

Interviewee: Martin Allen, Brentford manager March 2004 – May 2006  
YOB: 1965  
Born: Reading  
Parents: Father: Professional footballer and manager.  
Mother: PA in an investment company  
Date of interview: 28<sup>th</sup> February 2020  
Interview location: Griffin Park  
Interviewer: Brian Godfrey  
Summary: Richard Donaldson

Martin doesn't remember the most recent time he played against Brentford as a player (for West Ham 1991/2) but does remember playing a reserve game at Griffin Park against Brentford for QPR - a big night for 18-year-old Martin as it was a *"step up" to playing "against men."*

Asked how he came to be Brentford manager; Martin recalls he was contacted by representatives of the supporters' trust about the job. At the end of the interview where he had asked all the questions, Martin – excited by the prospect of managing in the football league, said he would let them know the outcome.

Martin then recalls that his Dad had applied for the manager's job at Brentford and got to the last three candidates but missed out. Much to his father's and ten-year-old Martin's disappointment. *"So, when this [the Brentford job] came round, I was going to take this, and I was going to make this."* Part of Martin's motivation came from what had happened to his father. Martin remembers how his father had struggled to find an income when his professional football career had ended – *"ducking and diving – like Del Boy in Reading."*

Although the team was struggling on the pitch, Martin remembers feeling *"so excited"* taking the job and being unveiled at a bingo night. Martin assured those playing bingo that the club would not get relegated that season and that *"this is going to be special"* and they all laughed thinking *"he is mad, there is no way we are staying up."*

Martin describes his first day at the training ground, arriving at 6am with it all locked up and walking around, excited *"like a little kid"*. Once inside Martin found mud on the floor and dirty balls and kits. This wouldn't do, *"if you are scruffy, you feel second rate you aren't going to win - I needed to do something"* so the place was cleaned and new kit found before the players arrived. When addressing the players Martin emphasised the need to be *"sharper off the pitch and on it."* One player (Steven Hunt) spoke out and reminded Martin that the team had good players. Martin - admired Hunt *"for going up against me on day one."*

En route to his first game (Rushden and Diamonds at home) Martin saw a road accident on the M4, the subsequent traffic jam meant player Kevin O'Connor was in danger of breaking the manager's strict rules on being on time (if a player was late, he wouldn't play). O'Connor's arrival just in the nick of time broke the tension. Brentford were 4-0 at half time of a wind affected game (ended up winning 4-3). Exhausted, Martin remembers sleeping from early evening that night to mid-afternoon the next day.

Martin explains he was not really aware of a Brentford "culture" or the rivalry with QPR.

Martin tells the story of swimming the river in Hartlepool during “The great escape” season (2003/4). Martin overheard two players discussing during training the day before the match whether they would swim the river, frustrated by their indecision Martin confronted one (Stewart Talbot, the team captain) and said he would do it instead if each player put in £2. Witnessed by the squad and children leaving school for the day, Martin swam the river and angrily rebuked his players “*if you say you are going to swim it you flipping swim it.*” Returning muddy to the hotel, Martin encountered a coach load of American tourists, before cleaning up, accepting his money from the players and re-enforcing the “If you say you are going to swim it, swim it” motivational message. Martin left and the stunned reaction of the players made him think the team would win the next day.

On match day, Martin did not speak to the players and the coaching staff printed posters of the message and put them up in the changing rooms. The players “loved it” and they won the game with a good performance – scoring from a set play they had been practicing in training. From then the team felt they were going to stay up.

Martin recalls the FA Cup win against Sunderland (2006), praising DJ Campbell’s performance and John Mousinho’s man marking of Julio Arca. This leads to Martin discussing the signing of DJ Campbell (who he called “The Diamond”). He listened to Campbell’s agent’s demands but offered the player less saying “*If they don’t work to what we want I’m not having him.*” Despite the agent and player walking out of the room, they soon came back and agreed to the club’s terms – which were incentivised – “*all geared around him [Campbell] playing well.*”

Martin goes on to explain that Campbell had to be sold later that season for financial reasons. This, along with Lloyd Owusu’s injury on international duty for Ghana, “*killed our promotion hopes.*”

The next two anecdotes concern Martin offering someone a job as a kit man because they successfully removed a horse from the training ground, and asking the players to sort out their own kit (rather than it being laid out) at an away game at Sheffield Wednesday.

