

OLIVER KAY IN BRIGHTON

‘We washed our own kits. Now we’re the envy of most clubs’

A week before Brighton return to the top flight, Oliver Kay meets those who survived the darkest days

Oliver Kay, Chief Football Correspondent

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Bong, left, and Knockaert were key to promotionMIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES

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The boy in the photograph is seven years old. He is standing outside the players’ entrance at Edgar Street in Hereford, dressed from head to toe in Brighton and Hove Albion kit. He is posing next to Steve Gritt, the club’s manager at the time. Both of them are smiling. There is no hint of the nervous tension that filled the air on May 3, 1997.

“I remember my dad driving us up to Hereford that day and telling me, ‘If we lose today, we’ll be relegated from the Football League and the club will probably go out of business,’ ” Russell Wood recalls, looking at the picture. “We were 1-0 down, going out of the league, and then Robbie Reinelt got the goal. At the final whistle there were floods of tears, just relief, pure emotion.”

The word “emotion” crops up a lot when discussing Brighton’s journey over the past 20 years. Wood remembers that 1996-97 season, his first as a home-and-away fan, being played

out to a backdrop of angry protest against the club's owners at the time. There followed another two seasons of what he calls "dire straits", with the club forced to play home games 70 miles away in Gillingham after the controversial sale of the Goldstone Ground. "Even when we got back to Brighton [in 1999], to the Withdean, there were still some really tough times for the club," he says.



Wood pictured with Gritt on the fateful day in 1997

As a student in those years, selling programmes on matchdays for some pocket money, Wood recalls basing an economics coursework exercise on Brighton's need for a new stadium and the potential benefits to club and city alike. In his wildest dreams, though, he "could never have foreseen just what it was going to be" once the club, now under the ownership of Tony

Bloom, moved to the splendid Amex Stadium in 2011. Brighton are now a Premier League club, eagerly preparing for Manchester City's arrival next Saturday.

Oh, and the boy in the photograph? Wood is now Brighton's financial controller, helping with the club's adjustment to the vast sums that are now coming their way in Premier League broadcast revenue. Nice story, isn't it? More on him later. There are others at Brighton with a perspective on the club's journey back from the brink — and back to the big time.

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At the age of 76, Ken Barnard can claim to have seen it all at Brighton. He was first taken to the Goldstone Ground as an eight-year-old and his hero was Jimmy Langley in the mid-1950s. He gushes about Peter Ward, Alan Mullery and Brian Horton and ruefully recalls a famous opportunity missed in the 1983 FA Cup final — “and Smith should have scored . . .” he says, a reference not lost on fans of a certain age.

Barnard's life has revolved around the club. Since 1988 it has also been his employer, first as a matchday steward — he recalls one occasion when he had to “smuggle [David] Bellotti [the club's reviled chief executive at the time] out of the Goldstone in a builders' van” — but mostly as kit man, that most unglamorous and thankless of jobs that tends to attract true loyalists. “You look at this place we've got now,” Barnard says, surveying their magnificent training ground in Lancing, West Sussex. “When I first did the kit, we didn't even have a laundry room. We had to rely on a launderette in Brighton. I had to drive down with the kit after training every afternoon, get there at 7.30 every morning to pick it up and hare back up in the van. They were closed at weekends, so I would wait with fish and chips while the girls did the laundry on Friday nights. This wasn't years and years ago. This was about 2003.”

And the club could not afford a washing machine? “It wasn't just that,” he says. “We didn't have anywhere to put the kit. We trained at the university, at Falmer, and there was nowhere to put the kit to dry.”

This is in keeping with the dysfunctional set-up that Glenn Murray, their leading goalscorer in the Championship last season, recalls from his first spell at the club, arriving from Rochdale in 2008. “We were getting changed in changing rooms that we couldn't all fit in, so we had to split between three or four rooms,” the forward says. “I think at some stage we had to wash our own kit.”

Murray suggests that Brighton has not been a “normal club”. The forward says that “it went through such a lot of turmoil, obviously having to play their home games out of Brighton [in Gillingham] and really struggling to find a venue after selling the previous one,” adding that the Withdean never truly felt like home.

“But we managed,” Barnard says. “We got four promotions [along with two relegations] there, so we must have done something right. We felt everyone was against us, a sort of Millwall scenario, so we just did it. The previous chairman, Dick Knight, deserves a lot of credit for getting it to the place where the present chairman could take it on. But the chairman now [Bloom] has taken it to new levels. With this place [the training ground] and the Amex, it's unbelievable.”

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By most estimates, Bloom, who made his fortune as a professional poker player and property investor, has put £250 million into the club he supported as a boy: £120 million on the stadium, £32 million on the training ground and about £100 million covering the loans and losses that have seen the squad strengthened year on year with acquisitions such as Leonardo Ulloa, Anthony Knockaert, Shane Duffy and Glenn Murray. “He’s very private,” Russell Wood says. “If he had his way, no one would know who he was, but he wants everything involved in the club — the first team, the academy, the women’s team, the community work — to be the best it can be. He has put a lot of money in but it has never been frivolous spending. We built the stadium, the training ground, built up the academy, the team.”



Bloom has taken Brighton to new levelsMIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES

Brighton were far from the biggest spenders in the Championship, but they made a loss of £25.9 million in the 2015-16 season, with football costs (£30.7 million) exceeding turnover (£24.6 million). Complying with the Financial Fair Play regulations was a precarious exercise. “There did come a point where we worked out we would probably have to work to a loss in order to compete in the Championship,” Wood says. “If you look at the last three years, the football investment has really picked up, but the club always did the homework on players. They were educated gambles, the right risks.”

