



STAR FANS' FORUM – Thursday 8th May 2008
Guest: Steve Coppell

The following questions were answered at the STAR Fans' Forum on Thursday May 8. The meeting was chaired by Jon Keen and the Guest of Honour was Steve Coppell. Steve was given a standing ovation by the audience of approximately 200 STAR members – both on arrival and also at the end of the meeting.

Current & Past

1. *Win, lose or draw at Derby will you remain as manager at Reading Football Club (please).*

Thanks for the welcome – I was a little bit anxious on the way here tonight! Ever since I have been here you – the fans – have been wonderful, through good times and bad. At the moment I feel responsible for what is happening. With 20/20 hindsight I might have done things differently. At the time I didn't want to "reward" players who had done so well by getting rid of them. Then there are problems attracting players who are better than what we have already got. I prefer to work with a small squad of 18 or 19 – but to have the best I can afford. It is difficult for us to get our targets – the big boys don't want to come here. We can't attract those at the end of their careers looking for a last big contract because of our wage structure. Consequently I had to buy 'potentials' who have not attained any degree of status – but who maybe don't have the "Reading mindset". So the season was sticky from day 1... We felt we were undone by international breaks almost always being followed by long away trips.

On Sunday even Derby will be looking to put on a show. If we stay up it will be a better achievement than Arsenal finishing third! There will be a flurry of activity on Monday with people pondering their future – myself included. Do I have anything to offer any more [whether we stay up or go down]? It may be time for a reckoning and a change. I have made some mistakes, and it may not even be my decision to make. I really enjoy being here, but I can't categorically say "yes, I will stay". It will take a couple of days thought after the weekend. This has been my most draining season since relegation at Palace.

2. *Will you be talking to 'Arry at Portsmouth before Sunday's match and asking him for a favour?*

We played Pompey reserves recently and I chatted to Harry and congratulated him on reaching the Cup Final. We discussed the last games and he said "Fulham should be OK" [sadly they were!] – and I have wondered whether to phone him and remind him! Once in the past Millwall promised to try in the last game to help me – but they went on the piss for 6 days after promotion! Pompey will want to go to the

Final having had a win – this is their big occasion and many of them won't be there again. But no matter what happens at Portsmouth we need to win and to "dance as if no one is watching". We need to be confident...there is a subtle line between being too uptight and playing as you can. At the end of the day we need to trust in the integrity of the League.

3. *There are persistent rumours that Gary O'Neill was about to be signed by Reading in the summer but wasn't, and similar for Gary Cahill and Matthew Taylor. Was there any interest from Reading in signing these players?*

When Sidwell was leaving we agreed a £4 million fee for Scott Brown who finally went to Celtic. However, his agent wouldn't even bring him to look at the facilities and to meet us unless we offered a guaranteed minimum wage in advance. Our reputation had gone before us. After that O'Neill was a possibility – but we believed Glen Little would be back and we suffered from him not being a magnificent physical specimen! I decided Cahill was not £5 million better than what we have got already. I want a team not just another player. Taylor was not really on, but we had a slight interest with the chance of Shorey going... Maybe I should have gone for it...

4. *After the Newcastle and Fulham games it was clear that personnel changes were required, which you recognised. Six changes were made. Newspaper reports and fans' views differed as to your thought process for the changes made as follows - "Teaching those left out a lesson, giving the new ones a chance to prove themselves, saving the important players for the final remaining 3 games as Arsenal were always going to win, tactical eg Walcott's speed" Please clarify what was your thought process. Thanks.*

It is hard to clarify. I like to chat to players and sometimes it is just a gut feeling – no list of reasons. I like to watch games on video and assess the problems. I ponder what has gone wrong and then watch videos of teams we are going to play. Some teams you just have to think "they are better than us" so you know they will win if they play well. So we have to try to stop them performing. So by making some very poor performances some players have let me down. Some may not play well but still help to gel the team together... Possession of the shirt is nine tenths of the law in the team. But if we are not playing well some changes can be made. It may be to shake some up. There is no single reason for changes. My neck is on the block – so I pick the team. I have been waiting all season for a team to leap out at me as being the best. I don't think anyone has had a great season. If a player knows he won't play he may not contribute. We have had a few simmerers who want to play as those in the team are also poor. So there is no specific reason for changes.

5. *The many changes that have occurred in recent weeks hints of panic. Is there any chance that we could rely on a tried and tested formula against Derby - the most important single match for RFC since the Bolton play off game? For example include Murty, Bikey at the back and the most exciting and skilful player in the current squad Marek Matejovsky.*

Yeah [laughs]. It is down to interpretation. We need to combine experience with skill and creativity. There is a good chance Marek will play – but I'm not going to reveal the team tonight!

