

STEVEN HOWARD



JOHN GREGORY is hardly the shy, retiring type. Yet, for once, even he was lost for words.

In fact, he was lost full stop. Nowhere to be seen – remarkably similar to Aston Villa's attacking inclinations.

"He's gone off early to see a game," explained Villa No 2 Steve Harrison.

Well, Gregory certainly didn't see his own team play at Highbury.

A few of us had made the trip to N5 to find out if Villa could be quite as negative as they had been at Chelsea three weeks earlier.

Staggeringly, they were even worse.

The match facts said they had two shots on target. They certainly had one – because they scored from it.

But, for the life of me, I cannot remember the second.

Arsenal, on the other hand, had 13 on target, 12 off, won the corner count 9-1, the game 3-1 and could have had six.

And Villa are supposed to be driving the fans away in their thousands at HOME.

Many more displays of such ineptitude and their increasingly disenchanted followers won't bother to move out of Birmingham.

The clattering of up-turned seats long before the final whistle heralded a near-unanimous verdict on the latest abject display from Gregory's dysfunctional team.

I suspect the Villa boss, far from making a sharp exit to see a match elsewhere, had his head down on the bus back to the Midlands.

And the closer he and his defeated, deflated troops got to Villa Park, the more clearly they would have been able to pick up the signal from local radio stations where disgruntled punters were airing their views.

Who can blame them?

Even Doug Ellis, whose life-long affair with Villa comes second only to the life-long affair he has had with himself, can hardly bear to watch these days.

Rising at 6.30am a couple of weeks ago, he interrupted a salmon-fishing holiday in Scotland to hurry back to Villa Park for the game against Middlesbrough.

AFTER sitting through 90 minutes of stupefying boredom, he announced that the reason why the crowd was 8,000 down on average was because of the appalling nature of the football.

Not long after, three pages of the Birmingham Evening Mail were taken up with readers' letters complaining their absence was linked to Ellis hiking season-ticket prices.

Ellis responded in his usual magnanimous way. He slashed entrance fees – but only for selected games.

Now Villa fans can save money watching Southampton, Bradford, Wimbledon – and Chester in the Worthington Cup.

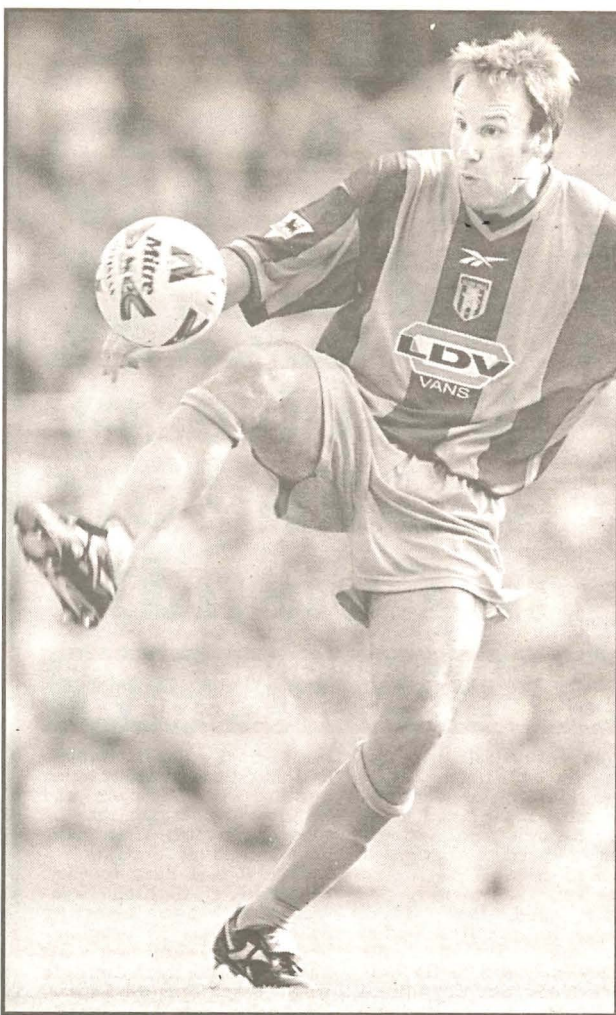
You lucky people!

