

Where are they now?

TONY CUNNINGHAM: EX-NEWCASTLE AND SHEFF WED

TONY CUNNINGHAM has switched from attack to defence — and that's an even more dramatic career change than it sounds.

Because the big former Newcastle No 9 has gone from finishing off crosses to cross-examinations.

After 11 years of study, Cunningham has just qualified as a solicitor, specialising in defending clients in criminal cases.

Cunningham, 40, said: "My new career has many similarities with football. In court you are giving a performance and trying to outwit an opponent, just like in football.

"But in a law court, it's a different kind of adrenaline. You have to keep calm and control your aggression.

"It's different to playing in front of 30,000 people at Newcastle but it's just as rewarding.

"It took me 11 years to qualify from start to finish but it's well worth it.

"As far as I know I'm the first former professional footballer to qualify as a lawyer.

Snapped

"But I always knew I wanted to do something academic after I'd finished playing, something where I would use my brain.

"We didn't earn enough to set us up for life in my playing days and I didn't want to end up as a labourer or something.

"Most of my team-mates spent their afternoons playing snooker or golf while I was studying and I used to get a fair bit of ribbing — but who's laughing now?"

Cunningham, born in the West Indies and brought up in the West Midlands, was an apprentice engineer playing for non-league Stourbridge when Lincoln City snapped him up in 1979.

He said: "I turned down Lincoln twice because I wasn't sure about giving up my trade and going full time in football.

"But I had got to know Laurie Cunningham — no relation — who was then at West Brom and he persuaded me to take the plunge.

"I was glad I did because it was one of the most successful times in Lincoln's history.

"We went so close to promotion to Division Two and many of that team went on to play in the top flight like Mick Harford, Glenn Cockerill and Trevor Peake."

It wasn't long until Cunningham was also a First Division star.

After a spell at Barnsley, the big

By DAVE KIDD

man was signed by Sheffield Wednesday boss Howard Wilkinson and helped the Owls soar into the top flight.

Cunningham said: "It was like being in the army. Training was done with military precision — but Wilkinson was the best manager I ever played for."

A six-month stint at Manchester City followed before Newcastle manager Jack Charlton swooped and handed Cunningham the legendary black-and-white No 9 shirt.

Cunningham said: "It was an honour to be part of the great tradition of Newcastle centre-forwards.

"Big Jack was notorious for never knowing anyone's name so he always used to call me Blackie Milburn.

"It certainly didn't offend me — when you're a Newcastle player it's a compliment to be called Milburn in any context.

"I had a couple of enjoyable seasons at St James' Park, playing alongside men like Chris Waddle, Peter Beardsley and a young Gazza.

"But when Jack left and Willie McFaul took over my first-team chances were few and far between."

Although Cunningham was never a prolific scorer at the highest level he went on to score bags of goals at Blackpool, Bolton, Bury, Rotherham, Doncaster and Wycombe.

Cunningham said: "I played at Wembley in a play-off final for Bolton and then won promotion from the Fourth Division with Rotherham.

"But all that while I was studying hard at evening classes, first for a B-Tec, then a degree."

Fond

While team-mates enjoyed card schools on away trips, Cunningham's head was always stuck in a textbook.

He has been working in the law since his football career finished, continued swotting until he became fully qualified just six weeks ago.