I want experience with a bit of freshness...

6. *Why not involve James Henry or recall Hal Robson-Kanu and Jem Karacan, the experience would be great for them and they couldn't do any worse than some recent performance?*

I agree. But I have at least 24 players and 12 on loan. Henry didn't even get a game at Norwich. Hal and Jem also did well on loan – but were not guaranteed a game. I think if I pick these guys who don't get a game in lower leagues people will think I am panicking! I haven't had a combination which has stood out for several games in a row and it wouldn't be logical to pick these players.

7. *You have presided over the most successful period in RFCs long but relatively empty history and for the "true" fans we have had a fantastic journey and lived our dreams. Expectation levels have been raised which brings more pressure for success. RFC has probably spent less on transfers than any other premier club over the last 2 seasons - putting the BIG top 4 clubs to one side do you feel you have been "disadvantaged" this season compared to your peers at the other clubs?*

Yes and no. Cash has been available for purchases. We identify talent and have a think tank. Then we rule out those who won't come or we can't afford. We can afford the fee more than the wages. If you smash the wage structure those already here will cause anarchy. It needs to be a progression. To advance to the next level you need to smash everything. For us £10 million in spending was a realistic sum.... To impact you need to have £50 – 100 million. For us to compete there has to be massive investment. For 18 months Mr Madejski has wanted to sell the Club. There can be problems. The new breed of owner likes to interfere. It will be like a Manchester City. They don't want **A** say – they want **THE** say. We really need massive, massive investment. With self sufficiency every decision has to be right – and I have got some wrong...

8. *Please explain the two performances we've had to endure at home to Bolton and Fulham, two performances that did really matter. Please also explain why, when the cards are on the table, the players generally let you, the fans and themselves down.*

Hmmm, it is difficult to explain these. Obviously last season was an extension of our dream of a promotion season. Sometimes I wondered how we won when we didn't deserve to... This season we got what we deserved – but the great thing is we can still get out of trouble. On each of those occasions we were poor. This season when we go behind we seem to feel we are going to lose. I really don't know why we are struggling. Prozone stats show we run further than any other team, so it shows effort is there. We worked so, so hard against Spurs in the first half and Prozone stats exceeded our recent games. We need to find a blasé arrogance, a belief that if we make a mistake we can handle it – the same as in training. All the players are out there working hard even before training officially starts.

Players & Staff

9. *What has happened to Nicky Shorey this season? Have he (and others) been influenced by agents?*

No – just his desire. He was close to Sid – who is now a very wealthy young man. We offered him the best ever RFC deal after his cap, but he prefers to move. We tried to find a replacement. I told him West Ham had offered £4 million – but with Everton having bought an uncapped defender for £6 million he agreed it was unrealistic to accept that! We need the market value. Since then there has been no interest. We never got a better offer. He feels unsettled and hasn't matched last year's performances. I told him that to get away in the Summer he needs to play well – and he is really trying hard. He is committed and could be the man to keep us up; but he is almost guaranteed to move away.

10. Graham Murty will the testimonial game or games be his last contribution in a Reading shirt?

I have told him he is fit and can play on. It may not be a full stop with his Testimonial, perhaps a heavy comma. I hope he will want to stay and play. If he wants to compete he will take some shifting.

11. What's the current position re: Leroy Lita, will he be back in a Reading shirt next season?

He is buzzing in training and has a good mentality. He is strong and fit. He was very disillusioned before his loan spell so it was ideal for him to go to Charlton. He has come back at game speed so it was good.

It is pointless discussing next season at the moment. Several players will look for new challenges next season.

12. Kevin Doyle works hard and gets about the pitch, however as a striker his primary role is to score goals which is something has not been managing this season, with this in mind how is it he keeps his place in the side rather than trying a combination of Kitson and Long or Kitson and Lita?

The only one not to get a real chance was Longy. Leroy has started but has not scored a league goal. Doyle has as many strikes as before – but is not scoring. Kits has 9 – but only 1 since the New Year. All of them have had opportunities. I have stuck with Kits as he gives us something different. He has a good physical presence and is a good target man. He is great at set pieces defensively.

None of them has succeeded. But back in August I believed our forwards would always score goals.

13. In August at the Fans Forum we were told that there was a new right winger ready to come to replace Blakey if his injury did not respond quickly – what happened, did the player go elsewhere or did you decide John Oster was better?

That might have been a bluff! Might have been O'Neill... It has been a big blow for Blakey. His contract is up this Summer so you can imagine how hard he has worked to get a new deal. His future will be decided next week.

