now six points ahead of Havant & Waterlooville, who had played the same number of games. Winning the league was now becoming a distinct possibility as we contemplated the possibility that we were witnessing possibly the best-ever football played by a Wealdstone side. Probably nothing will ever eclipse winning the non-League double 35 years ago, but even Brian Hall's biggest supporter in the mid-80s would have to concede that pragmatism outweighed prettiness in our style of play that season.

Now we were winning AND delighting crowds that are already bigger than the average who turned up at Lower Mead to see us winning everything.

Billericay already looked set to be another monster crowd and the Stones warmed up with a thumping midweek 7-1 win at Staines Town in the Middlesex Senior Cup quarter-final. Winger Ollly McCoy, signed on loan from Birmingham City, was outstanding with a two-goal debut and with Jack Jebb and Keiron Cadogan (another winger, signed from Billericay) pulling the strings we seemed to have the squad to cover all eventualities.

That meant we had scored 18 goals in the last three games... and the

boys were buzzing to take on lowly Tonbridge Angels on February 1st and rattle in a few more.

But frustration was the overriding emotion as the match was controversially called off barely an hour before kick-off. Tonbridge hadn't been able to get a home game on since December 7, their Longmead Stadium pitch being built on a flood plain and the country being subject to an unprecedented amount of rain.

Yet they declared the game was going ahead that morning - and around 400 visiting fans made their way into Kent only find out that the referee took one look at the playing surface at 1.45pm and deemed it unplayable.

I was sitting in a Tonbridge greasy spoon cafe with Mick, Nick Symonns and the delightful Nicole Cho-Yee (WFC assistant press officer) when news came through that the pitch was wetter than an otter's pocket. Nick raised one eyebrow and said 'Luckily the quality of the cuisine and the ambience of mine host has made up for any disappointment'. The old smoothie.

Anyway, back to the Riccay return game. There was desperate news in the preceding week that Markie Barton, quiet and unassuming doyen of the supporters club, had died after a long illness. It never prevented him from carrying out the thousand and one jobs that kept him involved right until the end... and it was some comfort to know that he had witnessed some amazing football in his last few weeks.

And the quality continued.

This game - against the team who had deservedly beaten us 3-1 just a few weeks earlier don't forget - was perhaps my favourite of the season. Yes, I know we've just been raving about the demolition of Bath but this was perfect in so many ways.

First of all the big crowd. I'm not sure we count all the kids because the crowd was WAY bigger than the 1,343 for the Bath game, yet it was announced as just THIRTEEN more. Still, our biggest league attendance since Barnet at home in 1988, yadda yadda yadda.

The turnstile queue stretching across to the car park at ten to three was testament to that. And then the way we completely dismantled a Riccay side that, unlike Bath, hadn't come to play. They were here to stop us playing, and it's never easy to overcome that sort of opponent.

Oh, and that first goal. We had already got

keeper Alan Julian's knees very, very muddy as Billy Clifford and Dennon Lewis rasped shots goalwards. Then Doug Loft headed another Clifford effort off the goalline. Then Connor Smith blammed one just wide. Then Ashley Charles drew a terrific save from Julian with a rocket from 30 yards. Then Clifford volleyed just over. Then he shot just wide. Finally, 33 minutes gone, the move that had even the floating voters in the Gun Turret stand off their feet and celebrating: Mendy Mendy starting the move in his left-back berth with a shimmy and sharp pass inside to Danny Green; Greenie's exquisite ball into Lewis's path, skipping away down the left; and then the arrowed cross perfectly onto Moses Emmanuel's head at the far post. Absolutely fabulous!

The chances kept coming as Riccay sagged against the ropes, a desperate Julian then saving from Emanuel with his legs.

The stats from the Bath City game, listed overleaf, showed eleven Stones attempts on goal to none for Bath. Against Billericay there were eleven in that first half alone!

It was breathless stuff, and although the pace slackened (unsurprisingly) after the break Billericay were so worn down that Ross Lafayette was able to come off the bench and twice administer the last rites. You had to feel sorry for the overworked Julian (not really), who finally spilled a low Lewis effort into the path of Ross who cracked the ball home. And then, a beautiful third as Mendy Mendy played inside the Riccay defence for Greenie to put the ball on a plate for a jubilant Ross.

What an amazing few weeks it had been. Were we on Cloud Nine? Cloud 110 per cent more like, as Bobby would have said.

MATCHDAY 35: SAT FEB 22 DORKING WAND (H) WON 3-1

Did we want a break at this stage? Did we heck! But another break is what we had as Storm Dennis ravaged the South Coast, causing the postponement of the game at Eastbourne Borough on February 15.

At least it was called off the previous evening to prevent unnecessary travel. Eastbourne have a plastic pitch so it wasn't otter-friendly rain that was the issue this time, but high winds that had the Sussex club quickly reaching for the phone. Some folk were suggesting that they didn't want to take on the rampant league leaders with a couple of players missing through injury - but we don't believe that, do we children?

So Dorking it was, next up. (Although there was the minor hiccup of an exit from the Middlesex Charity Cup three days after the Billericay extravaganza at the hands of our very good friends and neighbours Harrow Borough. Over 200 souls, probably a record attendance at this earlyish stage of the County Cup, turned up to see Borough led to the slaughter - but it was a bit of a mix-and-match Stones XI including rookie keeper Lewis

Everett who bowed out 6-5 on penalties. Willie Edjenguuele and Sanchez Watt (2) got the Stones goals as we came from behind to draw 3-3... and Lafayette missed a penalty in normal time that might have secured victory. But ho hum).

Ah yes, Dorking, February 22nd. This was going to be tricky. Now, my brother's wedding you know about, as he took the terrible decision to get married at 3pm on FA Trophy Final day 1985. That was

a real family conundrum - actually it wasn't as I went to the reception afterwards. What's wrong with that?

As I mentioned to his wife that evening, they were much more likely to get divorced than Wealdstone get to Wembley again, and that I'd be there for his next wedding. Promise.

Now, 35 years later my sister Lucy was also about to get married. She announced the date, February 22, after we'd already been knocked out of the Trophy which was nice of her, but still... Wendover, in the Chilterns (where the ceremony would take place) isn't the most convenient place to be at 3pm on a Saturday afternoon in the football season.

But I was there anyway. The ultimate sacrifice. Never mind exchanging vows, I don't remember that 'missing a match' was ever part of the vows that I pledged at either of my two marriages (there's a clue there).

So while the crowd were filing in through the hallowed portals of Grosvenor Vale, I was at the Red Lion, Wendover, watching my little sister getting wed (and actually having a rather lovely afternoon/evening, thank you for asking).

