Nationwide CONFERENCE

CONFERENCE COMES OF AGE

21 years on... the top teams, managers and players

Best of the bunch

SATURDAY'S KICK-OFF to the season sees the Nationwide Conference celebrate its 21st birthday – and what a great success the top flight of Non-League football has been! Through two decades in which full-time professional football has exploded into a multi-mullion pound business, the Conference has kept the Non-League flag flying high, constantly reminding the Football League there is life outside its domain – and that promotion and relegation should be based on merit rather than tradition.

In this celebration of 21 years of the Conference, *STEVE WHITNEY* looks back at some of the great players, managers and teams who have made Conference football the pride of Non-League – men like Barry Fry (left) and Martin O'Neill (right), two of the most successful bosses in modern times, whose sides created Cup upsets, stormed the lower reaches of the League and made money – to lay to rest the idea that professional football starts only with Division Three.

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Nationwide FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

CONFERENCE COMES OF AGE

A squad

THE NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE celebrates its 21st birthday as an undoubted success as season 2000/2001 kicks off. I have seen a lot of games in the Conference and some marvellous players. As a personal celebration to mark the occasion, I have selected my favourite 22 players.

By **STEVE WHITNEY**

They may not necessarily have been the best in other people's view, but they are players who left an impression on me.

I have also taken into account longevity. There have been players who have been superb for a season or so – former Wolves star Steve Daley for example – but I have gone for those who peformed in the Conference over a long period.

I eventually narrowed down the goalkeepers to four. Ryan Price would have to come into the equation simply because of his record. He was deemed good enough to earn a move back into the Football League with Birmingham through his form for Stafford Rangers and later did what must be unique by returning to the professional game for a third time when Macclesfield Town gained promotion in 1997.

Kevin Charlton was one of those goalkeepers who always seemed to play well against your team. He constantly frustrated Kettering's forwards for Telford and I am sure he did the same elsewhere. But in the end I have plumped for **Paul Jones** and **Dave Ryan** for my squad.

Jones may have missed out on Kidderminster's best years, but he was the rock on which Graham Allner was able to build a side that eventually went on to win the Conference. By then Jones had moved into League football with Wolves and has since gone on to become Wales' regular No 1, but in around 200 games for Harriers he proved what a terrific goalkeeper he is.

Ryan played in the first season of the Alliance Premier League for Northwich Victoria and eventually moved on ten years later after a tremendous career at the Drill Field which saw him finish second in the Vic's all-time appearance table to Ken Jones.

Ryan was a big, powerful keeper who seemed to fill the entire goalmouth and he did as much as anyone in preserving Northwich's Conference status during some rough times for the Cheshire club in the mid-to-late 80s. He is currently the Football in the Community Officer for Manchester United, the club where his career began back in 1974.

There have been some excellent defenders in the Conference. Some, like Yeovil Town's Mark Shail and Woking's Steve Foster, have gone on to play League football so, narrowing it down to a list of seven has been extremely difficult.

John Davison would always be first on my list – and as skipper, too. He was a fantastic player for Altrincham during the early days of the Conference and won a record 24 caps for the England semi-professional side from 1979 to 1986.

It has come as no surprise to me that he has subsequently become a successful manager with Burscough, leading them to promotion from the First Division of the Unibond League last season.

Dave Howell was another England regular, winning 14 caps during the 1980s. He helped Enfield to two Conference championship wins in 1983 and 1986 and another with Barnet four years later.

He followed Barry Fry to Southend and Birmingham as a member of his management team before resuming his playing career with Stevenage Borough, Heybridge Swifts, Baldock Town and, more recently, Harlow Town.

Steve Conner cost Dagenham & Redbridge – or Redbridge Forest as they were then known – £3,500 when signing him from Dartford in July 1990. What a bargain that turned out to be. He repaid that sum ten times over with his performances at the heart of the Daggers' defence in a career at Victoria Road that finished only last season when he finally moved on to Billericay Town. Conner was another England regular during the early 1990s.

