

A country bumpkin who laments the loss of humour in soccer

THE soccer man of the moment ambles up the staircase of his shop. Or, rather, he seems to amble until you realise that, for a big man, he has a natural athlete's grace.

We settle into chairs on the first floor of his sports store in Frogmoor, just by the folding snooker table for children, priced at £169.99.

He leans back, legs sprawling, seemingly at ease in sweater and slacks, flashes of gold on finger and wrist.

"So how does it feel?"

A question to break what little ice there is.

"No sooner does it sink in and you're already thinking of next season," he grins.

Mobile face

Thus, Mike Keen, manager of Wycombe Wanderers FC, The Blues, new champions of the Isthmian League; a first-class footballer of beloved memory in West London; successful businessman and mentor to dozens of soccer-mad kids in what spare time there remains.

He has one of those mobile faces that easily smile. Usually, his eyes complement that smile. Sometimes, though, they remain wary above that upturned mouth.

We talk, finally melting any ice, about our common ages in the early to middle 40s when the young insist the next step is to the grave, despite any protestation.

"Time does go a bit quicker," Mike admits, "but really I'm just beginning to enjoy life. I know what it's about now."

He's Wycombe born and bred, educated at the schools in Spring Gardens and Hatters Lane. His football started early with Wycombe Schools and then the Bucks Youth side.

Spotted

After all, football was in the family. Uncle Walt played league for Millwall. Father Wilf turned out for Wycombe.

And then there were those games on Kingsmead for a team called Marsh Lions, a side connected with the British Legion.

But, at first, that's where it stayed. After leaving school, Mike worked as a trainee quantity surveyor with Lovell's the builders. That meant night school three times a week.

"It was a bit difficult," Mike recalls. "All your leisure time was used up."

Then came the break. He was spotted by Queens Park Rangers playing for the county youth side.

There were two decisions to make. Would QPR stay in the Third Division in the then re-formed league or go down to the Fourth? And what about his employers?

Well, QPR went into the Third and Lovell's, understandably, gave the young man an ultimatum: "Football or the building trade".



So it was football. In his late teens, Mike arrived at the rather unsuccessful club in Shepherd's Bush, in the shadow of the growing BBC Television Centre, cheek-by-jowl with the White City Stadium.

Mike began to learn about life.

"The training was quite hard and the competition for places even harder," Mike remembers, a faraway expression replacing that smile.

football legend called Alec Stock, a man of infinite human patience and soccer wisdom.

With Mr Stock as its manager, the club in West London began its climb to success. Mike was in the forefront as the newly-made team captain.

Lessons gathered then still remain the backbone of Mike's philosophy in all things.

"You had to be fair," Mike says with conviction. "You must gain respect from people."

TUESDAY INTERVIEW

By Bob Perrin

"You learned to look after yourself. You had to take all the ribbing, the stick. I was the 'country bumpkin' because I came from Wycombe."

"You learned that the person to worry about was you. All that mattered was your name on the team sheet, no-one else's."

Mike learnt well. He was in the first team by the age of 20 and soon afterwards met one of the greatest influences in his life.

That was — and is — a

"They might be right. But, if pushed into a corner, I think I could get ruthless."

"For me, life is about compromise and commonsense, not getting pushed into corners."

His greatest career success was the unforgettable day at Wembley when QPR, still very much the minnows, won the League Cup.

He moved to Luton, again with Alec Stock, then as a manager to Watford, before Elton John, and finally to Northampton.

Three years ago, he took over at Loakes Park. His business, established with foresight, with non-playing days in mind, flourished, first in Oxford Road and then, eighteen months ago, in its present, spacious two-storey premises.

Football, clearly, still dominates his life. Apart from "The Blues, Mike looks after three teams of youngsters in the area.

All changed

His beliefs again mirror his life-style.

"I want to win, want to be better than the other team."

"But I'd sooner lose 3-4 in a great match than clog the opponents in a dreadful 0-0 draw."

"Possibly, that's why I'm not a top manager but there you are."

"You know, in the game now you've got to be a winner, which is a pity. The humour has gone. It's all changed over 20 years."

"At QPR, you used to have marvellous humour from the spectators. Now, everywhere, you get horrible, biting comments."

He pauses, thinking, and then adds quietly: "If you don't win anything, is that failure?"

Mike smiles lazily at that thought.

He lives at Flackwell Heath with his wife of 21 years, Glenys, and their two sons.

Michael, who's 18, helps in the sports store, learning the business.

Pleasure

Kevin, 16, might be the next footballing Keen. He's already played twice at Wembley for England Schoolboys.

The entire family life revolves around football and sport.

"I enjoy serving 11-year-olds with their first pair of football boots and their first kit," Mike shrugs.

He obviously means it. The big national headlines, the TV interviews, might no longer be within his reach.

But Mike Keen is happy in his world. He's given pleasure to hundreds of thousands and continues to do so.

The big man believes in being fair and honest — sometimes hard — in everything, football or business or family life.

That he patently succeeds in doing so makes Mike Keen more than just a winner in the Premier Division of the Isthmian League.

In truth, measured against him, many of the so-called winners in today's society smack of failure.