Was the icing on the cake the fact that the Stones won 3-1 to stretch our lead to eight points at the top of the table? I rather think it was.

Luckily I had my chums at the game, and of course Syl Allen's almost-instant Stones Goals Live to keep me apprised of the key moments. And I could relax as the first half on Twitter sounded like an action replay of the Billericay game... chance after chance, a couple of saves, a wrong decision by the assistant ref that chalked off a Moses goal and then - oh joy! - a Stones goal in controversial circumstances. Phillips' lunging tackle on Sami El-Abd by the dugout was a bit naughty and Dorking, of course, played it for all it was worth... rolling around, clutching various body parts, manager Marc White throwing his hands up in



Right: Moses was the man of the moment once again against Dorking, popping up with the first goal while the visitors were all in a tizzy over Michael Phillips challenge on the touchline. For once the controversy went our way

Champions!



Ross Lafayette goes down in a heap and Tom Marshall (grey top, in the stand) calls it correctly! Dennon Lewis



slots away the penalty and takes the accolades from the big home crowd



Two extra points go begging: Dennon sends the Dartford keeper the wrong way but the ball strikes the upright and rebounds to safety

Pictures: Adam Williams atfcrsaps.surrey.gov.uk

the air like a pantomime dame and lime-shirted players in paroxysms of fury all over the pitch. "It was very funny" said Mick afterwards. "The referee just ignored it, we took a quick throw in and suddenly the injured player was sprinting back to cover. Too late! Greenie squared it to Moses who crashed it into the net for 1-0!"

Back in Wendover, we were just sitting down for the formal meal when it all turned sour. Or was that the lemon cheesecake? No, it was a sending off for Connor Smith when he over-committed on the opposite touchline and referee Richie Watkins decided to take retrospective action.

"Crazy challenge, really stupid" was the immediate Twitter reaction. "Dorking's play acting turned up another notch" was another verdict... whatever the rights and wrongs, we were down to ten men with 50 minutes still to play.

Moments later, my screen lit up again. A furtive look, expecting a Dorking equaliser. But no - it was 2-0, Moses' shot saved by Slavomir Huk but only as far as Dennon Lewis who scored from close range!

I had a quick look at the Dorking Twitter feed (as you do) and manager White was apparently giving it large, saying that he expected to win now against ten men. I had to have another slice of cheesecake to settle the nerves - it sounded like the sixth-placed visitors were all over us and a hard, low freekick from wide on the left by Guiseppe Sole somehow evaded our keeper Aston Oxborough to find its way into the net.

I spilled my coffee. How hard is it to mutter pleasantries to your family and friends when your mind is 30 miles away and your team is defending for its life? Very hard... which is why I decided to turn off my phone, let nature take its course and enjoy the company.

Happily, when I finally had a look later that evening (karaoke and dodgy Dad dancing, thanks for asking) all was well in the World of Wealdstone. Ross had come on and won a penalty, which Dennon converted in dramatic style (the ball hitting one post and rebounding into the roof of the net off the other one) and now I had Chelmsford City at home on Tuesday night to look forward.

Not complacent, no. But honestly, 16 goals in the last four home games? Bring it on...

MATCHDAY 36 : TUES FEB 25 CHELMSFORD C (H) LOST 0-1

This game fell into the realm of "shock home defeat for the league leaders" and it's happened to every successful Wealdstone team in history. It even happened to Liverpool this season.

Fortunately, with two or even three games in hand on the chasing pack this was a surprise rather than a disaster. The Stones never found the type of irresistible fluidity that had blown away Bath, Billericay and Dorking (to a degree) in the previous home games, and Chelmsford came with a rigid five-at-the-back game plan that we never really managed to play through.

Their centre-backs Troy Brown and Elliott Ward were hugely experienced, and they were joined by our former No.5 Taofiq Olomowewe who enjoyed a huge slice of luck as we were chasing the game deep in the second half. You may remember this - it certainly made me livid at the time - but Moses Emmanuel found himself bearing down on goal, one on one with keeper Laurie Walker with Taofiq on the wrong side of him. Firstly T tugged Moses back on his shoulder, inside the box, and then he knocked him off balance just as he shaped to shoot.

This was a nailed-on penalty and red card... but the ball ran loose to Dennon Lewis and the ref waited. Walker plunged to his right to block Dennon's shot and we thought, well surely the ref waited for the advantage and that never came, so he must bring it back and award a penalty. But no - he gave a corner!

To be fair to the Clarets, though, they proba-

bly deserved the win with Tom Knowles tucking away an excellent goal in the first moments of the second half and then bringing two sensational saves from the Ox to keep it at just 1-0.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the magnificent Stones side of 1973-74 winning the Southern League (South) title will recall the gobsmacking 5-1 defeat by lowly Andover at Lower Mead. I came home numb. Even George Duck scored an own goal. Now THAT was shocking.

MATCHDAY 37: SAT FEB 29 DARTFORD (A) DREW 0-0

Okay, we're now officially in the home straight. Twelve games to play... and when you look through the list forensically and realistically, evaluating the tricky ones and the apparently straightforward, Dartford away is probably the toughest.

The Darts, rejuvenated under Steve King, had won their previous five home games and were making a late tilt at the play-offs, now in sixth place after a very patchy mid-season. Yet their Princes Park Stadium is an amazingly successful venue for the Stones as we've never lost there in seven previous games (won three, drew four) since the new ground opened in 2008.

This was some consolation as the game kicked off in bright sunshine with Darts flying out of the traps. The 1,400 crowd (300 in blue) made for a great atmosphere as probably the best 0-0 draw of the season unfolded... perhaps no great tribute as it was the ONLY goalless game, for us, of the season apart from Bristol Manor Farm in the FA Cup. But you know what I mean.

Anyway, you're probably wondering, how was I was feeling? How were my symptoms? Not too bad. Britain wasn't really aware of the virus spreading north-westwards and certainly the Government weren't taking it seriously - in fact this would be the first week when it was even mentioned as families returned from skiing breaks in viral Italy to mingle freely with their friends... and then start to fall ill.

Anybody with flu symptoms on this bright but chilly afternoon would have felt similarly

Handbags at Dartford: Mendy Mendy and Emmanuel try to heat up the battle in the bitter cold and hail of Princes Park



MATCHDAY 38: SAT MAR 7 DULWICH HAM (H) WON 2-1

Twitchy. Can't sleep. Inability to concentrate. Nervous exhaustion. None of these were relevant phrases.