Then again, these cheaper seats will only be in certain areas – like Q Block in the lower Doug Ellis Stand. Which has a restricted view. You luckier people!

Ellis' criticisms did not go down well with the manager – and a few days later, Gregory was linked with the Newcastle job.

Just as he had been linked with Atletico Madrid when Ellis failed to come up with the cash to sign Juninho last term.

Who will he bracketed with this time? Not a lot after Saturday's shambles.



SMALL MERSY . . . Paul Merson's goal assist was Villa's only highlight

INVISIBLE MAN GREGORY HAS LOST THE PLOT

The only shock was that Villa managed to score. But that was only down to a blinding, fleeting few seconds of inspiration from former Gunner Paul Merson.

He controlled the ball on his chest and had four touches in mid-air before sliding Julian Joachim through for the shot that gave Villa a 44th-minute lead.

It was the last we saw of both Merson and Villa.

Arsenal equalised a minute later and then blew away a side who had hoisted the white flag.

Yet Gregory played a part in Arsenal's extraordinary second goal.

Keeper David James had damaged medial knee ligaments in training and yet still pronounced himself fit.

Halfway through the first-half, he aggravated the injury and re-aggravated the break with his right knee heavily strapped.

The foolishness of sending him back out took just five minutes to surface.

Unable to kick the ball – and with Villa players inexplicably failing to make themselves available for a throw – James was penalised by ref David Elleray for time-wasting.

A little harsh, maybe, but had Gregory had the sense to replace James at half-time, the situation would never have arisen.

It did – and Davor Suker crashed home the free-kick from eight yards through a mass of flailing bodies.

Only then did Gregory send on substitute keeper Peter Enckelman.

These are strange days at

Villa. Gregory has spent £20million on Steve Watson, Steve Stone, George Boateng and Alan Thompson. Not one of them started.

On top of that, Lee Hendrie – called up by Glenn Hoddle for England last season – looks shot.

And Gareth Barry – whose next appearance will cost Villa a £200,000 payment to Brighton – is nowhere to be seen.

Gregory also refused to cough up the extra £500,000 to buy Robbie Keane.

HE then told fans that if Coventry won the title and Keane scored the goals, he would bare his backside in the Co-Op window.

Keane has just been named Carling Player of the Month. Mercifully, Coventry are 17th in the Premiership.

But, as ever, it all comes back to Villa's chairman.

Ellis, roundly condemned for missing out on Juninho, is even alleged to have leaned across a dinner table and said: "Tell me, Mr Junior, what's your first name?"

He has now plunged his money into launching a Sunday tabloid in Tamworth and Sutton Coldfield. Looking at Deadly, it should have been a broadsheet.

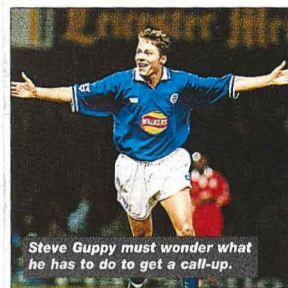
And what Villa revelations did its first edition come up with? Intimate tales from the boardroom?

His relationship with Gregory? Why he missed out on Juninho?

No, a riveting exclusive about what Gareth Southgate will do when he retires.

A growing number of Villa fans are more interested in what Ellis is going to do when HE retires.

GIVE GUPPY A GO



Steve Guppy must wonder what he has to do to get a call-up.

I can't understand why Steve Guppy is not in the England squad. We are desperate for a left-winger with a left foot and apparently Guppy put in the most crosses last year in the Premiership. I also think that Stephen Hughes will be a great left-winger for England in the future.

Zac Newman, Stanmore

BRIGHTY SAYS: "I was surprised Steve Guppy wasn't in Kevin Keegan's recent squads. It's an area where England clearly have a problem with no natural left-footed wide men. If Steve continues his good form this year, who knows. Regarding Stephen Hughes, I think he's better in the centre of midfield."