



Stevenage

Manager: Alex REVELL

Starting XI

- 1 Taye ASHBY-HAMMOND
- 2 Luther JAMES-WILDIN
- 3 Dan BUTLER
- 4 Nathan THOMPSON
- 5 Carl PIERGIANNI
- 10 Dan KEMP
- 11 Jordan ROBERTS
- 18 Harvey WHITE
- 19 Jamie REID
- 22 Dan PHILLIPS
- 30 Jake YOUNG

STEVENAGE FOOTBALL CLUB

Season Tickets 2024/2025

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Under 18
East Terrace



BEFORE YOU GO

LOWER LEAGUE LIFE AND
LOVE AT THE LAMEX



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JOHN AIZLEWOOD

BEFORE YOU GO

**LOWER LEAGUE LIFE AND
LOVE AT THE LAMEX**

JOHN AIZLEWOOD



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July – Anticipation

2 July 2024

Speaking Truth to Power (1)

The close season trundles along. All Boro's main players are retained, which is a relief. Some so-so signings arrive and the morning after Ollie Watkins scores for England against the Netherlands, Boro post a tweet saying 'morning all' above a picture of Boro's grinning Jamie 'Reidy' Reid, Dean Campbell and Jake 'League Two Pirlo' Reeves hurtling past a disconsolate Watkins after Campbell's FA Cup winner at Villa Park. I laugh a lot, as does Oscar. Fans of other clubs don't. 'Weird ... tinpot ... strange' are the most used words. There are calls for Boro's Twitter posse to be sacked. I'd promote them or, since there's probably nowhere for the administrators of Stevenage FCs Twitter to be promoted, give them a pay rise. I couldn't be more proud, unless Boro started printing a programme again.

With the season looming, Phil Wallace hosts a fans' forum. He has been Stevenage's owner, or at least 91 per cent of it, since 1999. He runs a tight ship, so tight that Stevenage don't run at a loss and do run in the real world, which lets us all sleep at night. He's in remarkably fine fettle for a 75-year-old, and being CEO and majority

shareholder of the multinational Lamex Food Group ('one of the world's largest privately owned frozen and chilled food exporters and importers. 25 offices based on 6 continents, providing 24-hour coverage for the entire world', trills their awkwardly worded company statement) means he's very wealthy indeed. Even so, in 2019 he wasn't wealthy enough to refrain from seeking further investment so Boro could become 'a bigger spending club, attracting new supporters and aiming for the Championship. To do that, we need additional funding.' Nothing came of it, but I like that too, as it means (or at least implies) he's open to power-sharing.

Better still, the childhood Leyton Orient supporter is not a Boro fan (self-evidently, fans shouldn't run their clubs) and in fact spent most of the '90s as chairman of Boreham Wood 20 miles down the A1. In 1999, the club then called Stevenage Borough were in danger of going out of business or, worse, being merged with Barnet. 'If they were to shut down, then they could join with us to preserve their name. But it would not be a takeover,' said Barnet chairman Tony Kleanthous, defining the word 'disingenuous' before it fell through.

Frustrated by Boreham Wood's lack of support, Wallace sold his shares, bought Stevenage and the rest is history. Obviously it's history, that's how linear time works.

Cannily, Wallace's first target at Boro was the training facilities – always a winning strategy with players, since it's where they do nearly all their work – and he oversaw the building of a 42-acre complex at Bragbury End, way out Ware way. Then he changed the name of the ground from Broadhall Way to the Lamex and the name of the team from Stevenage Borough to Stevenage. And this evening at 5.30pm he's holding court.

There are (about) 70 people present at the Lamex's '76 Lounge, so called because it resembles a Czechoslovakian regional Communist Party headquarters circa 1976. Coincidentally, it's also the year Boro were formed. Oscar and I are (about) the 69th and 70th people to arrive, so we have to stand, rather too visibly for my liking. Jay 'Drackers' Drackford is compering. He does the pre-match and half-time MCing on the Lamex pitch and he's a wry joy. Not a match goes by without me and Oscar chuckling, whether he's interviewing monosyllabic mascots, benevolently teasing away fans, taunting Boro Bear (of whom much more later) or just spreading a little more togetherness.

Phil Wallace sits at a table alone. Drackers and his microphone roam in search of questioners. There are early questions about Steve Evans, about putting nets up so fans don't get hit during the pre-match shooting drills and (I think) about erecting some kind of railings to help older people mount the stairs. It's hardly *Frost/Nixon*. Somebody has to be the bastard. Hi everyone, here I am.