After all, weren't we now facing a Dulwich side deep in relegation trouble? Level on points with 21st-placed St Albans? Hadn't they struggled despite an expensively-assembled squad? Wouldn't this be a routine home win, our 15th in 17 games at the Vale?

But at the back of our minds was the way Dulwich had come to Ruislip 12 months earlier and apparently derailed our play-off hopes with a deserved 3-1 win. And now they had the talented Jeffrey Monaka out wide, the solid Christian Smith in midfield and the excellent Marvin McCoy at right back, all former Stones of distinction.

Jeffrey famously blew hot and cold - and when he blew hot it was scalding. He seemed to be in that mood today, jinking in and out and forcing the Ox into an early save. Then he set up Lionel Ainsworth, who sounds like a 1950s band leader but is a clever and effective foil to the muscular Smith. His long-ranger cannoned off the crossbar and the Ox, desperate to be first to the loose ball, caught the rangy Danny Mills with an outstretched glove. Monakana despatched the spot kick.

Now, Jacob Mendy Mendy had been injured at Dartford and Connor Stevens managed to get

injured in the warm-up so our defence looked unbalanced and susceptible to the 6ft 5in Mills. In fact it wasn't until the hour mark - when Ryan Sellers came on for Sheppard and Sanchez Watt for the misfiring Clifford - that we took control, albeit for just ten minutes. Dulwich took off Mills and Smith at the same juncture and unwittingly played into our hands.

In 120 seconds the game was won. We forced a corner on the left after 67 minutes and Charles' corner was met beautifully at the near post by the soaring Efele. He had pulled our irons out of the fire at Havant and here he did it again, heading into the far corner to lift the Bulla crowd off its feet.

And the game had barely restarted when, amidst pandemonium, Stones pushed the assault button and Dulwich were wilting. They half-cleared to Danny Green on the left wing but his clipped cross was met by an astute header from Watt that flew across the grasping Charlie Grainger and into the far corner. 2-1!

The Bulla (sorry, Holywell Skip Hire) Stand had been bouncing a lot this season but those two quickfire goals sent the noise levels to a new high. This was a proper atmosphere. This was how it was going to be for the rest of the season as the promotion challenge intensified. Braintree, Hampton, Weymouth and Hemel Hempstead, all at home and glory now so close that you could almost touch it, taste it...

As we came out of the ground, I recall the first con-



Lucky boy, Taofiq.... our former defender (No.5) tugs back Moses Emmanuel in the box but the referee waved for an advantage. The ball ran to Dennon Lewis (No.11) but the Chelmsford keeper blocked his shot. No penalty, no sending off and no goal... this was wrong on every conceivable level!

Nowhere to shelter: the rain blows in at Dartford and our Megastore boys make a mental note of adding Stones oilskins and Sou'Wester's to the range of merchandise

Champions!



Pictures: Steve Foster/Aqueous Sun Photography

versation I had about the Coronavirus and football. "What was the non-handshake before the start all about? When they lined up as usual, but instead of shaking hands, just turned their backs and trotted off to their half of the pitch?"

"Dunno mate, unless it's 'cos of this virus thingy. It's just a precaution I suppose, not shaking hands. Be back to normal next week".

MATCHDAY 39: SAT MAR 14 CHIPPENHAM (A) DREW 1-1

Little did we know. With Italian football knocked on the head and most of Europe following suit, England's Premier League only sat up and took notice when Arsenal boss Manuel Arteta tested positive for Covid-19 on Friday March 13.

In our own little non-League bubble, I recall thinking that there would be bumper crowds for the National League matches as ALL the EFL games were now postponed. Even the bumping of elbows among Stones fans arriving at Chippenham seemed jokey and pretend. It was only when I pulled up outside the ground and recognised my old pal from Harrow Hywel Rees (who is a long-term Newport County fan and ex-director, now living in South Wales) in the next parking space and I asked him "Hi Hywel, what are you doing here?" and he said "Well, every game is off and I don't reckon I'll see any football for a while. Thought I'd better grab the chance". Then it sunk in. Football really was under threat. Let's re-phrase that: Everything was under threat.

From that moment on, walking into the Chippenham ground, swelled by hundreds of extra

fans wanting to see the table-toppers and get their hit of the football drug, it all seemed a bit surreal. There was real annoyance that our national sport was being suspended, yet a real sense of the unknown. And some fear too.

So what happened in this final game? Well, it had all the elements of the season so far, wrapped up in 90 minutes: neat, clever football, a little defensive vulnerability and a shockingly bad offside decision that probably cost us the win. But it ended in a 1-1 draw while over in Dorking, Havant & Waterlooville had come from behind to win 2-1 to cut the gap to just three points...although we still had a game in hand.

Chippenham were one of the form sides in the NLS, having won five of their last six and they surprised us with the ferocity of their early attacks. Just 15 minutes had gone when they led 1-0. Swindon Town loanee Scott Twine cracking a half volley past Aston Oxborough from a difficult angle at the far post.

We had spurned the best chance of that half when Michael Phillips spooned his shot over from 10 yards, but Stones gradually turned the screw, having to work hard on a bobbly pitch against pumped-up opposition. A terrific 16-pass move eventually unpicked the home defence which featured our ex right back Rhys Tyler - Watt, Clifford, Green and Lewis all combined to squeeze Michee Efete into a yard of space to the left of the box and he galloped through to shoot past Will Puddy. It was Mich's seventh goal of the season from full-back... probably the Stones' best return from that position since the days of Stuart Pearce.

Sanchez Watt should have made the points

safe when he took an extra touch in the six yard box, in front of an open goal, and Tyler flew across to block the shot. And then, in the final few minutes came that irritatingly poor decision from the assistant referee: Ashley Charles, in terrific, tenacious form, stole the ball in midfield but was brought down from behind just outside the box.

Chippenham were caught dozing for a moment as Ashley grabbed the ball, leaped to his feet and threaded a pass to the alert Moses Emmanuel, angling his run to stay a good yard inside. He finished in style past the stranded Puddy but the linesman had his flag raised. Why? Because he was slower than Moses, that's why. Even more annoyingly, the assistant referee smiled smugly at the crowd as he, obviously, knew best.

And that, dear reader, was that. A season that promised a fantastic climax, dissipated into nothingness. The weeks passed by as the country entered lockdown, frustrating and worrying for all of us on a national level, and desperately sad on a personal level as we were deprived of the companionship and framework to our lives that football provides.

Jurgen Klopp put it rather well. "Football is not as important as good health" he said, "But it is the most important of the unimportant things".