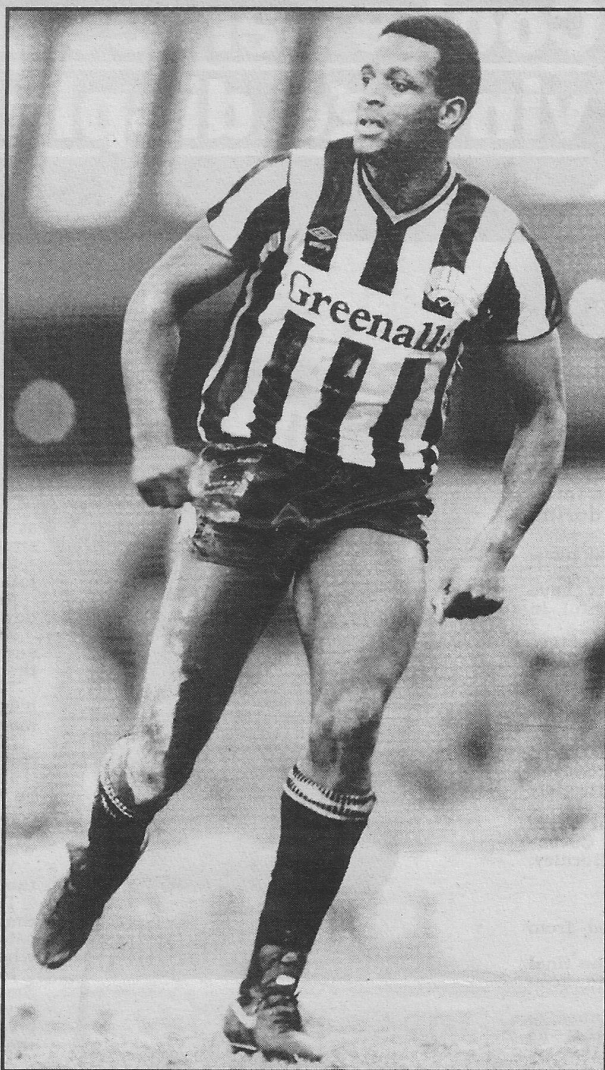
Now employed by Andrew Jay & Co in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, Cunningham is a regular at Lincoln's law courts — just a short jog from Sincil Bank, where his professional football career began two decades earlier.

He said: "It helps that a lot of people around here remembered me fondly as a footballer. It can help you gain the respect of clients.

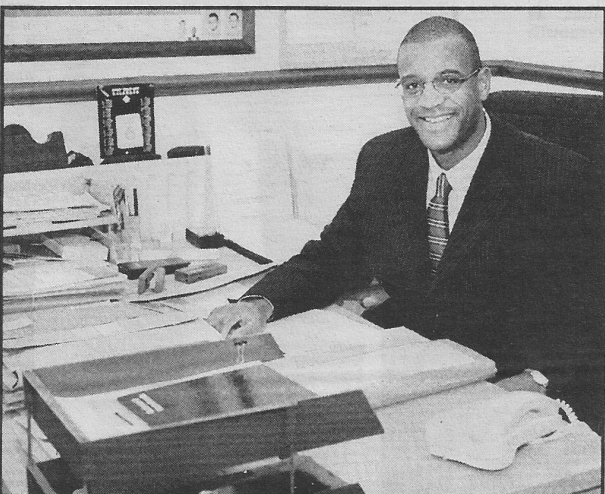
"I've always been ambitious — in football and now in the law.

"I'm only a new boy at the moment but I'll always aim as high as I can."

Maybe the former Geordie favourite will soon be performing in Newcastle's colours again — a black gown and white wig.



THEN . . . Tony Cunningham in his Newcastle playing days



NOW . . . solicitor Tony busy at work in his office

20 YEARS AGO

TONY is plucked out of non-league obscurity when Lincoln sign him from Stourbridge.

Interest rates hit a record 15 per cent within months of the Conservatives taking power and Sex Pistol Sid Vicious dies of a heroin overdose.

Art Garfunkel's Bright Eyes is at No 1 in the hit parade.

15 YEARS AGO

ACE TONY helps Sheffield Wednesday win promotion to the top-flight.

Coal miners fight pitch battles with police during a year-long strike.

John Francome rides his 1,000th National Hunt winner.

Lionel Richie tops the hit parade in Britain with Hello.

8 YEARS AGO

BIG Tony is a promotion winner again as his goals fire Rotherham out of the Football League basement.

Terry Waite is released after almost five years as a Beirut hostage.

Boris Yeltsin is elected Russian president.

Color Me Badd are top of the pops with I Wanna Sex You Up.