Kevin Richardson, like John Davison, also skippered England – although injuries restricted him to three appearances for his country in 1994. Richardson's playing career really took off after he joined Bromsgrove Rovers from Hednesford in July 1990. He led them to the Southern League title in 1992 and then to two Bob Lord Trophy successeses.

Matt Crossley never played for the England semi-professional side, which is surprising as he was always among the best defenders in the Conference. However, he is one of Non-League football's most successful players with four FA Umbro Trophy wins and both Conference and Ryman League championship honours to his name. After starring for Kingstonian in last year's final he has now switched to Aldershot Town in an attempt to help George Borg's side to gain promotion to the Conference next season.

Martin Weir is another who didn't get the nod from various England managers, which again is amazing. He joined Kidderminster Harriers from Birmingham City in 1986 and went on to play a major part in their Conference title-winning success and was twice voted player of the year at Aggborough. A confident, footballing central defender, his 13-year Harriers career ended when he moved to neighbouring Worcester City last September.

Mark Smith is the current England central defender. The Stevenage Borough player has been outstanding since switching to the back four in 1994, initially in an emergency. For the first five years of his playing career Smith was a striker with Hitchin Town, Woking and then Stevenage but was moved into a central defensive role during Borough's Isthmian League title-winning campaign after an injury to one of Paul Fairclough's centre-halves. He hasn't looked back since and made a name for himself during Borough's marvellous FA Cup runs in recent years.

WHEN I BEGAN to think about selecting this squad I would have expected the midfield positions to have been the hardest to choose. Actually, they were the easiest. I have been privileged to have seen some outstanding midfield players over the years.

My home-town club Kettering have possessed some terrific midfielders, including Steve Daley, Dennis Mortimer, Lil Fuschillo, Billy Jeffrey, Paul Richardson and Billy Kellock, who would undoubtedly have made this squad had it been selected for an earlier period.

I have selected two former Poppies players, but more for their performances before and after they had been at Kettering than for their spells at Rockingham Road.

Nicky Evans was a striker originally when he came out of League football as a youngster but eventually became a powerful, strong-running goalscoring midfielder for Kettering, Barnet and Wycombe, who paid £32,000 for his services in 1989.

Paul Bancroft's inclusion may come as a surprise, but for me he was simply lovely to watch. Capped six times by England while at Kidderminster Harriers in the early 90s, he was an elegant player who always seemed to have time on the ball.

Paul Webb would, I suspect, find a place in most people's squad. He has been one of, if not the best, midfielders in the Conference for around eight years, eventually achieving his dream of winning the title and promotion last season with Kidderminster. A regular in the England side from 1993 to 1997, Webb is also capable of performing equally effectively at the back if required.

Kenny Lowe won two England caps in 1992 while at Barnet and was the Glenn Hoddle of Non-League football, gliding through games and spraying long passes about the park. I was fortunate enough to see him play for Barrow in the 1990 FA Trophy final and Wembley was seemingly made for him. He was superb that day – a treat to watch.

Paul Rogers won six England caps before leaving Sutton United for Sheffield United for £35,000 in 1992. Now at Wigan, Rogers was a strong-running midfielder who it seemed was destined to play professionally. **Richard Forsyth** also made the move into the full-time game after starring for Kidderminster Harriers in their Conference title-winning side of 1994, transferring to Birmingham for £50,000 in 1995.