NB: But what of Moaners' Corner, you are no doubt thinking. Were they won over? I asked cynic-in-chief Nick Clark and he said simply: "The best footballing team in the league and the best team we've had in a very long time".

Like for ever.....



The final goal of the season: Michee Efete shoots past keeper Puddy at Chippenham (above) and then performs his off-seen celebratory dance with his pal Dennon Lewis! Pictures: Adam Williams and Steve Foster

An almighty Chipp on our shoulders: Why we will never forgive this assistant referee

Pictured below, the sequence that shows how Moses Emmanuel collects Ashley Charles quick-thinking free kick and shoots home. The slow-moving home defence are saved by the flag of the assistant referee. How on earth did he miss it?



Emmanuel (circled) is at least a yard this side of the defender as Charles plays the ball through..



Even now Emmanuel (circled) is STILL inside in the next frame.. in fact Rhys Tyler (far left) is playing him inside too



Frame three and Emmanuel (circled) is homing in on goal... Tyler (far left) even raises his arm to appeal for offside, knowing full well that he isn't



Chippenham are desperate now as Emmanuel (still circled) shoots past Puddy for what should have been 2-1 and three valuable points. Cruelly denied.



The Stones fans know exactly what has happened.. as does Ashley Charles (below) as he quizzes the assistant referee, who remains implacable :(



Not the epic terrace celebrations we'd hoped for, but Champions nonetheless



MARK HYDE (pictured left with the WFC President's Award) has edited the Stones match magazine for eight successful seasons.. and back-to-back NLS South Prog of the Year awards

The 32-year path that has paved the way for our return to the top flight of Non League Football has been a much documented tale of turmoil and anguish punctuated with some incredible highs.

And while the long, drawn-out process of meetings to plan meetings to plan outcomes over the last few months have been a disappointing tale of who blinks first in the boardrooms of the FA and League officials... it has resulted in Wealdstone FC back at the top of the tree. While not the epic terrace celebrations we began to dream of as our season unfolded, we are Champions nonetheless.

We certainly crammed a lot into the curtailed seven months that represented the 2019/20 season: Rumoured budget cuts, a new management team and a raft of new and returning ex-Stones kept Twitter and the Stones Net Forum as busy as always along with the pros, cons, strength & weaknesses of the pre season itinerary that Dean and his team largely inherited.

One thing was immediately apparent to the hardy souls that frequent those pre season fixtures was that embryonic squad could play some attractive football. One in particular, Dennon Lewis - despite a very public holiday - proved the early indications were no flash in the pan by walking away with both the Supporters Club Player and Junior Stones player of the year awards at the end(?) of season 'Virtual' Awards.

Early optimism after a 4-1 thrashing of Dartford at the Vale in our first league match was in true Stones fashion tempered just three days later in Dulwich. However just two weeks after our midweek trip to Champion Hill we hit the top with a win away at Hemel's Vauxhall Road... a position we would maintain for the remaining 27 league fixtures.

Even the most hardened, age-wearied Wealdstone fans who have endured so much over their time as supporters are on the whole uniform in their praise for what must be one of the most attractive teams ever to represent our great club.

So enjoy your memories and raise a glass to the Class of 19/20 either in a quiet moment of reflection or a socially distanced group of like minded people. On behalf of



Never saw the light of day: The programme for the Braintree game (March 21) was curtailed by Covid-19

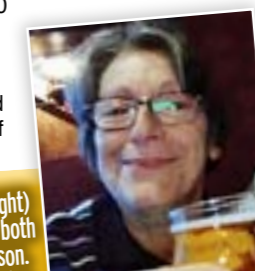
the Programme Team I would like to thank every one who has played a part in this story, the Board of Directors, the Supporters Club, all of our volunteers and every single one who contributed to the Budget.

Some personal thanks are also to my fellow team members here at Programme Towers, Tim Parks, Martin Read & Martin Lacey ... the sheer hours involved and dedication are staggering. Thanks also to Sudhir Rawal, Roger Slater, Dean Brennan and everyone else who has contributed this season - and for everyone involved at the Pop Up Bar for their endless promotion.

We are still the reigning **Vanarama National League South Programme of the Year** and have recently been awarded the Wealdstone Presidents Award, as well as the **M60 Programmes NLS programme of the year**. We produce a match programme we feel is worthy of you, our fantastic supporters so please keep buying to keep us motivated.

My final words are to thank and remember two very special people who on a personal level were always generous with their praise and encouragement but sadly lost to us recently and would have so loved to have witnessed this historic moment...

Miriam (Mim) Goodman and Mark (Markie) Barton... this one's for you. **Mark**



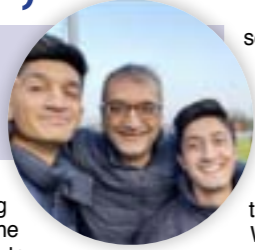
Miriam Goodman (pictured right) and Markie Barton (far right) both passed away during the season. They have left lasting memories

Champions!



'Brennanball was encapsulated by Dennon's goal at Welling: It was delightful, it was joyous... poetry in motion'

SUDHIR RAWAL (pictured right with his sons) jointly edited the Stones famous fanzine *Elmslie Ender* back in the 80s, 90s and noughties and is now celebrating the rebirth of the club



As we trooped out of Drill Field, one Bank Holiday Monday at the beginning of May 1988, our last away match in the Conference, little did we know that our return to the top-flight would take another three decades to occur.

A full coachload had travelled to Northwich Victoria to see a relegated side in its last throws. A dour 0-0 draw ensued. Our group had travelled up by train to nearby Hartford station and managed to get a lift in the back of an open-backed Land Rover from the ground back towards the station after the game. Sat with the likes of Jez Albert and Fingers, we had naively thought that we would storm back the following season, as we had done in 1982, the previous time we had fallen out of the highest division. How wrong we were.

That return has taken Wealdstone 32 years, a lost stadium, one that never was finished in our colours, five groundshares, and in true Wealdstone style, a pandemic that saw a curtailment of the season, with everyone wondering whether the easy option of null and void would be taken by the powers to be.

Whilst there were and are more important things to worry about, the sense of not being able to celebrate the title, to enjoy, with those that you have watched football with for the whole season and more, the financial implications of missing out on big crowds and the passion and sheer joy of a vibrant bar after the match and end of season celebration, doesn't diminish from Wealdstone being finally, after three decades, back dining at the top table.

In May of 2019, I am not sure, after the gut-wrenching defeat at Woking, many people would have thought we would be where we are. The Marmite-like Bobby Wilkinson gave the board an ultimatum that it could not acquiesce to and Wilkinson was gone.