Touching on the connection between him and Brentford fans, Martin reveals that supporters seen walking to away grounds would be invited onto the team bus, taken into the dressing room, and even asked to give the team talk. He also mentions relaying his thoughts to the fans by dictating messages to Peter Gilham who then put them on the website - this built the special “*camaraderie between club and fans.*”

Martin moves onto discuss some of his players. Jay Tabb – to whom Martin gave a better deal including a clause about playing for Ireland (which Tabb found unlikely). Eventually Tabb had to move on as the club couldn’t afford him; Steven Hunt – who Martin feels he shouldn’t have let go, they had disagreed over the timing of a hernia operation and Hunt was talking to other teams, although he verbally agreed to sign for Brentford again, the night before he was due to do so he accepted an offer from Reading; and Michael Turner – who, along with Tabb, worked hard in the gym to get stronger and practiced hard on the training pitch.

Martin speaks proudly about bringing young players through and seeing Tabb play for Ireland [U21s] and Turner and Campbell scoring in the Premier League.

A “*trickier character*” was Sam Sodje – who broke Martin’s rules banning defenders from celebrating goals (Sodje danced in celebration), was always scruffy, did a two footed tackle on new signing Deon Burton on the first day of training, and who arrived at the club with a six match suspension from being sent off four times in a season for his previous club (Margate).

Martin describes how he has *“an amazing memory for players”* which helped his recruitment *“when I came to Brentford I knew all the best players already.”*

Returning to Sodje, Martin remembers his pace, seeing him *“kung fu kick”* a winger, and his heading ability. He also recalls reading multiple summonses for the player’s arrest for unpaid council tax. At the time the player had no money and was *“bunking”* on the train to get to training. The club agreed to pay the council tax and Martin lent him £100 which, despite seeing Sodje driving a big Range Rover years later, was not repaid. Martin was also proud when Sodje played for his country (Nigeria).

Martin moves on to speaking about his relations with Brentford fans. His *“highlight and lowlight”* was hearing the Brentford fans sing despite losing in the play off semi-final to Sheffield Wednesday (2005). *“It makes me cry... I’ll never forget... the dream was over.”*

Martin recalls how he had more success at other clubs (championships with Gillingham and Barnet) and that he gets a good reception at West Ham, but his reception by Brentford fans is *“something else.”*

Martin describes how he used to work with the fans in the Braemar Road paddock who would be abusing the opposition’s management staff as they walked from the tunnel to the dugout, and a few steps behind Martin would walk *“with passion, power and arrogance”* and smile. The opposition staff would look round so Martin would *“make sure I had that body language... it all played a part.”* Martin also had prepared his suit the Thursday before *“I felt like a schoolboy on the first day of school... I was ready to put on my outfit to go into battle.”*

Arriving later than usual because of traffic, Martin walked to Griffin Park for the Southampton FA Cup replay (2005) with the fans *“I had never seen so many people at Brentford... there were police horses everywhere...every Brentford supporter came to say hello... I felt famous.”*

Returning to the great escape. Martin tells the story of having to book a celebratory trip to Dublin before safety from relegation had been secured (against Bournemouth) and persuade Board Member John Herting to pay for it in advance. Martin describes Herting’s agreement as *“a special moment...key to what we did.”*

Martin also recalls accidentally setting fire to his office at the training ground.

Returning to his relationship with the fans – he mentions an affinity with the fans *“not prawn sandwich type supporters...more of my type... I liked the fact it [Griffin Park] was a ground not a stadium, not flash... more of a working-class fan base... I prefer this... I had a bond.”*

Moving on to leaving the club, he again remembers seeing the effect on his father when he was sacked as manager of Cheltenham Town – *“his advice [to me] was make the most of it because they can soon sack you.”* After the Swansea play off semi-final defeat Martin felt *“I’ve gone as far as I can go”*. Leaving was *“a massive wrench”* but Martin didn’t have the *“same fire in the belly”* knowing he would lose his best players and the subsequent season would be a struggle.

Returning to the fans, Martin mentions being stopped on Regents Street and talking with a fan for 20 minutes *“wherever I go and whenever I come back here it is special.”*

On Griffin Park, Martin remembers seeing the ground from a plane when returning from holiday. As soon as he got home, he drove to Griffin Park and walked around the empty ground *“feeling it... I couldn’t wait to get going again.”* Martin ends by saying it will be sad to leave Griffin Park, but it is an exciting time to be a Brentford fan.