14. Some Managers have not been too happy with the behaviour of Wally and Kev during matches and don't feel you have sought to rein them in- How do you plead?

Well it is difficult. Wally was only involved once – and Warnock got what he deserved! Wally is in the tech area more and I've asked him only to speak if it is worth saying! The Dill / Keane issue should not have been made public.

15. RFC used to be one of the fittest teams in the league. this year we seem to have tired in the last 10 minutes - has the training changed/is the sports scientist doing his job?

Prozone shows we run further than any other team. I reckon if we do so much running it shows a lack of control and we need to run further to cover other teams. We have mixed up training and switched weekly patterns. We have tried to keep them fresh. They have given their all physically and mentally they are battered. Sometimes we succeed, other times less so... Tomorrow and Saturday we will wind down and keep fresh legs for Sunday.

16. In view of the number of goals conceded by defenders falling over on the wet pitch, and the number of goal scoring opportunities missed by forwards falling over, what is done to ensure the players wear the right shoes?

There is no common denominator. Studs and blades don't seem to give an advantage. In my day I preferred leather studs which wore away to leave a couple of nails sticking out. Perhaps we could source some of them for Sunday!!! We competed brilliantly last season. A couple of players seem to slip more and I have spoken to them about it. There is no logical reason and I can't explain it.

17. It appears that the team spirit has been eroded – is it the new players coming in or has the premiership turned the heads of some players?

A bit of everything. Some imports don't yet get "the Reading Way". Some heads have been turned – which is the only concession I would make to second season syndrome. In September / October some had delusions of grandeur about their worth. Having too many players doesn't help. We do have a great record for keeping players fit. Basically a number of factors combined to affect unity.

Miscellaneous

18. Despite being in such a tricky situation here at Reading- do you thank your lucky stars- that you are not in Rafa Benitez's position in some respects?

It could happen here! We could be sold at any time so there is an element of uncertainty. The problem comes with money men who don't understand football tradition here – they are after money and fame. So in a way I am lucky.

19. There has been a lot of talk all season about tackles and what's a yellow and a red card offence- which has been exacerbated by the Eduardo / Martin Taylor incident- when the LMA get together-do you discuss this and what would be your solution to the problem of potentially career ending tackles?

Yes, we do discuss it. We had a meeting in Bristol recently. There were 5 people there – and 3 were from RFC! I stick by the fact that the ref is right; even when he is clearly wrong. Various angles and video speeds can show errors which the human

eye will never catch. We need to believe it evens out over a season – but the big boys do tend to get better decisions. Hleb deserved to be sent off for the slap on Murts. But by and large refs do a great job.

20. Would you back a move to have all managers' post match interviews moved back 30-45 minutes from the current time they take place after the end of the match in light of the heightened atmosphere at the end of games?

I like to shake hands with the players no matter what. I resent it if a player won't shake hands when substituted. I have a chat after the game for a few minutes then I do 3 TV interviews, the main press conference, then Monday papers, then the radio. It takes 45 minutes. Sometimes it is boring and it shows! I have time to hang around and I like the interviews to be over so I can see my sister and family.

21. Would you back the call for the match referee to have to give a post-match interview in games in which controversial incidents take place or matches turn on borderline refereeing decisions?

No. He is right even when he is wrong. Shorey was booked for throwing a ball against Hunt. I argued with the 4th official. I even phoned Hackett and he said "I know why you are calling – the officials got it wrong"! But by and large they do a decent job.

Questions from the floor

22. Kits made some comments about the F.A. Cup and had well publicised driving problems. What has affected him?

He is a very complex man. Football to him is a means to an end. I don't think his problems have affected him. He seems to try too hard. For me he is at his best when he is more laid back and just lets it flow.

23. Who will have the bottle to take a penalty on the last minute on Sunday?
Hunty. But I don't know if it will be confidence or stupidity!

24. You touched on Pearce and Cox have gone. When will the Academy produce someone who is good enough?

This is a great conundrum. The Chairman would be delighted to see a kid break through. The higher up we are the harder it is. To compete with Premier League teams boys of 10 or 11 are having homes bought for their families so they can live within an hour of the Academy. Chelsea Youth comes from all over the world. We look to the local community. Big teams can afford to relocate kids from Brazil etc. We all want a local kid to be prominent.

There just isn't a talent pool of English players. There are so many options for kids in this country. For kids in South America football can be the way out of poverty. It is a gravy train for the whole family.

Mr Madejski persists with locals 100%. He wants to give kids a chance. You have to admire him.

25. How easy was it to let Cox move on?

He wouldn't even have been a regular in the Reserves. Next year he has to break in or lose out. Potential only develops with competitive games.