The budget was to be reduced from the eye popping levels that it had grown to and a new man would have to rebuild a new team as many of those that took us to the play offs moved on to pastures new.

The management appointment would be key. The Stones manager's job is still a very sought-after one, and within the substantial number of applications were

some big hitters in non-league circles - and some very up and coming ones too. When the announcement of Dean Brennan and former Stone Stuart Maynard was made, I think it would be fair to say there was a collective meh!

Why? Possibly because it seemed a safe choice, someone that had worked at this level with relative success before but had a couple of difficult short stints elsewhere since. As football fans we do not necessarily know why things do not pan out at football clubs. At Kingstonian, Brennan's son was involved in a serious road accident and he left, whilst no sane person can ever judge anyone by what happens at Billericay, particularly under the Glen Tamplin regime. For me, as I said, it was a safe appointment, not one that raced the heart. Hemel were notorious fast starters, that scored plenty of goals, leaked a few too, but also that used to fall away as the season wore on. How wrong we were.

In the time away from football, Deano's black book was acquiring names aplenty and when the signings were being made during last summer, I do not think a single person, certainly supporter, predicted a title charge. Not one. The signings were not recognizable names. But the squad grew, a team that had something to prove as to a man they had probably not performed to their levels the season before. A belief in themselves was instilled and a style of play was about to be unleashed that was as entertaining and exciting as many of us have ever seen at Wealdstone.

I first started going properly to Wealdstone at the flag-end of the 1974 season and cannot pretend that I can remember too much about our style of play, though a team with Duck, Henderson and Byrne could be nothing but entertaining.

But, in the time since, whether it was the Alan Cordice-inspired Southern League grand slam side or the Brian Hall-regimented double winning team - or Gordon Bartlett's finest side, with Glen Little and Tom Pett pulling the strings, that won the Ryman League - no Wealdstone side has played as entertaining and enjoyable football as the vintage of 2019-20 have.

It has been fast paced, played on the front foot, with wingers overloading at the fore. It has been a joy to watch. We were the best footballing side by far in the National South, scoring the most goals, playing the most

beautiful football that was dubbed Brennanball, which was never better encapsulated than by the "Goal of the Season" from double Player of the Year Dennon Lewis at Welling.

It was delightful. It was joyous. It was poetry in motion. We deserved the title. We deserved our promotion. The match at Weymouth was as good a game of football that you could have wished to have seen and deserved to have been played at a much higher level. Who will ever forget the victory at Havant and Waterlooville, with over 400 Stones fans supplying immense support, and the drubbing of second place, yes second placed, Bath City at the Vale by seven goals to nil a week later. Only the five wins in eight days towards the end of the double winning season has given Wealdstone fans a better week's football.

As Wealdstone sustained a title challenge, crowds were flocking to the Vale. The final average was 1,030, which would have been higher still if the season had seen a conclusion. It is still the highest since 1974/75, the local community and youngsters in particular embracing their team about to make history. The bars were packed post-match. The atmosphere vibrant. The Vale was the place to be in HA4.

I have watched Wealdstone with my eldest son Akhil at my side for several years now, but my youngest, Nik, normally to be seen at Stamford Bridge, was on the Stones bandwagon too. Football with my boys, watching a fantastic football side, doesn't get better. Those dark days at Yeading, where we averaged 196 and 192, and in the first season saw the worst Wealdstone side in living memory, seemed a lifetime ago.

Instead, this coming season, we could well be hosting the likes of Notts County, Chesterfield, Wrexham and our old local rivals Barnet at the Vale. Who could have imagined? We still do not know whether social distancing will allow football fans to attend matches when the season does eventually commence or if they are, how much ground capacities might be reduced.

So, if they are, if tickets are limited to games, just remember: if you were NOT at the 6-0 home drubbing by Newport IOW or when we had 124 at home for a league match against Baldock Town at Yeading - the season where we were saved from basically park football by another team being up the creek financially more than us - you are at the back of the queue for tickets at PEPF against Barnet! Those days must count for something!

As supporters, it has been a joy to be part of this season. From the players to our management duo, a flaming well done and thanks for the entertainment! Let Brennanball loose on the National division...



The size and quality of squad you need for success! WFC line up (back row, left to right) Jacob Mendy Mendy, Reece Beckles-Richards, Kavan Cotta, Ryan Sellers, Dejon Noel-Williams, Matthew Saunders. Middle row: Abbey Maunders (sports therapist), Gary King (coach), Michee Efete, Afolabi Coker, Michael Phillips, Aston Oxborough, Jonathan North, Joe Ringer, Connor Stevens, Jacob Cook, Ross Lafayette, Kirk Rayment (coach), Tony Waugh (kit manager). Front row: Danny Green, Dennon Lewis, Billy Clifford, Nick Arnold, Stuart Maynard (asst manager), Dean Brennan (manager), Jerome Okimo, Connor Smith, Sanchez Watt, Jake Sheppard. Insets: Ashley Charles, George McLennan & Moses Emmanuel

'I've loved every last minute working with this board, those players and the incredible fans'

Stones' Chairman RORY FITZGERALD has presided over the resurgence of the club. Here he talks to TIM PARKS about his new passion



"I was a huge Arsenal fan for many, many years - had a season ticket, enjoyed corporate hospitality and saw some fantastic players in fantastic stadiums. But then I got a bit disillusioned and Paul Rumens asked me if I could help out a bit at Wealdstone... well, non-League was an eye-opener to be honest, poor facilities, some poor matches and with my thriving business, three young children and a wife to think about I was time poor. Did I really want to get involved?"

"But very soon I realised how many good people, passionate people, there were at Wealdstone and I got the bug!"

I asked Rory: "Do you remember the conversation we had, soon after you'd become Chairman, when you blamed El Presidente Paul squarely for dragging you into it! Are you a bit happier now with that level of involvement?"

"I've loved every minute of the last season" he confessed. "Absolutely loved it. And the long-drawn-out announcement that we are Champions has made all the hard work worthwhile."

"You know, we've got such a good board of directors; we're all aligned in our thinking and we pull together. We thought we could achieve success together but the major element was getting Deano and Stuart on board this time last

year. It was a brave decision to sack Bobby Wilkinson but we really just couldn't see how he was going to work with our objectives - getting in good, hungry young players in a competitive budget and building that environment.

"And he's had to be flexible. The boys were getting tired around Christmas time but we found the finances to get in people like Adam Coombes and Moses Emmanuel - and Mo in particular made a massive difference, giving everyone a boost."

