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BEES REVIEW

THE BIG INTERVIEW: KEVIN O'CONNOR

Today is a moment of dual celebration: one for Brentford's deserved promotion to the Championship and also for Club Captain Kevin O'Connor, who is set to complete 500 appearances in a Brentford shirt this afternoon.

That total has only been beaten by three other men in the club's 125 year history.



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Brentford's promotion on Good Friday has at the first time of asking erased a moment in history that could have scarred the club irrevocably.

Marcello Trotta's penalty that hit the crossbar against Doncaster Rovers a year ago has been subject of endless discussion and repeated broadcast on television.

The intended penalty taker was Kevin O'Connor; instead of hurt and anger when the subject is brought up, he now looks on the events of April 27 2013 as a steep learning exercise.

Brentford's elevation to The Championship last month has ensured that there will be a happy ending after all.

"When I think about it now a smile comes on my face," said Kevin.

"It happened for a reason, and it's made us enjoy this season even more.

"I can smile about it now, whereas before I couldn't – that's what has changed."

Last year's events are understandably difficult to discuss, but like or not, it is now part of the Club's history.

"The Donny game was a crazy one," said Kevin.

"The amount of people that said to me we'd get a penalty in added time and I'll take it, and for me not to take it for whatever circumstance - I don't blame Trotts, I can understand why he wanted to take it.

"I would have preferred to have taken it and missed, the way I felt.

"At least it would have been completely down to me.

"The next week was hard."

Incredibly, Brentford were awarded a penalty in stoppage time against Swindon Town seven days later, and there was no mistaking who was taking this spot kick.

"As soon as it was given, it was the least nervous I've felt, because I was angry about the penalty the week before" said Kevin.

"All I felt was anger putting the ball down.

"The thing that made me smile was that when I went to collect the ball - Clayton had it - and then said to me 'I'm taking it', and then laughed, which made me laugh.

"I knew I was going to score, and got an awful lot of nice messages afterwards, which I thought was really nice.

"Obviously what happened last season was hard, as you can imagine, it was hard for everyone – we're talking about centimetres aren't we?

"I try and stay positive, sometimes I have down moments as everyone does but overall you have to think forward.

"The Club is in such a better position now than last season, in a way it might be a blessing in disguise."

Spin forward 12 months and Kevin is sat on the bench for the Good Friday game with Preston North End when he got from Brentford's very own Mystic Meg – Toumani Diagouraga.

"Toumani said to me on the bench 'I can smell a Crawley goal,'" said Kevin.

"Five minutes later the crowd go crazy, and from that moment on I felt sick in my stomach, I just wanted the game to fast forward.

"When the whistle went we thought we'd done it and celebrated, and

then heard it was 4-4 at Molineux.

"We then went into the changing room, still happy at 5-4 to Wolves, but when it went to 6-4 that when the place erupted.

"We really had a good celebration, jumping and dancing around.

"They are the memories – they are the things that will live with me for a long, long time, and that's what we worked so hard for all season."

Those celebrations then continued into the night, where supporters and players mingled together in the Lord Nelson in Brentford.

"When we walked into the pub the reception we received from the fans was tremendous," said Kevin.

"I missed out on the previous promotion [in 2009 at Darlington] as I was injured, so I didn't get all of that so I really enjoyed it and made the most of it.

"This one I was in or around every single game, on the bench or playing, all the team talks, so I really did soak it in."

He was persuaded by the assembled audience to make a speech, and Kevin duly delivered, with a shot of sambuca handed to him downed to huge cheers.

"It burnt my throat, and thought 'what am I doing?' but they deserved the celebrations for the support they've given us this season and last," said Kevin.

"Now I can look back, enjoy and learn from experience and look forward to next season.

"I couldn't have written it any better, but the team have won promotion, that's the most important thing.

"Leicester City apart, not many of the Play-Off teams have done

well, we've kicked on from that experience, which we've used to make us stronger."

Championship football will mean a return to some old grounds, but many new ones too.

"That's when it's going to sink in," said Kevin.

"Griffin Park will also be packed for every single home game, and then we'll go to away grounds – there's a few I haven't been to.

"The standard of football is going to be harder so that's a good test for us but I think these young boys have definitely got it in them to perform really well for the Club."