Drackers smiles and hands me the microphone. First of all, I thank Phil Wallace for doing it – he really doesn't have to put himself through this – and then I nod to Oscar (we'd discussed this beforehand), who nods back in assent. At some length, I complain about the new signings and by implication the recruitment policy, which partly resulted in last season's play-offs slipping out of reach. Immediately the atmosphere changes. Drackers sighs loudly, someone actually hisses and collective morale dips as heads shake. Mr Buzzkill is in the house. I don't help myself by delivering all this in a slightly sulky monotone. I've left my sing-song voice that's charmed, ooh, dozens of viewers and listeners on television and radio at home.

I go for facts. Louis Appéré is a striker who scored six goals last season and couldn't get in Northampton's team, a team who finished below Boro. Lewis Freestone could get in Cheltenham's team, but they were relegated from League One. Dan Kemp couldn't make League Two MK Dons' starting line-up and scored three goals after New Year, albeit after an undeniably successful loan spell at League Two Swindon Town. And I conclude by asking whether these arrivals signify lack of ambition and/or Revs's lack of sway. I don't even mention Vadaine Oliver. It's not the moment to ask if the printed programme can be restored. Oscar won't ask anything because he's too shy to speak and, shamefully, he doesn't care about printed programmes.

Phil Wallace isn't happy. In fact, he's offended: 'I'm offended by that question,' he says. Then he takes each signing one by one and justifies them. He also insists they weren't 'cast-offs' (tellingly, I hadn't used those words); that Boro had been chasing them all for months and that they were swayed by a presentation Revs made to them, although if Boro had been chasing them for months, Revs wouldn't have been involved in the early courting. In short, if there was one reason these non-cast-offs came, it was Alex Revell. Drackers won't come within 20 metres of me for the rest of the forum, so I can't counter. Oscar shakes his head. Later he says, 'You were right, but couldn't you have said how much you hoped you were going to be proved wrong? Really?' I forgot.

The exchange doesn't make Boro's official Twitter feed, but it doesn't escape everyone. An attending fan tweets at length: 'Some guy not impressed by our signings.' He ignores my facts and quotes – selectively quotes – only Phil Wallace's replies, so, 'Kemp is a ridiculous signing

for us, an incredible signing, we've been trying for six months', omitting Phil Wallace's admission that Kemp had fallen out with MK Dons. Freestone is 'a warrior with Stevenage DNA, the only reason Cheltenham didn't go down earlier' and Appéré 'chose us over multiple League One clubs and the geography was right'.

Phil Wallace also batted hard for his recruitment team. 'He cannot emphasise enough how much work goes into signing these players,' continues my Twitter chum. 'We know exactly what we are and what we want.'

After that, it's all 'Can we have a bar on the East Terrace?' From my killjoy's point of view, hopefully not, and it would be tricky to adhere to the no-alcohol-in-view-of-the-pitch rule, but I guess it would make financial sense. There are more adroit questions vis-à-vis playing style. Phil Wallace contends that getting the ball forwards quickly is another part of Stevenage's DNA and it was too often lacking at the end of last season. Managerial restlessness isn't mentioned.

In 2019, Phil Wallace looked to the Championship. Where he might be looking now is less clear. For this season, it seems his aim is to be in loose contention for the League One play-offs. That's fair, but there were moments last term – outplaying Derby County at home and winning; outplaying Portsmouth away and somehow losing – where it wasn't unreasonable to dream of more.

Oscar's right, I should have stressed to Phil Wallace how much I wanted to be wrong, but I'd envisaged a lengthier discussion. Like everyone in that room, I desperately want me to be wrong. I want to shout, 'We've got super Alex Revell,' as Boro career upwards. I want us to be there when Dan Kemp scores his 20th goal of the season and Louis Appéré matches that in assists, and I

want Lewis Freestone to attract attention from half the Championship. I'd just love to tell you how wrong I was. I'm repeating myself now. Sorry.

'I expected more,' shrugs Oscar as we shuffle towards the subway with its genuinely inspiring street art mural featuring a host of Boro greats, including current captain Carl 'Pidge' Piergianni. Nobody is making eye contact with us. 'I wanted to believe a bit more.'

Phil Wallace had promised a fourth signing. Next day, good as his word, one arrives. Dan Phillips helped St Johnstone survive in the Scottish Premier League and didn't get a full summer of rest because he was playing for Trinidad & Tobago. I like the look of him and his giant thighs. He'll help maintain the unsavoury tradition of Boro having more black players than supporters, although, for the record, I've never heard a racist comment, let alone a racist chant, at the Lamex, unless the anti-Luton one, 'We hate the fucking Luton', counts. Phillips is a midfield hardman (11 yellow cards last season, no goals) and it's a gap that needs filling. That's better. Let's go.