"And now we've got a squad who are going places. The young players like Dennon, Michee, Ashley and Connor Stevens know that they have a big platform next season to show what they can do, while the more experienced ones like Ross, Jerome and Connor Smith have been crucial as the season went on."

"But we are a bit short on numbers now and Dean and Stuart will have the chance to bring in a few more players - I think we need a bit more physicality and experience at National level. We will get some information on who they are in the next few weeks."

And how will that be financed? "Well, we'll have the same business model as last season - a tight ship, but we'll have some TV money plus extra gate receipts. You'll probably know that we've been expanding the stadium, and now with extra concrete terracing at the side of the main stand the capacity will be up to 3,500. That's important because, when we

kick off the new season in September there will be some social distancing and we are told we can only operate at 50 or 75% capacity we can still get a decent crowd in, and the money that generates."

There has also been a huge amount of reconfiguring going on at Grosvenor Vale this past couple of months. The dressing rooms have had to be enlarged in line with National League specifications, plus three toilet blocks have been installed, one next to the main turnstiles, and two (one a disabled facility) in the area behind the Megastore. Plus there will be extra turnstiles in that same area of the ground to help with the increased number of away fans next season.

But what about the lease situation at the Vale? "Well, we only have three years remaining on the lease and that does hamper the amount of work we want to do on the ground. If we had it extended, we'd have access to Football Trust funding for new stands and increased capacity. There is a lot going on behind the scenes to get more security for the club."

"What amazes me is how far the Stones have come in 15 years. And how loyal and passionate people have been. The crowds have been record-breaking, the biggest in over 30 years and we're just pleased to have rewarded them with this success. We've known for a month that we'd almost certainly be promoted and it's frustrating because there are so many things we want to get on with."

"But now we can press the button!"



Ground-breaking, and often banned from the ground... an Elmslie Ender (with the revered Elmslie Stand in the background) edition in the 1986-7 season. Picture is from the home Swansea FA Cup tie

Champions!

BACK STORY

..or how, this time, we can genuinely celebrate a return to our former glory

World of Ball



MARTIN READ's World of Ball page has decorated the Stones programme on an ad-hoc basis throughout the last eight years: Wacky, obscure, opinionated are just three of the most printable things I've heard to describe it. But always readable!



I've never seen Stones start at such a blistering pace, burning through the opposition like a hot knife through butter. What an unforgettable autumn and winter, and what a beautiful side to watch.

It's important to note that when the coronavirus eventually stopped play, we'd topped the National League South table for **SEVEN MONTHS STRAIGHT**. And as others will surely write, our achievement is no less real for the circumstances behind the season's sudden ending, nor less real for our inability to celebrate it properly.

Still, the abiding frustration is that we've been robbed of being present to see it transpire; Stones fans across the generations staggering up to each other in wide-eyed amazement on a day that would have made 'Wealdstone 7 Bath City 0' seem more 'Concord 0 Wealdstone 0' by comparison.

I've been asked to throw in some stats, so here goes: Our return journey to non-league's top table has involved five changes of ground, six full-time managers and more than 850 first-team players.

But it's not really the stats that matter. What matters is that, after all this time, we're still Wealdstone Football Club. The fact that we haven't become 'AFC Wealdstone', nor 'Harrow &' or any other mutant variant, is the result of so much hard graft from so many people that it defies easy chronicling. Whenever the club faced jeopardy over that 32-year span, it was the fans who stepped up to steer the Stones clear of the rocks. It's an incredible story.

Speaking of fans, those three decades have inevitably robbed us of all too many fellow supporters who can now only look down from above, clearing their throats in preparation to join in with the rest of us.

Because yes, it's time to find our voices. After all, we've only gone and done it: Come full circle; returned to the summit; rejoined the non-league elite. For the first time since Thatcher and Reagan, since before the internet, mobile phones and Sky TV, we can genuinely crow about a glorious return to a league we once won. And since we can't all be in one place, let's at least make the singing of it in our internal monologues as loud as possible, eh? Notts County, Hartlepool, Chesterfield, Stockport, Wrexham, and, sure, even you Barnet – listen up:

"Hello, hello, Wealdstone are back, Wealdstone are back..."

quarter of the club's entire playing history.

Of course, every division we've hauled ourselves out of – this being our fourth promotion and third title since 1988 – has not really allowed us to talk of being 'back' as such, just one step closer to being back.

When we have found ourselves at an equivalent level to where we'd once been, non-league restructuring has managed to rather dampen the impact. Dulwich 2004 is a case in point, being essentially an ecstatic avoidance of relegation given the pyramid restructuring that spawned it. Joining or transferring across from some newly created 'step' or 'tier' hasn't afforded us the necessary sense of returning to shout "hey, did you miss us?" at our opponents. It's like leaving a house, seeing it demolished and replaced, then shouting through the letterbox: "Hey honey, I'm home!"

This time is very different. Elsewhere in this celebration special Tim has documented every kick of this glorious season, reporting it as being like no other. And boy, is he right about that! It's all the result of a bold board putting in place a new manager who swiftly deconstructed a side that had made the 2018/19 play-offs, taking such seemingly counter-intuitive steps as benching our best and most loyal player.

But by God, Dean Brennan's formula worked.

Premier. Fortunately, parallels between the following 1981/1982 season and the one we've just enjoyed are many. Both saw an inspired change in management team and a Stones side running up 4, 5, 6 and even 7 goal margins as we overpowered all in our path.

Division, Cup, Championship - we took everything the Southern League had to offer in 1982. So naturally, 'Wealdstone are back' was a justified and throaty response when our promotion was confirmed.

Three further years of positive progress were capped with the ultimate prize on 11th May 1985. Then, in 1988, when relegation came for us a second time, we'd spent eight of our then 89 seasons at National Premier level. Not that long, perhaps. But we were objectively one of non-league's top clubs, so we'd soon be back... wouldn't we?

Alas, our Lower Mead troubles saw us retreat slowly from the limelight, watching on as such innovations as automatic promotion to the Football League came to pass. Ultimately, we ended up self-isolating to the nether regions of the Isthmian League, triggering survival mode for fear of extinction. The road back, including our climb from Isthmian League Division Three to National League Premier, has taken 32 years. Thirty-two years, people! More than a generation, more than a mortgage's worth, and more than a



Stones' President PAUL RUMSENS (above, finally coming off the wagon on a memorable June 27 with son Sam) knows better than anyone the club's arduous journey back to non-League's top table...

25 years ago I told players 'This is the first step on the road back to the Conference'.. it took longer than I thought!

