

Q&A

KEITH ASLAN

Speaking to *FGIF* is Kent based **Keith Aslan** - super hopper, avid programme collector and highly regarded senior reporter for *FGIF*. Having watched football for over fifty-five years now, Keith talks about his early days watching his beloved Chelsea; his hopping travels to those remote football outposts (including Mongolia); his strong views about the modern game and his passion for the game of darts. We hope you enjoy what is cracking read....

FGIF: Keith, firstly tell us a bit about yourself and what encouraged you to get into football?

Keith: I am a stunningly attractive 65-year old who after 45 years hard graft on British Rail is now taking a well-deserved rest. I first got into football in a big way at the age of 11 when I was incarcerated in a boarding school for four years. Not the happiest period of my life as discipline isn't really my thing and the only respite from the drudgery of school life was on a Saturday when I spent the afternoon watching local club Letchworth Town. This set the template for the rest of my life with Saturday afternoon football being the highlight of the week. When I left school by 'mutual consent' at fifteen my housemasters' last words to me were 'If you keep on spending all your time going to football, you'll never make anything of yourself' I like to think I've proved him right...

FGIF: Which teams did you support when you were growing up, and the reason behind this?

Keith: Letchworth Town (see answer above) Chelsea (see answer below) and Hillingdon Borough. I supported Hillingdon as my grandmother lived around the corner from their ground and my Mum used to drop me off at the match while she visited her. I went to many of their away games which was what started me off on Groundhopping. My first major trip, and the first time I'd been to the north of England unaccompanied, was to watch them play at Wigan in the FA Trophy the year they got to the final. The team and supporters travelled back on the same train and took over the buffet on the way home noisily celebrating a surprise 1-0 victory. Everybody was exceedingly drunk and I can proudly boast (ok, maybe not proudly) that my first ever kiss was with Tommy Higginson! I must stress this was in a celebratory not sexual kind of way. I can remember everything about the day, but have trouble recalling events that happened last week.

FGIF: What was the first ever game you attended? What are your memories of this special day?

Keith: The first game I went to was Fulham v Chelsea on January 16th 1965. It is the only programme in my collection I know exactly where to find. My uncle took me and asked me which team I wanted to win. For no particular reason I said Chelsea, and that was it, the start of a lifetime of pain (although not as much as if I'd said Fulham). The line ups were awesome, Fulham had Bobby Robson, Tosh Chamberlain, Johnny Haynes, George Cohen and Rodney Marsh as well as Jim Langley who went on to manage Hillingdon Borough through their glory years. Chelsea had Peter Bonetti, John Hollins, Ron Harris, Terry Venables, Bobby Tambling, Barry Bridges et al. We sat in the old stand on uncomfortable wooden seats which are still there today due to a preservation order. I started collecting programmes from the off but I wish I'd kept the ticket back then, as I'd love to know what seat I saw my first match in. Interesting adverts in the programme, Fireman had new pay rates of £815 a year, and 'the weekly paper for Fulham fans', the Putney & Roehampton Herald was threepence. The programme was 6d, that's two and a half pence in this new-fangled money. Chelsea won the game 2-1 (I think).

FGIF: When did you first get into groundhopping? How many years have you been a hopper?

Keith: Not an easy one to answer, I've always liked travelling around to different grounds, but with teams I supported. Sometime in the late seventies, having done quite a few grounds with Chelsea, I decided to complete the '92'. After that I continued lower down the leagues and when Chelsea priced me out around about the same time as Hillingdon Borough folded, I took up groundhopping full time. Now I don't miss going to Chelsea at all and on the odd occasion I've been back to the 'Bridge' I don't enjoy it anything like as much as I used to standing on the terraces. Still miss my visits to 'The Leas Stadium' though. It's now a housing estate.

FGIF: For you, what makes non-league football so special?

Keith: You meet such nice people, not something I could always say about standing on the Shed.

FGIF: How many grounds have you visited so far? What are the most games you have been to in a season?

Keith: Haven't added them up recently, would guess at somewhere between 2,500 and 2,800. Don't know which season I've seen my record number of games, counted them up one year and it came to 124, probably about average.

FGIF: What is the best (and worst) game of football you have ever seen, and why?