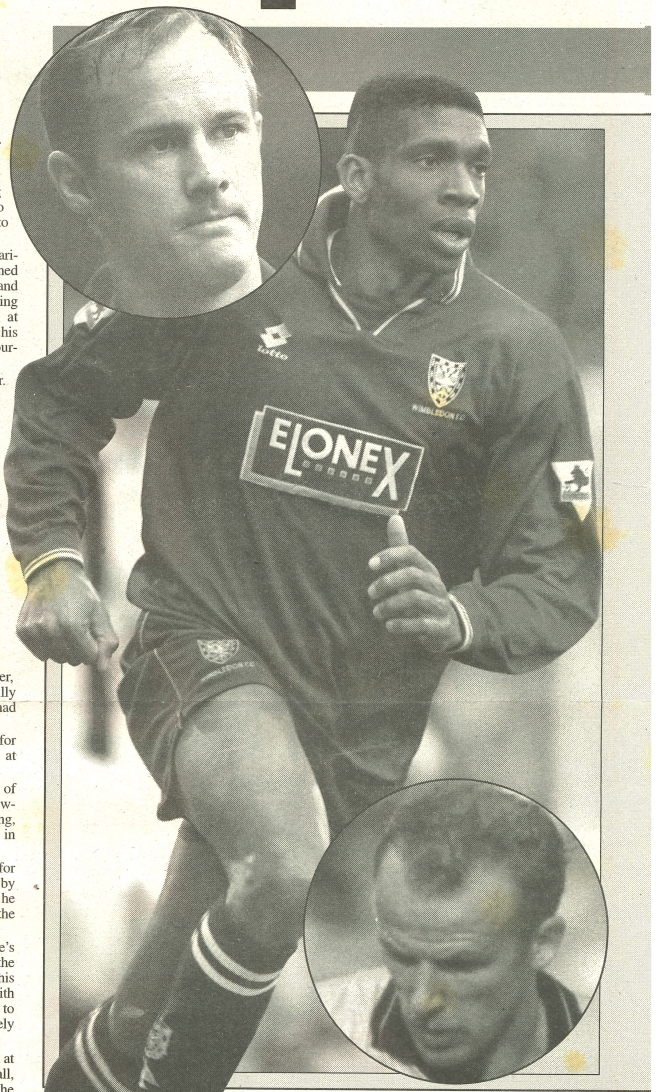
Ossie Smith was, in my opinion, the best midfielder in the Conference during the mid-1980s. Capped just once by England in 1984, Smith starred for Runcorn when the Linnets were always among the top six in the league.

Selecting six forwards was, without doubt, the hardest task. Just think of the talent available. Players like Lee Hughes, Andy Hunt and the modern phenomenon Carl Alford. Doncaster fans will be hoping Alford will continue his form of 20 goals a season and it is with a somewhat heavy heart that I have discarded Alford for Efan Ekoku.

However, my first choice is **Paul Davies**, one of the all-time Conference leading scorers. Paul, or "Ocker" to his friends, spent almost 16 years with Kidderminster and made more than 600 appearances, netting nearly 300 goals in all competitions, including 178 in the Conference and also won six caps for England during the 1980's.

Later to become Graham Allner's right-hand man at Aggborough, Davies followed his mentor to Worcester City in January 1999 before leaving St George's Lane at the same time as Allner to join neighbouring Dr Martens League Western Division side Evesham United last January.

My next choice partnered Davies on many occasions for both Kidderminster and England. **Kim Casey** is another with a great record as a Conference scorer, netting over 150 goals for Harriers in two spells as well as for Cheltenham Town and Wycombe



SUPER DON: Efan Ekoku is a leading hit-man; Inset (top) Mark Carter. Inset (above) Kenny Lowe

full of memories

SO MUCH POWER, SO MUCH PACE IN THIS TEAM OF MANY TALENTS



MY TOP 22

GOALKEEPERS:

PAUL JONES (Kidderminster Harriers)
DAVE RYAN (Northwich Victoria)

DEFENDERS:

STEVE CONNER (Dagenham & Redbridge)
MATT CROSSLEY (Wycombe Wanderers, Kingstonian)
JOHN DAVISON (Altrincham)
DAVE HOWELL (Enfield, Barnet)
KEVIN RICHARDSON (Bromsgrove Rovers)
MARK SMITH (Stevenage Borough)
MARTIN WEIR (Kidderminster Harriers)

MIDFIELDERS:

PAUL BANCROFT (Kidderminster Harriers, Kettering Town)
NICKY EVANS (Kettering Town, Barnet, Wycombe Wanderers)
RICHARD FORSYTH (Kidderminster Harriers)
KENNY LOWE (Barrow, Gateshead, Barnet)
PAUL ROGERS (Sutton United)
OSSIE SMITH (Runcorn)
PAUL WEBB (Kidderminster Harriers)