At five minutes to seven on that now-famous Wednesday night, I got the call from Rory to finally confirm we were champions and definitely going up: Total and absolute joy!

I have to admit I shed a tear or three as this has been a very very long time coming and in the making for a lot of people at our great club. Sadly some are no longer with us.

But what a turnaround since early May last year when the club took the bold decision to change the management after the play-off semi-final defeat at Woking.

Hats off to our Chairman Rory, along with Nick, Dom, Andy and Mark on the board to carry out due process and appoint what has now proved to be a masterstroke and install Dean and Stuart in the hot seats. Alongside them came Gary, Kirk and Matty as the back room staff plus stalwart Tony (aka Kitman) together with the physios Abi, Leah & Rosie - and the rest as they say is history!

What an incredulous journey we've all been on, culminating in rightfully being declared Champions of National League South. Not in the manner we wanted it, but it will do nonetheless.

A huge debt of gratitude goes to this relatively hastily-assembled but talented group of players led by skipper Jerome Okimo as only five survived the management turnaround last May - truly and utterly remarkable.

There are many others around our fantastic club that are deserving of a thank you off the field without doubt too - you know who you are - so from Rory, myself and the board a wholehearted THANK YOU!

It was really interesting to see on Twitter the comments from former Captain Fergus Moore regaling the story of Gordon Bartlett's opening competitive match away at Cove in 1995 when I was Chairman and going into the dressing room to tell the players that we were on our tentative first steps of starting our own road back to the Conference. They thought I was nuts!

The fact is that privately (in late 1992 when I had become vice chairman of the club) I made that my goal... but little did I know it would take 28 seasons for us to get there though!

Talking of social media, there was a thread on the forum debating if this season's achievement is **THE BEST** in the club's 120-odd year history given the context, the circumstances and the finances. Well, I've got to agree with the overall

sentiment that this IS the greatest achievement on the park - the Double-winning team ran it a close second, and let's not forget the '66 Amateur Cup winning side, while the '51/52, '73/74 and '81/82 title winning sides were all pretty bloody special - but, for me, this is the pinnacle and YOU were there! That's some claim when you consider we only got see three quarters of the season completed.

Off the field, 'Walton's Left Boot's' comment "As a club, we survive. That's our greatest achievement" - was absolutely right you know.

Lastly on social media I loved the Stones stories by both @GlennyRodge and @shaunjlawson - the latter who chronicles the club's ups but mainly downs since 1991 when we left our spiritual home Lower Mead and concludes (pictured below left) that the greatest catalyst, the individual who made the most difference is the man who moved into the hottest of hot seats in 1995 and made it his own as manager for the next 22 years... Gordon Bartlett."

Again, absolutely right.

Going forward, we are going to need masses of help on match days and during the week particularly not least of all because of Covid health issues and the huge step up in professionalism that will be required to maintain our club at this new level. And ever more so if we all want to stay there! Please come forward and see me or any official at the club if you can spare some time. The club will NOT prosper without this type of assistance.

We must all really enjoy this occasion and celebrate like there is no tomorrow because this has been an amazing season - if we keep playing this brand of football in the National League I'm sure more and more people will be flocking down to HA4 to be entertained and we can average 1,500+ gates. We are after all a football club so let's play the game as it should be played - I can assure you plenty of the teams at the next level won't. Who knows where it's going to take us but one thing is for sure... we're not there to make up the numbers!

It will be a big ask but we have some very capable people both on and off the pitch - so watch this space!

Finally a huge mention to you, the fans, for continually being the 12th man. We will need you more than ever, not just at home but at some pretty far-flung places next season as we push onwards and upwards.....

UP THE STONES!

Shaun Lawson (Isth... - Jun 18) But the greatest hero of all - without whom, none of this would've been possible! The man who moved into the hottest of hot seats in 1995, and made it his own as manager for the next TWENTY-TWO years. Gordon Bartlett. Imagine that. 22 years at one football club: transforming its onfield status, while dealing with constant turmoil and frustration off it. Sacrificing what would've been a career at a much higher level too. All because he loved the club, loved its supporters and believed in it.



WHEN WE WERE KINGS: Splendidly grainy picture of Robin Wainwright and Steve Perkins hugging at Kettering on the penultimate day of the 1984-85 season, knowing that we had just won the Gola League (Conference) title



TROPHY TIME: Skipper Paul Bowgett lifts the Conference trophy at Barnet on the final day



THIGHS THE LIMIT: Tony Lynch and Danny Bailey imposed themselves in midfield in the 1987-88 season... but it was still our last in the Conference National. Until now!

Champions!

Danny Green has come a long way from the peripheral figure who decorated the midfield for, firstly, Gordon Bartlett and then Bobby Wilkinson.

He's come a long way from the player who scored a worldie freekick three years ago against Bognor and then, to make his point against being dropped, barely celebrated the crucial goal.

And he's come a long way from the player who was angry at the world (and, more specifically, his then-Dagenham boss John Still) for ending his dream of a long career in the Football League.

"But my Dad's still desperate for me to play in the EFL!" laughed Danny when I phoned him on the day of the Stones' confirmation as NL South champions.

"We were talking about this the other day; about my chances of actually getting into the League with Wealdstone and while it seems a bit far-fetched it's still a dream of mine.

"Even going into the National division is a big step-up. The core of the team this season all have jobs and wouldn't find it easy to train a few mornings a week in addition to the evenings, as many of the sides in that division do. So it'll be all about putting in the hard yards when you can; a lot more recovery work because we'll be travelling further afield and the tiredness that comes with that; it'll be a jog and swim on a Sunday on your own; plus more work on videos and assessing the opposition.

"Our rivals will all be a lot fitter so we'll have to combat that".

Blue is the colour, Green is the name

Danny shares a few thoughts about the magical 2019-20 season, and the months ahead....



Danny has been consistently brilliant this season, linking the play, stretching the opposition, providing endless assists and even winning the ball in the air! So has this (shortened) campaign been the best of his four years at the Stones?

"It's been incredible! So enjoyable being at the top of the table for so long and the confidence that that brings. This group of players have really clicked, on and off the pitch and that's very rare. It's through that that our success has come - last season wasn't bad but it's been a different style of play under Dean.... more playing between the lines, getting into little pockets of space where you can hurt teams.

"Bobby Wilkinson let us cut loose in the final third, but often it was a long ball to get to those areas and that was difficult at times."

I've heard Danny called 'The non-League Guti' after Real Madrid's Spanish playmaker, but it wasn't until

I sat down and watched a few YouTube clips that I realised how apt that comparison is. Keeping his head up, the ball tied to his laces and threading exquisite passes in to his colleagues.