26. Is there any real reason why we ship so many goals and score so few?

No, to both questions. It is a blend thing. We have been punished for so many errors. At the start of the season I thought our defence would determine where we finished as I presumed we would still score with 4 determined guys fighting for 2 shirts. It just hasn't happened. I don't know why. Some games in defence I have just not liked it. At Pompey I thought 7 – 4 flattered us! I haven't felt comfortable with the back 4 this season.

We have trained hard. We have tried to defend from the front. This has been so demanding and exasperating. We can't just say we are not good enough – we need to improve.

27. Are you frustrated [after playing at a high level] by the way we are not passing and playing well? Were you embarrassed by performances like Swansea?

I knew it was coming. Swansea are “a lesser Arsenal” in some ways. We have played a set way for a couple of years and can't just change everything. A mate said we are playing better football but are less effective.

I think this may be right. Smaller teams that survive bring something different – and it is NOT good football! So, yes, I do get frustrated.

28. You seem to be down and unsure of the future. Surely we could pay the best wages around if we went down?

If we go down we will have a huge bill. In the promotion season we had a wage bill of £4 million. Now it is £20 million.... The problem if we do go down will be to shift players out who are on high wages.

I have perhaps been too loyal at times... I have an affection for my players and there is a bond.

I made the same mistake at Palace. We got to 3rd in the top flight and a Cup Final and then got relegated. Alan Smith made 2 or 3 changes that I would not have done and they went up as Champions.

I will keep this in mind after the weekend...

29. Is Fae ever going to be a big player at RFC?

After the last couple of weeks I don't think he will ever play for me next season. French teams are technically gifted and expect lower wages. He never adopted our mentality. I don't think he will play for Reading again.

30. What happens on a match day?

On Saturday we will travel to Derby and eat together at 1900. Then we will watch rugby before bed. On Sunday I will have an early breakfast at about 0600 – the players get up about 0800 – 0930. After breakfast we go to our rooms and watch football. Mid morning we have a walk, then a team meeting before a meal at 1145. Then it is off to the game. The day passes quite quickly. We stay at nice hotels and the players have their own foibles about meals. Marcus always wants “too-na”. Single rooms are becoming the norm. Players are pampered so there is no excuse mentally. Preparation is perfect.

31. Any chance of seeing Convey on Sunday?

He has struggled intermittently with his knee and can't train flat out. He feels he can't go flat out for a week at a time. So, no, he won't be involved. He feels he has some more rehabilitation to go.

This is a real concern for him. He is frustrated because he cannot play properly and may have to quit.

32. You spoke of no "excuses". The quality of set pieces has been awful. What practice is done, and why is it going wrong?

Against Spurs we didn't feel Cerny is a good keeper. We practised hard to crowd him and mix things up. We have problems with right footed delivery. In training 80% of Nicky Shorey's crosses are on the button. But in games the harder he tries the worse it gets... Players need to relax and trust in me, each other and the fans.

33. Fans from big clubs like the big games but fans of RFC enjoy the good times even more. Why did the players not do a lap of honour on Saturday?

Nobody suggested it before the game. There is an element of embarrassment and shame. The players feel they have let themselves and you down. After the game anyone suggesting a lap of honour would have been chewed out!

34. After Newcastle I read you wanted the players to drive fast past speed cameras to try to get 3 points?

That's true!

35. The Long shirt throwing incident; you handled it brilliantly. You ask for respect and behave impeccably. How do you feel about player power? Shorey knows he can leave no matter what. The Fae business would not have happened in your day. Oh, and I'd like to see you throw your jacket into the crowd on Sunday!

I wear the same match day clothes every game. I have 8 trousers and 3 jackets. One is due a clean – but I held back as I might be throwing it into the crowd! So whoever gets it I do apologise for the smell!

I am always mindful of the Reading way and the honour of managing Reading FC.

36. On Sunday do you expect Moore to play and would it be good to let Long loose on him with his pace?

Frankly even my pace would get him sent off!

This game is entirely down to us. I will hardly mention Derby and try to get the balance right. We need to deliver.

37. What can the fans do on Sunday?

The fans have been excellent. The team are aware of some displeasure. There are no complaints that the crowd is quiet. The home crowd is supportive and forceful.

Away you are brilliant, making more noise than you have a right to. I know it will be great on Sunday. It will be a celebration on Sunday no matter what happens. We still hope to be in the Premiership in August.

Steve was thanked for attending and received a standing ovation. Afterwards he stayed to sign autographs and have his photo taken with fans [many of whom expressed their hope that he would stay even if we were to be relegated].