Next season, alongside his newly-signed playing contract for next season, Kevin will also undertake a coaching role.

"I'm really excited by it," said Kevin.

"Especially when you get to my age it's nice to be offered another deal and to stay at a club that's going places.

"Everyone knows I wanted to stay here, and the Club have been good to me over the years – it was an easy decision.

"I've been very lucky here, up until the last couple of years I've been really good on the injury front, and I've managed to play under a lot of managers; I've just worked hard, done my best, and luckily the managers have wanted to keep me.

"It's a natural progression as I get older and see the younger lads come through; I enjoy watching them improve, and try to give them advice if I can.

"The manager has offered me this role, which will involve the Academy up to the First Team, working off Mark and David Weir.

"It's exciting for me; we're going to structure it so if I'm playing it will be less coaching, and if I'm not, then I get more involved.

"It's always been in the back of my mind, but the last four or five years I've taken an interest in it, and started to do my [coaching] badges as well.

"I need to do my level three, which I'm booked in May, after that it's the UEFA licences, and the Pro Licence – I'll try and work my way through as much as I can.

"I'm just going to try and learn off all the people here, a lot of good people and coaches and see where that takes me."

"I possibly could have gone to another club for one or two years, but I want to stay here – my roots are here – I love this club.

"It's been great for me and there are some really good people I can learn a lot off and see where that takes me in the future.

"I could have gone to another league club and play slightly more than I am here, but long term, the opportunity to coach here, and to guide me; Warbs and David Wier – they are good people, good coaches.

"I can learn from them and take me to a better place rather than go to another club and that's it."

When Mark Warburton took over as manager, one of his first tasks was to assure Kevin that his Griffin Park career would be extended, if he wanted it.

"To his credit, he come to me straight away and spoke to me", said Kevin.

"He made it clear he wanted me around, in his type of role as player-coach, so he put me at ease straight away.

"It was really nice, he didn't have to do that, and the way he did it shows the bit of class, and made me feel comfortable.

"I think it's a fantastic opportunity to learn off him, the Academy, I'm really excited by it."

Kevin is also bullish about the team's chances in The Championship and was adamant that this squad is the best one he's been involved in.

"The squad is absolutely fantastic," said Kevin.

"Previously we've had good 11 players but when there have been two or three changes it has brought the team down slightly; this season we've seen where he'd had to make changes, the people that have come in have played really, really well.

"It just shows that it's a squad game these days, and it's just exciting, isn't it?"

A change of manager didn't derail the side, and Kevin spoke openly about Mark Warburton's opening six months as Brentford boss.

"Mark's continued Uwe's great work," said Kevin.

"He's ultra positive all the time, always wants us to go for next goal no matter what the score is – even if it's the last minute and we're one-nil up, he'll go for goal rather than keep it in the corner.

"Mark's calmer, but he loses his temper when he needs to and we've seen that once or twice, which I think has been needed."

Kevin has played under 13 permanent and interim managers in his time at Griffin Park, and mentioned two that he would take inspiration from.

"From Martin Allen, I would

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definitely take his man management skills," said Kevin.

"If he didn't like you he'd let you know, but if he liked you, he'd look after you – and you wanted to play for him.

"Steve Coppell was very calm; when he spoke you would listen to him."

Kevin began as a trainee in the summer of 1998; even in that space of time the landscape of youth development has changed, with the 32-year-old feeling the current crop of scholars are treated with more cotton wool than his days.

"We had it a lot worse than they do now," said Kevin.

"Those two years made me who I am; you got so close to your team mates, learning all the time, what the whole thing was about.

"If you mucked up, so to speak, Bob Booker [Kevin's Youth Team Manager] would take you out running.

"You were scared of him; he was a lovely guy but he had that fear factor about him and I don't think that's there anymore.

"My two best friendships – Mark Williams and Paul Woodhouse – were formed from those days."

The 2006/07 season was tough for Kevin on and off the pitch, the side being relegated to League Two and the death of his mother, which capped a period in his life that was extremely testing.

"You just had to get on with it," said Kevin.

"It was really tough, there was a lot of stuff going on for me personally, but I always think you have to experience those times to appreciate the good ones.