As one of those “educated gambles”, Murray was delighted to return last summer, initially on loan from Bournemouth. “I had looked [in] from the outside for a few years,” he says. “When I came back, it was like signing for the same badge but a different club. It had changed so much in the five years I had been away.”

For the better? “Totally for the better,” he says. “The stadium and this training facility would be the envy of most clubs. The set-up is right up there with any club in England. Luckily we’ve got a group of players together last year who have got us to the Premier League. I think that was a hard task in itself, but the next task, staying in the Premier League, is even harder.”

Chris Hughton pulls up a chair and sits down. He is asked how long he took to get over the high of promotion last April. “Fairly quickly,” the Brighton manager says unapologetically, adding that he was genuinely disappointed that, giddy from the high of securing promotion, his team took just one point from their final three matches, handing the title to Newcastle United.



He sees it as his responsibility “to try to get people’s feet on the ground”, but the sense of achievement, of elation, was not lost on him. He has witnessed many highs in football, not least winning promotion with Newcastle in 2010, but he suggests that the buzz around Brighton returning to the top flight for the first time since 1983 is “probably as great as anything I have been involved in”.

“Some of that is about getting promotion,” he says, “but a lot of it, for the supporters, is about the past and how long it is since the club have been in the top flight. Supporters come up to me, saying they were there in the dark days, going to Hereford, going to Gillingham . . . So

many go back to the Goldstone era. They have history and some of them can't believe where we are now."

Intelligent and far more intense than his polite manner might initially suggest, Hughton is among those who deserve enormous credit for Brighton's promotion. Naturally he prefers to deflect praise towards his players, his staff and of course to Bloom.

He calls Brighton "a very well-run club" but also talks of the family values reinforced by an owner "who is Brighton born and bred, was educated here and whose family had been on the board for a number of years".



Hughton described promotion with Brighton as "probably as great as anything I have been involved in" STEVEN PASTON/PA WIRE

Hughton insists upon honesty and integrity, qualities exhibited, he believes, by his staff and his promotion-winning team. He recognises the need to invest in Premier League quality this summer, hence the additions of Mathew Ryan, Markus Suttner, Pascal Gross and others, but he is also wary of diluting the strengths and the togetherness that earned Brighton promotion.

"That's important," he says, "because you build something. Probably the most difficult thing is to get that right balance. Bring in a lot of players and if things don't go so well, we're probably saying we brought in too many. If you don't bring enough and don't do well, the argument would be: 'Well, we didn't freshen enough.' We're going into a tough season united and there's no doubt you want that unity. You want that right mix in the changing room."

There will be more new arrivals but Hughton will build around individuals such as Bruno, Lewis Dunk, Dale Stephens, Steve Sidwell, Knockaert and Murray. “I think that’s a proven way of staying in the Premier League when you look at clubs like Bournemouth and Crystal Palace, even Burnley last year,” Murray says. “If you keep the core of players that got you there, and you keep that togetherness and add to it well, I think staying in the Premier League is a real possibility.”

Just do not think of it as mission accomplished. “You can’t afford to think that way,” Hughton says. “What we were very clear on, on the first day of pre-season, is: ‘Last season is gone and if you need a reminder of how tough things can be, it’s Man City at home, first game of the season.’ Exciting, but that’s a reminder of how tough it will be and how hard we’ve got to work to stay there.”

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The boy in the photograph has been a busy man since promotion. “We used to have to go out and actively try to sell the club to local companies to try to drum up sponsorship,” Russell Wood says. “The phone has barely stopped ringing, with global brands approaching us.”

Wood predicts that, with at least £95 million guaranteed in broadcast and prize money alone, Brighton’s revenues will increase “five fold” this season. “But we don’t want to just rely on the TV money,” he says. “We also want to grow our commercial and retail revenue. The whole business becomes more sustainable with Premier League football, but we will always spend wisely. After everything the club has been through, it would be great to be sustainable year after year.”

Interest in the club has surged locally as well as globally. It was a struggle to attract capacity crowds (8,850) during the 12 years at the Withdean Stadium, but last season’s average league attendance at the Amex was 27,995. This season, tickets will be like gold dust. There is a large and growing waiting list for season tickets.



Reinelt celebrates after the game against Hereford in 1997 STEVE MITCHELL/EMPICS SPORT

Glenn Murray cites the difference in turnout between the promotion celebrations on the seafront in 2011, upon the return to the Championship, and the spectacular scenes on the corresponding day last season. “The turnout that day really, really surprised me,” he says.

As an adopted Brightonian, even staying put after his unpopular move to Palace, Murray has an interesting take on the fanbase. “Unfortunately the club probably missed out on a generation of children in the Brighton area because I don’t think the Withdean was very forthcoming,” the forward says. “I think a lot of kids in that period probably went to watch the big London teams. But those who went elsewhere are starting to get to know their home club again.. It’s got a lot of dormant fans more interested in the club.”

There will be a tendency among visiting supporters, arriving at the Amex, to ask: “Where were you when you were s***?” The obvious answer is that Brighton’s supporters have been through more s*** than most Premier League clubs could possibly imagine. That they attract far more supporters as a progressive, ambitious, successful club at the Amex than they did during the chaotic years at the Withdean, let alone at Gillingham, is hardly surprising.

Russell Wood and Ken Barnard agree that, without the perseverance of those fans who stood by the club in the darkest of times, there would be no Brighton and Hove Albion. For those who earned their stripes back at the Goldstone the return to the top flight must feel like a glorious end to a gruelling odyssey. When Fatboy Slim’s *Praise You* rings out shortly before

kick-off at the Amex next Saturday evening, the opening line, “We’ve come a long, long way together”, will resonate more than ever.

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