

# Man from The Beeb

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



**Johnny Cantor vividly remembers his first big match as a football commentator. It was the 1976 World Cup Final, in which England lost to Poland.**

And before you go, 'Hang on, what's he on about? There was no such game – no such tournament, come to that', I should maybe explain that Johnny was eight years old at the time, playing Subbuteo on the bedroom carpet with his brother Pete.

"In our holidays, when we were looked after by our grandmother, we used to recreate the whole tournament," recalls the man who these days commentates on every Albion match for BBC Sussex. "I think I've still got a ring binder somewhere with all the match statistics in it.

"And I can still remember actually crying out dramatically, right at the end of that last game, 'And there goes the final whistle...' It was clearly a sign



of what I'd end up doing for a living!"

Johnny's first fixture as a bona-fide BBC commentator, nearly a quarter of a century later, may sound a tad less glamorous. But at least it was real.

"It was Tamworth versus Weymouth in the Conference," he recalls. "Ben Smith scored for Weymouth after 13 seconds – although in all the excitement of my first match, I realised I'd forgotten to switch my stopwatch on. I called the goal as 11 seconds, so in fact I was pretty close!

"It taught me a very important lesson of commentary, especially on the radio. People are always tuning in at different times, so you need to remind them about the time, and the score, about once every 90 seconds. It's very important."

Equally vital for Johnny, as he's commentating for a BBC local radio station, is striking the right balance between passion – after all, most of his listeners are rooting for the same side – and professional impartiality.

"I think it's actually one of the most difficult parts of this job," he tells me. "I obviously want Albion to do as well as possible in every game. But that doesn't mean I'm totally biased. I've got to be in a position where, if they aren't playing well, or if the game is particularly dull, I'm able to say that. I need to be able to tell it like it is.

"From there, it's then a question of trying to be positive – asking how, for example, they can improve on a poor first-half performance, and looking at why it's gone wrong. It's a case of asking the same questions as the Albion fans who are listening."

And the summarisers, such as former Seagulls Johnny Byrne and Warren Aspinall – are they free to be a lot more biased?

"Well, yes, in one sense they can be as biased as they like," Johnny concedes. "But they're actually very objective."

Johnny's job with BBC Sussex involves a lot more than just Albion



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commentaries on a matchday and the pre-planning and research these require. "As a station we cover all sorts of other local sport," he points out, "such as Eastbourne Borough and Crawley football clubs, Sussex cricket, Eastbourne Eagles speedway, Worthing Thunder basketball and Worthing rugby.

"We also write hourly bulletins for output on the radio, and we have responsibility for the BBC Sport website in the regions.

"On top of this, we cover special events, such as the tennis at Eastbourne every year, and come up with different ideas for BBC South TV news. My own history is quite heavily embedded in TV, so I also do television pieces for them."

In his 10 years behind the microphone, Johnny has been lucky enough to visit some fine sporting

arenas and cover some memorable fixtures. Albion's trip to Villa Park last season was among his most recent highlights. "I was also lucky enough to be one of the team asked to cover Guimarães versus Portsmouth in Portugal," he recalls, "the club's first ever competitive game in Europe. That was a huge responsibility."

But there are plenty of grounds in League One to bring a commentator swiftly down to Earth.

"At Exeter, for example, you literally have to sit in your seat with all the equipment between your legs," he says. "You've got your microphone in one hand, your pad on your knee, your pen in your other hand, your stopwatch around your neck – and you're meant to be watching the game, taking notes and speaking to the person next to you, all at the same time."

All of which, I guess, makes Withdean's facilities seem relatively tolerable?

"Well, the lack of atmosphere at Withdean is obviously a real shame. But physically there's a relatively decent amount of space for us. I'm in a low-down position, too, which I don't particularly dislike. Sometimes it's nice to get that close to the play.

"Having said that, I can't wait for Falmer, naturally!"

And thinking even beyond that, what would be Johnny Cantor's dream match to commentate on? "I suppose it may sound a bit clichéd," he says, "but I'd love to do Brighton in the FA Cup final. I really don't mind who against.

"I just love great occasions. And if it ended up being decided on penalties, well, love them or hate them, you couldn't beat that for drama!"