



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

It's a funny old game... especially when I've been asked to play it

THE anniversary of me becoming 'Mystic Fitz' has just passed in the world of football.

Twenty years ago, I stood at Exeter City's St James Park beside the Tottenham legend Steve Perryman and ECFC main man Julian Tagg. I had set up what was called a limited-service radio station at the ground to test the waters in the hope that we might win the franchise for a new Exeter-based radio station.

Steve, Julian and I were chatting about the third round of the FA Cup draw which was about to take place. At the time it was safe to say that the club's future was looking a little bleak as the finances were in a terrible state.

"Don't worry," I said. "You will get Manchester United, hold them to a draw at home, then have to play them at Old Trafford."

They smiled at me and left the room. A couple of months later... after that was exactly the outcome, Julian asked me to pick that weekend's lottery numbers for him. At that point, my short-lived career as a clairvoyant came to an end.

In 2001, for some reason, I became the pitch announcer for Plymouth Argyle and stood beside some of the great names in football managing or playing in the Championship. Ian Holloway referred to me as the poshest bloke in football, Roy Keane smiled at me but it could have been wind, and Robbie Savage was a delight... especially when I announced that he was leaving the pitch. I remember one away manager, a former top player, who will have to remain nameless, who came stomping down the tunnel after an argument with Paul Sturrock, turned left and sat in the dugout, arms folded, not happy. He was there a couple of minutes when Sturrock joined him. They stared at each other for a moment and then the 'away manager' realised that he was sitting in the middle of the Argyle team.

There were, however, two great announcements that will stick with me throughout my life.

Firstly, I should explain that at times I was passed personal notes in order to help the crowd. On this particular occasion as kick-off started, I was passed a note that a car with the registration GF02LJY had left its lights on. That was at 3 pm. I remembered the note just before the final

whistle, turned on the microphone and said to the crowd: "I'm sorry, I've had this note for nearly two hours now but will the owner of GF02LJY please return to your car... your lights 'were' on."

It got a laugh from 18,000 people... bar one. The next was in a match against QPR, I think? Argyle were 2-1 down and we had just five minutes to go. QPR made a replacement substitution and the player coming off decided to do it at a snail's pace. As was my job description I had to announce his number and name. For legal reasons, I will change his name to Delbert Smithurst and I said: "Coming off number 17, Smithurst," and as he crawled to the touchline, I added... "eventually."

This got a laugh from both sides, a round of applause from the Argyle dugout but a waggy finger from the FA officials. Still to this date, I believe I'm the only pitch announcer who has ever got an FA warning and a lecture on the on the rules of incitement.

All of these memories and more came home to me when I had the honour of hosting a tribute to journalist Dave Thomas at Torquay United. He started his career as part of the renowned *Daily Mirror* training scheme in 1967. He became part of a club that included such illustrious names as Alistair Campbell and David Montgomery. He covered his first Torquay United game in 1968 and formally became the Gulls reporter in 1973 and has been that person ever since. It is unlikely that there is a reporter anywhere else in the country who has covered a club as long as Dave has covered Torquay United. On the night, he unveiled what he considered was the best team that has represented the TUFC over his lifetime.

The event was packed and as we tripped through the history of the teams, some incredible names came up from Torquay's past; great managers such as Frank O'Farrell, Cyril Knowles, Leroy Rosenior and Paul Buckle. Neville Southall was to me a brilliant keeper and indeed came out on top of Dave's list. Left backs Tom Kelly and John Uzzell shone like the stars they were, and we reminded the room of the incredible careers of players like Wes Saunders, Mark Loram, Bruce Rioch, Chris Hargreaves and the infamous Dave Caldwell. His



Fitz is called up for the Plymouth Football Boot Bank charity team and meets Chelsea legend Colin Lee. Below: Fitz comperes a star-studded tribute to Torquay United football reporter Dave Thomas



description got a belly laugh from the man himself who was sitting in the room.

It read like this: "He'll either be a disaster or the talk of the town, said Cyril Knowles when he signed Dave from Chesterfield in 1987. Despite Caldwell's disciplinary record, Knowles knew there was a First Division striker trying to get out and Caldwell showed it, along with a few more red and yellow cards!"

I caught up with the man afterwards and asked him if he minded the description. He certainly did not and suggested doing an evening with Dave Caldwell! I agreed immediately and shook his hand. I am not sure of his 'card' record, but it was safe to say he was in the Vinnie Jones school of 'discipline' for a while.

I have in the past been drinking with Scottish goalkeeping legend Andy Goram, now sadly no longer with us. I have rubbed shoulders with Sir Geoff Hurst, Kevin Keegan and Paul Merson. I remember hosting a charity event in Plymouth with Razor Ruddock, who was a bit late. My phone went off, it was Razor who asked a strange question.

"How much is the bridge?"

"What bridge?"

"The Tamar Bridge!"

Twenty minutes later we rescued him from Saltash having overshot the county.

All of this was eclipsed by my own playing career. In 2024 I was asked to appear for the Plymouth Football Boot Bank charity team and immediately went into training, seen here in a photograph with my fitness coach, Chelsea legend Colin Lee.

On the hottest day of the year, I ran out onto the pitch, 35 minutes after the kick-off.

The manager of my team had looked a little doubtful after he asked me what position I played? I said mostly offside!

"I'll bring you on towards the end of the first half," he said. "You could be useful if we're five-nil up."

Suddenly I got the call and jogged to the centre spot only to discover I was facing the wrong way.

"Mark Mike," was the command. I looked out on the wing and there was a gentleman with long dreadlocks who looked vaguely familiar! I went and stood by him and needless to say he vanished then reappeared, slipped past me with the greatest of ease, scored and jogged back into position. It was then that I realised who I was marking... Mike Lewis, formerly Saracen from The Gladiators.

I think our fitness levels were a little unbalanced. With a bright red sunburnt face, fluorescent shirt and striking pink boots I looked like the world's largest liquorice allsort rather than a player. I touched the ball twice, delivered an offside forward roll and announced my professional retirement.

My wife helped me to the car, although not from the crush of adoring fans. I was having trouble walking.