Keith: I've been privileged to see many great games in my time, QPR 5 Birmingham 2 with Rodney Marsh running the show and scoring a hat trick with his third being the best I've ever seen. I was standing directly behind the goal at the school end when it went in, catch it on You Tube. Fulham 5 Derby County 3 (aet) in the first season of the late lamented Watney Cup. This was a game that had

everything including a spectacular Jimmy Conway overhead kick that they still talk about today down at the Cottage. Hillingdon Borough 2 Luton Town 1 in the FA Cup second round, a huge giant killing back in the day when the FA cup was important. Crowd of 9,033, I doubt if Health and Safety had been around, they would have let more than a couple of thousand in. And a women's match, Wimbledon 3 Doncaster Belles 2, the Belles first league defeat for 15 years! (they didn't take it very well). There have been so many other great games over the years, but as for the worst match I've ever seen it's difficult to pick a stand out downer. When you watch the amount of football in fields that I do, seeing a pile of manure comes with the territory.

FGIF: What is the best goal you have ever seen?

Keith: See answer above.

FGIF: Which non-league clubs do you live near? Tell us something about them.

Keith: My country dacha is equidistant between Ramsgate and Margate but I strongly favour the former, a proper ground with covered terracing behind each goal. They serve top quality eats and the tannoy plays records from the sixties and seventies which all adds to the matchday experience. Nobody likes Margate's ground, but if you'd seen the state it was in when they were forced to play away for three years you've got to have admiration that they've managed to turn it back into a football ground at all. One thing they need to sort out is the programme, vastly overpriced at £2.50. Whichever I visit, always a pleasurable evening no matter what the football is like, but with public transport a tad scarce round these parts Ramsgate is by far the easier option to get home from.

FGIF: What are your (three) favourite grounds, and why?

Keith: Charlton Athletic, Celtic and Chelsea in the days before all seating. I have a bit of a fetish about terracing, I love the stuff. Standing on the concrete bank along the touchline at Charlton was mind blowing. The highest block of terracing in the world you could see most of London from the top of it, but the players looked like ants. The vast bowl of Celtic Park was another favourite. I've never known anything to compare with the experience of standing on the 'Jungle'. Obviously Stamford Bridge is going to feature here. I used to have my regular spot at the top of the terracing to the left of the Shed. A great viewpoint as long as it wasn't raining.

FGIF: Have you been to any grounds abroad? Which ones stand out?

Keith: A lot of people are surprised when I tell them that the only country I have ever visited, outside the UK, is Mongolia. I have a girlfriend out there and so have made a number of visits. There is only one ground in the country, in the capital Ulaan Bataar which houses almost two thirds of the countries six million population. On my first visit it was just like a typical Kent League ground without the floodlights, but it's now been built up with a large stand and has a licence to hold World Cup games. The league has six teams and all fixtures are played at the ground, three games back to back on Tuesday afternoons during the very short

season. No programmes but ornate fixture lists make ideal souvenirs, even with my girlfriend translating I had great difficulty in explaining why I wanted one, they don't go in for that sort of thing. The ground is next to the giant Nadaam Stadium a massive Soviet built arena where I, along with 70,000 others, watched the Nadaam Games. The country is Wrestling mad, it's the national sport and football doesn't get much of a look in. I'm afraid watching two men trying to get each other to fall over just doesn't do it for me. Visiting the Sports Museum, I was very surprised to find a very old replica Chelsea shirt in the gift shop selling for £1.50p. It was the only football shirt in the place and I was interested to know how they came by it. Nobody had any idea but were pleased to sell it as they'd had it since the museum opened.

FGIF: How do you decide which game or ground to visit each week?

Keith: First port of call is 'Traveller' then a look to see what lines the trains are actually running on. That usually narrows it down quite a bit.

FGIF: What is your matchday routine? Do you make notes in the game to help write your reports?

Keith: *No routine. Don't make any notes which is why my records are so poor, but I do jot down the attendance as that's the one thing I usually forget.*

FGIF: Are there any obscure grounds that you really like and why do you like them?

Keith: *Not really, I like them all.*

FGIF: We know you love getting a matchday programme. Why is this important to you?

Keith: Basically, my life is encapsulated in my football programmes, looking back at them evokes so many memories, without them I wouldn't know which games I have been to, or have any tangible evidence of how I've spent my existence.

FGIF: How many proggies have you got in your collection? Which are your favourites?

Keith: Too many to count. I've got a programme from almost every match I've ever seen so average it out at around 110 games a season for the past 52 years and you do the maths because I certainly can't. The best programme in my collection is from the ground opener at Doncaster Rovers. I think it was £7 and worth every penny. Read it on the journey back to London and still hadn't finished it when we pulled in to Kings Cross.