FORWARDS:

EFAN EKOKU (Sutton United)
MARK CARTER (Bangor City, Runcorn, Barnet)
KIM CASEY (Kidderminster Harriers, Cheltenham Town, Wycombe Wanderers)
ANDY CLARKE (Barnet)
PAUL DAVIES (Kidderminster Harriers)
FRANK MURPHY (Kettering Town, Barnet, Nuneaton Borough)



SELECTED: Steve Foster (left), Andy Clarke (main picture above) and Frank Murphy (inset above)

Wanderers. Now player-coach at Dr Martens Western Division side Moor Green, Casey, 39, has already showed his talents off the field by helping the Moors to gain promotion to the Premier Division last season.

Mark Carter scored more than 180 goals in the Conference for Runcorn, Bangor City and Barnet before scoring about 100 times as a professional with the Bees, Bury and Rochdale.

Carter also played 11 times for England before Barnet's promotion and was, without doubt, one of the best strikers seen at Non-League level in recent times. He's still turning out as player-manager back at one of his former clubs, Runcorn, now in the UniBond League Premier Division.

What a front trio they would have made. Add **Andy Clarke's** sheer pace and you have a really frightening prospect. Capped twice by England in 1990, Clarke became one of the hottest properties around when arriving suddenly on the scene at Barnet. Fry fended off a number of offers for his flying attacker, including one reputedly from Manchester United, before finally accepting a record £250,000 bid from Wimbledon in February 1991. Clarke went on to become a regular with the Dons before rejoining Fry at Peterborough last year.

My choice of **Frankie Murphy** may surprise some, but he was a one-off. He scored more than 120 goals for Kettering, Barnet and Nuneaton. But it's his ability to do the unexpected that sees him on my list.

My last place goes to **Efan Ekoku** who did so well as a Premiership player with Wimbledon until moving abroad to Grasshoppers Zurich. Ekoku burst onto the Conference scene with Sutton United, netting 25 goals in his first full season. His pace led to him joining Bournemouth in 1990 for £100,000. He then moved to Norwich before signing for Wimbledon.

MY TOP TEAM — See page 22

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A Vote is for Wycombe

AS WITH THE best players, I was really spoilt for choice when it came to selecting the outstanding team since the Conference began as the Alliance Premier League back in 1979/80.

The first winners were **Altrincham** who beat a strong challenge from **Weymouth** to take the title by two points. Under the guidance of Tony Sanders, the Robins repeated that success by again lifting the championship the following season, pipping **Kettering Town** by a three-point margin.

At the time Altrincham were undoubtedly a very strong side. Uncompromising in midfield and at the back, they over-powered many teams and the 'southern softies' had to be content with being runners-up until Enfield broke the mould in 1982.

Altrincham's team of the time included players such as the magnificent John Davison at the back along with the giant Paul Cuddy, who certainly took no prisoners, and, in the first championship team, current England boss John Owens, who was a much more refined central defender. Stan Allan and Ivan Crossley took the full back roles and neither of those two took kindly to anyone passing them.

In front of the back four was John King, who knew that if he missed you the defenders wouldn't.

But there was much more to that Robins' side than mere brawn. They could also play a bit too. King was more than just a midfield destroyer and in Graham Heathcote, Jeff Johnson, Barry Whitbread, Barry Howard and John Rogers they possessed midfielders and forwards with pace and ability.

Perhaps the only shame from Altrincham's point of view is that the formation of the Alliance Premier came a few years too late. A number of their best players were coming towards the end of their careers and they began to slip down the table after their second title success. But for the first couple of years of the Conference they were definitely the team no-one wanted to play against.

Runcorn kept the title in the north-west, but the next four years saw the southerners turn the tables on their rivals.

First it was the turn of a very good **Enfield** side to move from being runners-up to Runcorn to win the title in 1982/83. Eddie McCluskey's team had won the FA Trophy by beating Altrincham in 1982 – a fact that perhaps affected their title run-in.