"My dad calls me the poor man's Rui Costa, and I'm happy with either of those" laughs the midfielder who is only just behind Jerome Okimo in the current squad's most-appearances record on 170. In fact, add Danny's 21 appearances off the bench and he just edges ahead of the skipper.

He'll be 30 in August ("into the twilight years!") but definitely wants to carry on combining his football with his day job as a Key Account Holder for ATS Euromaster, a car servicing business with major contracts among the public services. He lives just north of Harlow, in Essex.

"I'm field-based, which is very flexible and helps with football commitments. My wife's been furloughed so she can help with home-schooling our six year old son (they also have a two year old daughter) but I just can't wait to get back to real training... and celebrating the title properly!"

By Tim Parks

And now, Mr Brennanball himself...

Dean Brennan is a man in demand. "After talking to you, Tim, I've got an interview for the non-League show and then an interview for the non-League paper. I love to talk but to be honest, I just want to get back training and working with the players."

And also adding names to his famous Little Black Book of course... which must be bulging at the moment as football sheds its players in never-before-seen numbers.

"It's a buyer's market, to be sure" said Dean. "I've just received lists from League One & League Two clubs and you're seeing things like Stevenage losing 20 players, Lincoln losing 12, Carlisle 15 players... pro football is in a mess and I think clubs are going to operate on much smaller squads, bolstering numbers with loan deals and signings from the Category One academies. If you're a professional with an

extra year on your contract at the moment you're a very lucky boy".

Dean admitted that the Stones would have sold three or four young players to EFL clubs during this summer if it weren't for the pandemic.

"Covid-19 has altered the face of football enormously. We've benefitted because we can offer these players another year on their contract and they are going to have to realise the new economics of the game.

"I've been a player, and after a successful season of course you'd be thinking 'I want more money, I want to be rewarded' and normally that would be the case. We'll look after our players but the whole footballing landscape has changed"

So will the Stones be training more often next season as we face up to the new levels in the National League?



Best-ever signings: Dean Brennan (left) and Stuart Maynard (right) put pen to paper for chairman Rory Fitzgerald 13 months ago. What an amazing first year it's been!

The club's own awards went to...

WEALDSTONE SUPPORTERS PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND YOUNG STONES PLAYER OF THE YEAR



DENNON LEWIS

GOLDEN BOOT AWARD



ROSS LAFAYETTE

CHAIRMAN'S AWARD



MICHEE EFETE

MARK BARTON TROPHY



DAVE READER

PRESIDENT'S AWARD



PETER EDWARDS

PRESIDENT'S AWARD



MARK HYDE & THE PROGRAMME TEAM

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the 2019-20 season, where the usual disappointing reality never arrived

MARTIN LACEY (right) jointly edited the *Elmslie Ender* magazine back in the day and now prints the club's programme (and all club publications, such as this one) at knockdown prices from his own business www.peopleforprint.co.uk in Sheffield. And still travels down!



It is my considered opinion that all football fans are optimists.

This may come as a surprise to those of you who know Wealdstone supporters, but not too well, who think of us as a bunch of gloomy, despondent, fatalistic old gits (and a few gittesses) to whom confidence and expectation are exotic strangers.

Let me let you in on a secret: this is an act, a charade we put on as a defence against being proved wrong. Act like you expect the worst and nobody will ever say 'I told you so.' Truth is, when that fixture list comes out every July, we look down the schedule and think, privately, 'We can beat them, we can beat them, we can beat them...' and before you know it we've convinced ourselves we'll be champions by February.

Then you meet all the old faces in the bar before the first match and grumble, 'Mid-table if we're lucky...' And by the end of August reality has arrived and that genetically ingrained optimism is now being employed to fantasize about a couple of easy draws in the early rounds of the cup and a gentle march to the first round and beyond, disposing of Harrow Borough and

Barnet en route, perhaps with a dignified third round exit at Watford, where we can all nick a couple of seats that we've paid for", maybe to go with the ones we've nicked from the Hive in the second round.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the 2019-20 season, the one where reality never arrived.

Living, as I do, 150 miles from Ruislip I only get to between ten and twenty matches per season. I tend to pick these matches quite randomly and seldom by their level of importance.

I love watching Wealdstone: Everything about the whole matchday experience, the train-beer-football, the utter fanaticism, the affable camaraderie, the scarcely bearable tension and anticipation. I love watching Wealdstone win, and hate seeing them lose.

I take one match at a time, and don't really worry where the result is leading us. Winning is good, losing is bad, that's all. However, if I'm miserable and losing my equilibrium at 5.00, generally by 6.00 I'm on the mend. This is the nature of supporting a 'small' club like Wealdstone. Sometimes you're going to lose. In fact, quite often you're going to lose.

Losing makes the winning all the sweeter. For every Cambridge United there's got to be a Burgess Hill, for every Southport there's a Biggleswade, for those forty years when we could barely nick a point from Bath City there's a last minute Joe Turner winner and now, that January 7-0 destruction that will live long in

the memory (your memory, not mine. I wasn't there). I have to make do with the consolation of seeing the dismantling of Havant the previous week. By the way, Bath City fans consider us to be their bogey side.

How boring must it be supporting Manchester City? Of course, put this question to a Manchester City fan and they'll respond, 'Yeah, but I remember when we were s**t', to which you say, 'Yes, you remember when Man City were s**t, but you didn't actually go to the games.'

I have now been watching Wealdstone for forty-nine years and I promise you, of all the things that might discourage me from going to matches, being a bit s**t isn't one of them. I remember 1993-94.

This season past we've seen some scintillating football, not for ninety minutes of every match of course, but enough that we've started getting used to it, and breathtaking moments of skill that leave you wide-mouthed in admiration.

It's been a strange feeling. Dean Brennan has worked miracles in putting together a team of underrated, under the radar and possibly underpaid (whoops, probably shouldn't have said that) players who have defied expectation and given us a year to remember.

Forum regulars will recognise the line of thought of those who claimed they didn't want us to get promoted because we 'weren't ready'. Errm... ready for what exactly? Notts County? We can beat them. Stockport? We can beat them. Torquay? We can beat them. It's been thirty two years. I'm more than ready.



A long road travelled: Martin began his Wealdstone-watching in April 1971, here at Lower Mead

*For our younger fans, Wealdstone had to bale out of a hugely expensive groundshare with Watford in 1993, effectively paying for their new Vicarage Road end stand. And had half-completed The Hive before having to bale out of that venture too. But we're over that now