FGIF: For you, what makes a good programme?

Keith: *In my eyes all programmes are 'good', I get just as much pleasure from a basic 4 pager at a Middlesex League game as a glossy production from higher up the pyramid.*

FGIF: Have you got any 'must-see' grounds on your 'to do' bucket list?

Keith: The ones in step 1 to 6 that I didn't manage to do before football shut down. Garstang, Golcar and Jersey Bulls. And Cove Rangers in Scotland, that will be a nice little day out. I have done a team called Aslan and have always been promising myself to do to a match at Keith but haven't got round to it. Yet.

FGIF: Do you have any other collections (football or otherwise)?

Keith: No.

FGIF: Do you subscribe to any soccer magazines?

Keith: The Football Traveller of course but nothing else.

FGIF: Is there anything that annoys you about the modern game of football?

Keith: Don't get me started, I could write a book on this one. Games that now go on forever have sucked much of the joy out of the game. I remember the good old days when the BBBC teleprinter used to start giving the football results out at 4.37pm and by 4.40pm was clattering merrily away, before falling silent by 4.45pm when all the results were in. You could go to a match and know exactly what time train or bus you would be getting home. Why can't games start on time now? Why must referees play a minimum of 46 minutes even for a half of football containing nothing that could possibly be defined as a 'stoppage'. Why does everybody, including referees, think that the laws of the game say you should add on 30 seconds for every substitution and every goal scored? They don't. Why are there three substitutions when teams just use them to waste time (the FA doesn't seem to have spotted this). Why aren't players booked for time wasting anymore? Why do half times have to drag on for 16minutes upwards? It does make me angry. Other things that wind me up are £100,000-a-week footballers, all seater stadiums, Alan Shearer, VAR, pre-match handshakes, linesmen inspecting the goal nets at the start of the second half, what do they think will have happened since the last time they had a look? These are a few of my least favourite things. There are many more but I'll stop here before I blow a gasket.

FGIF: If you didn't watch football, which other hobbies would you probably follow?

Keith: I'm very much into Darts and watch hours on end of the stuff on ITV 4. It's the only game I've ever played seriously and fans of the Marylebone & District Darts League in the 70's and 80's won't need telling how good I was. I find a sport you can play while smoking a cigarette and drinking beer is a very attractive proposition. Did use to have a collection of Darts World magazines but gave them away due to lack of space in my Hammersmith penthouse.

FGIF: Your General preferences next. What is your favourite Food?

Keith: Steak and Chips but I'll eat pretty much anything.

FGIF: Drink?

Keith: I have a caffeine addiction so I continuously need to tip coffee down my throat. Also, rather partial to a spot of Fosters and a gin and tonic goes down well on a day when it's too hot for lager.

FGIF: Genre of music or band?

Keith: Anything from the fifties and sixties particularly rock and roll and surf music (that's proper instrumental surf music, not the naff Beach Boys stuff).

FGIF: TV programmes?

Keith: Peaky Blinders, Mock the Week. Virtually any BBC drama, they're nearly all good if Robson Green isn't in them. I never tire of seeing reruns of Fawlty Towers, I know all the episodes off by heart and still find them hilarious.

FGIF: Place(s) visited?

Keith: The Highland Line from Glasgow to Mallaig.

FGIF: Film(s)?

Keith: California Dolls.

FGIF: Book?

Keith: I haven't read a book since I left school.

FGIF: Daily paper?

Keith: Monday to Friday - the 'i', Saturday - The Times, Sunday - The Non-League Paper.

FGIF: Go-to social media site/platform?

Keith: I'm not really in to social media.

FGIF: Other sports you follow closely?

Keith: My interest in Darts (see answer above). Also used to be a regular at Streatham Redskins ice hockey and Fulham Rugby League and at one stage had watched Fulham play at every Rugby League ground apart from Halifax.

FGIF: Describe yourself in three words or list top three separate qualities?

Keith: Unambitious, idle, harmless.

FGIF: And finally, name three people you would most like to take with you on a desert island?

Keith: Piers Morgan, Boris Johnson, Richard Branson. Only joking, try Helen Mirren, Nicola Walker, Sara Pascoe.

That's really helpful. Thank you very much Keith for taking the time to answer these questions and for helping us with our survey!

Martin - 04/20

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