"I look back then it makes me appreciate where the Club is now, and where we're looking to go.

"It was sad, but I feel good that in my time that we managed to get the Club back up to League One."

Andy Scott and Terry Bullivant's reign as manager and assistant respectively came to an abrupt end in February 2011 but Kevin recognised their efforts in regaining Brentford's League One status.

"They got us established again in League One," said Kevin.

"He got a bit of stick for the way we played but I didn't think it was that bad, we played to our strengths.

"It wasn't as flowing as it was now, but I don't think we had the players too.

"I thought he did really well when he came in."

Kevin has captained the side on more than 200 occasions in First Team games, the first against Hartlepool United in October 2004.

Due to lack of prior record keeping the historians are uncertain but it is probably the most by any Brentford player.

"I love being captain," said Kevin.

"But if the manager decided to give it to someone else I wouldn't take offence.

"Previously, one or two times I've come back from pre-season, and the captaincy was given to someone else and I wasn't even told, which I thought was disappointing in the way it was done.

"For one reason or another it's come back to me, I enjoy it, but it won't change me if I'm not.

"There are lots of captains in our

room; Tony Craig, he's superb and big influence, a big voice.

"You've then got Dougie, who slightly quieter but goes about his business on the pitch in a captain's way.

"Alan McCormack, he can be lively and vocal, plus Clayton, who's not vocal but he produces on the field - like they all do.

"It's great not to be looking at one person all the time."

I drew a comparison between Steve Coppell's Brentford team and the current crop, with Kevin picking up on the similarities.

"I don't remember playing from the back so much," said Kevin.

"But both teams have experience; we definitely had that under Coppell, and today.

"You can look at Clayton and Lloyd to a certain degree, both have pace, strength and power.

"Ben Burgess and Marcello Trotta - two big left-footed players with a bit of magic.

"I'm not sure Brentford fans may like it but I can see a little bit of Martin Rowlands in Adam Forshaw.

"So when you think about it there are a few comparisons."

Kevin realises that with Championship football his appearances may be less than in previous seasons.

"I try and look at it in a different way," said Kevin.

"As long as I'm fit and able, then it's up to the manager.

"I'm realistic to realise that in The Championship I probably won't be playing as much, but that's neither here nor there for me.

"I'll keep fit, work as hard as I can – coaching and playing – and see where it takes me, and enjoy it.

"Of course everyone wants to play, but you have to realise there's people in front of you that have been performing as well as they have, what can you do?

"You have to support them and do what you can.

"For me now, I'm disappointed not to play but as long as the team is winning, then I'm more than happy."

Fatherhood has meant Kevin now puts his work troubles aside when he walks through the family door.

"You have to switch off," said Kevin.

"Previously I'd struggle to do that, especially when things weren't going so well.

"These days, I go home, put my bag down and that's it.

"It takes me away from football and that's great."

The previous two seasons were both punctured with serious injury for Kevin, but with the Club's Medical Department looking after him, he knew that full recovery was only a matter of time.

In November 2012, Kevin was injured in Brentford's 1-0 victory at Portsmouth.

"It was a strange one as the season before I had a long injury, and I never doubted I'd come back," said Kevin.

"As soon as I landed – no one touched me – I knew I had done something.

"For the first 48 hours I didn't know what was wrong; that's the worst part as you don't know what to think.

"As soon as I had the X-Ray and the



scan, it was never an issue; I always thought I would come back."

Kevin is full of praise for the medical staff and a former team mate.

"They are brilliant; I can't speak highly enough of them," said Kevin.

"They'd be dropping me home after training, things like that, which they didn't have to do, to go that extra mile to give you the best chance to be as good as you can be.

"I can't praise them enough."

"From the previous year, I knew how good they were – how they looked after you, and worked you hard.

"I had the added bonus of Farid being injured at the same time –

he's an amazing guy.

"When he heard about my injury, he visited me at the house, and got a really good bond together – every day we would push each other to the limits.

"I'm glad to see him come back from his injury as well."

Kevin's final words will chime with the majority of supporters that visit Griffin Park when he describes why he is a Brentford fan too.

"There's something about it – it's a lovely club, you feel like part of the family," said Kevin.

"I've been here so long it's hard to put it into words, it's just Brentford."