McCluskey's cultured line-up, which included Keith Barrett and Tony Jennings at the back, Nicky Ironton and Noel Ashford in midfield and Dave Flint and Steve King in attack, edged out **Maidstone United** by one point.

Enfield's re-built squad repeated their title success three years later, but this time the stars were Dave Howell and goalkeeper Andy Pape plus Paul Harding and Paul Furlong, both of whom went on to enjoy success as professionals.

After winning the Trophy again in 1988, McCluskey's side broke up. They were relegated in 1990 and have yet to return to the top flight.

Maidstone ran Enfield close in 1983, but went one better the following year, beating off Graham Carr's excellent **Nuneaton Borough** outfit in an exciting climax.

The Stones, under current Dover Athletic boss Bill Williams' shrewd guidance, had a quality side which included players like Frank Ovard in attack, Derek Richardson in goal, the towering John Glover and cultured full back Brian Thompson at the back and former England star Peter Taylor pulling the strings in midfield.

A slightly different team under John Still then won the title again in 1989 with Steve Butler, one of the best players in his position, dominating proceedings. With Mark Newson in defence and Mark Beeney in goal they had a side that won the title by an eight-point margin from Kettering who at one stage looked like walking away with the championship.



TOP MEN: (inset left) Nuneaton Borough's Trevor Morley, (top left) Wycombe Wanderers' Matt Crossley and (main picture) Steve Guppy

The Nuneaton team pipped by Maidstone were arguably the best side never to have won anything. Graham Carr built a super footballing outfit which included Trevor Morley, Eddie McGoldrick, Richard Hill and Paul Richardson, who all went on to play League football.

They finished as bridesmaids again in 1985 to double winners **Wealdstone,** but after that the team broke up. Carr moved on and relegation for Borough followed two years later.

My final choice was between three clubs – Barnet, Kidderminster and Wycombe Wanderers.

BARNET, under the incomparable Barry Fry, enjoyed a tremendous four-year spell when they finished runners-up three times and won the title in 1991, gaining promotion to the Football League.

The quality of Fry's players during that time can be judged by the number of them who went on to play League football – Mick Bodley, Gary Poole, Phil Gridelet, Paul Harding, Jonathan Hunt, Derek Payne, Lee Payne, Gary Bull, Dave Regis, Peter Guthrie, Andy Clarke, Nicky Bissett and Robert Codner.

Kidderminster were one of the clubs who maintained a solid backbone to their team over a long period of time.

Manager Graham Allner, who must be considered amongst the best over a 20-year period, also lost players to professional clubs. He said farewell to Lee Hughes, Paul Jones, Marcus Bignot, Steve Lilwall and Richard Forsyth to League clubs at various times, but was able to find more than adequate replacements.

Harriers' record doesn't perhaps compare as favourably as some of the others but the quality of their football, especially the side who won the 1994 title, was among the best I saw.

Whoever had the foresight to appoint Martin O'Neill manager of Wycombe in February 1990 deserves a medal.

Two years earlier Wanderers had almost suffered an immediate return to the Isthmian League, but O'Neill, whose only previous managerial experience had encompassed spells at Grantham Town and, briefly, Shepshed Charterhouse, immediately led them to fifth and then second in his first two seasons in charge.

But it was his third full season that hit the headlines when he guided Wanderers to promotion as champions with a whopping 15-point cushion from runners-up Bromsgrove Rovers.

TOP MIDFIELDER: Peter Taylor

To emphasise their superiority that season, Wycombe also achieved the double by comfortably beating Runcorn 4-1 at Wembley in the FA Trophy final, repeating their Trophy triumph of two years earlier when they had beaten Kidderminster 2-1 in front of 34,842.

There is little doubt that O'Neill's side containing Steve Guppy, Dave Carroll, Matt Crossley, Keith Ryan, Keith Scott, Andy Kerr and Steve Thompson was a very good one indeed. That showed when they won immediate League promotion.

So, for achievements, entertainment value and ability, I am going to plump for Wycombe as my team of the first 20 years of the Conference.

STEVE WHITNEY