

# If the suit fits...

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action. Mike Ward unearths the individuals who have one thing in common... a love of the Albion



**Paul Rogers took six months to get used to wearing a suit. Or, rather, to wearing one again on a daily basis, for the first time in over a decade.**

"It was really hard," the Albion's Commercial Manager tells me, recalling the transition he had to undergo after 11 years as a professional footballer.

"Obviously I'd done it when I worked up in town (before turning pro, Paul was a commodity broker), but after all those years of training for two hours a day – where I was outdoors, enjoying all that banter – coming into an office environment took some getting used to. At first it drove me mad!"

These days, however, the former Seagulls captain is relishing the challenge. The Albion's imminent move to the Amex Stadium means having to attract new matchday sponsors, ball sponsors, advertisers

etc., ensuring the club can go forward on a sound financial footing.

"It was Dick Knight and Martin Perry who suggested I could stay on once I'd finished playing," Paul explains. "I'd been thinking of going back up to work in the City – I'd kept a lot of contacts there – but the idea of having to sit on the train up to London every day didn't appeal one bit. So it was this or coaching. And the commercial role appealed to me more."

He admits it's been a tough one, however, these last few years. "Withdean has made it hard to attract sponsors," he adds. "If people have wanted to entertain corporate customers, they've preferred to spend a few more quid and go to Chelsea or Arsenal or Tottenham."

But that's changing, I take it?

"Yes, people are now ringing us, rather than us having to ring them.

It's like we've been used Lada dealers all these years and suddenly we've got the Mercedes gig!"

So, is his background as an ex-Albion skipper a useful asset when dealing with clients?

"Yes, if you're trying to sell a product, it helps if you have a first-hand knowledge of it. Initially it really helped me get into people's offices to promote the club. It changes over the years, though. Long-standing fans know who I am, but there'll be a lot of new faces who won't."

So presumably his job will evolve when we're at the Amex?

"It'll be similar but on a much larger scale," he explains. "I'm currently looking after 150 people dining upstairs at Withdean on a matchday in the Legends' Lounge. At Falmer, the 1901 Club will have 2,000."

Paul was 43 when he finally stopped playing altogether, having continued to turn out for Worthing – albeit less and less frequently – after calling time on his Albion career. So what convinced him it was time to quit?

"It was partly because whenever I played I was blocking the way for the younger guys," he says. "But also the pace of the game catches up with you. I could still play – but only if they all agreed not to tackle me!"

Other than a broken leg when he was 16, Paul has managed to avoid any serious long-term injuries. "I think it's largely because I was playing non-league until I was 26," he says. "Unlike

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most pros, my body hasn't had that constant, day-to-day pounding since my teens."

Surprisingly, though, it's not competitive matches he misses the most. It's the training.

"I do miss that buzz you get when you're outdoors every day, practising what you're good at," he admits. "I still need to get out in the fresh air after I've been in an office all day. That's why I got involved with Burgess Hill. I'm first team coach there – all of the fun and none of the aggro!"

"But you really don't enjoy games when you're playing professionally. It's all about having to get a result, play well, stay in the team. There's not many games that you go into thinking, 'I'm really looking forward to having a bit of fun here.'"

So does that mean he was having more fun when he played for Sutton United – the side with whom he famously helped knock out FA Cup holders Coventry City in 1989?

"Yes, because football at that level was a release, you were playing with your pals. Obviously you'd still want to win every game, but if you lost when you were playing for fun, you'd just look ahead to the next match. If you lose with the Albion, it's on the website, the news, you can never get away from it."

Even so, Paul must envy those players who'll be able to tread the soon-to-be hallowed Amex turf. So, hand on heart, would he swap his honours for the chance to play there?

"It would have been nice, but no – everyone has their time. Besides, players don't really care about which stadium they're playing in. They just want to be part of a successful team and winning things, wherever that happens to be.

"It'll be fantastic for the fans, of course, and a big help in attracting new signings, but for the existing players a pitch is a pitch."