13 July 2024
Stevenage 2 Watford 2 –
pre-season friendly

My prediction: don't care

His prediction: don't care

I don't want to go. He doesn't want to go. I accept this might not be the expected tsunami of enthusiasm a new season should bring, but it's a pre-season friendly, an extended training workout without tackles, which Boro used to include as part of the season ticket. Now, the

season tickets aren't ready and they have the brazen cheek to charge.

We had a massive argument last summer when I attempted to entice Oscar to take in an away friendly. The boy who abandons everything to see Boro home and away, freezing and baking, top of the league and bottom of the league, simply refused. In fact, he cried at the prospect. I was furious with him, but he was right. I shouldn't have pushed him to attend a phony war. After we reconciled days later, I promised that some walking-pace encounter against West Bromwich Albion two years ago would be our last friendly. Even there he wasn't as impressed as I was by seeing Steve Evans and Steve Bruce deep in pre-match conversation in the seats behind us.

But here we are. It's surreally early in the year. His school year hasn't finished yet, nor have the Euros. But on balance I feel we should go to this friendly. I play the 'for the book' card much, much earlier than I'd hoped, I've bribed him with a Nando's and we've abandoned all our routines to turn up at the last minute, admire the Watford team coach – a functional Stewarts, as used by Reading – and go home. He's still not happy, he refuses to wear his Boro shirt ('not a proper game'), but once the gnashing of teeth is complete, he acquiesces. I'm not happy either: I've broken a promise and you can't do that with children. They remember.

Speaking of promises, I promised Oscar too that mighty Watford, recently a Premier League team and the only other league club in Hertfordshire, would sell out their away end. There's 813 of them, but that's no sell out, although Watford's line-up is strong. Serendipitously, I don't actually pay to go in: a sweet man gives me a free ticket as we queue.

Half the ground is closed. Boro launch their new home kit (shirts £50 for adults, £40 for kids) and while it doesn't quite exude the amateur darts player aura that the Twitter pictures suggested, it's no design marvel. I don't do replica kits, thanks, but Oscar's had his for two seasons and myriad growth spurts now. The purple away one looks good, but he'll see how it looks on Jordan 'Robbo' Roberts before making a decision. He's not a greedy boy. The game's not that bad, I suppose, especially if you don't insist on football being a contact sport. It's all the better for having no added time.

There's a goalkeeping situation. Burton Albion came in for Boro's Taye Ashby-Hammond, fluttering their eyelashes rather seductively and bearing more money than you might think Burton are capable of bearing. Instead, Taye accepted Boro's offer of a 'new, improved and extended contract' (i.e. the club don't want us to know for how long and for how much) in the week, but he's not around today.

At the forum, Phil Wallace had explained that they're looking for a back-up keeper, a change in Steve Evans's policy of having more experienced competition. Rylee Mitchell is only 18, so it's a big hello to Triallist A (probably not his real name).

Phillips loses possession and gives away a goal, Boro score with the last kick of each half and somewhere in between is a Watford penalty, although I was looking at the sky and weeping softly, so I miss it. There's even some on-field aggro when Dan 'Sweens' Sweeney wades into a sea of yellow shirts as Watford's crafty foxes try to intimidate some of the chicken-coop kids (Boro have a 15-year-old, Ryan Doherty, out there). Unhelpfully, centre-forward Aaron Pressley ('Press', rather than Elvis

or Reg) injures himself after half an hour. He'll have to have an ankle operation.

I sort of like Pressley. At the Northampton opener last season, as Oscar and I grappled with the piping pies. Pressley was all Bambi legs, eager running and absence of goal threat. Oscar wasn't enamoured. 'He'll never score for us.'

An older bloke behind us spoke up: 'Mark my words, he'll get goals.' I add my vast weight of football knowledge and weigh in on the older bloke's side. Pressley scored one goal from open play all season and the conversation at Northampton is another Oscar never forgets. Pressley was publicly berated by Evans for the concession of Derby's late, late winner at Pride Park and by the end of the season we're singing 'let Pressley score' because we can all see what he's going through, still all Bambi legs, still all eager running and still all absence of goal threat.

What have we learned from today Oscar?

'Nothing, Dad.'

We make a joint decision. No more friendlies.

So when Boro win in Jersey (Phil Wallace lives there), I'm watching athletics and Oscar is watching the Hungarian Grand Prix qualifying (Lando Norris on pole, that went well) and playing computer games with his friends.

When Boro lose at home to Coventry, I'm in the bath. Oscar is playing computer games with his friends.

When Boro win at Braintree, I spend the evening working at my second job, unpaid taxi driver to a stropky teenage girl. Oscar is playing computer games with his friends.

When Boro beat Chelsea (that's Chelsea Under-21s), I'm wading through the Smashing Pumpkins catalogue

and Oscar is playing computer games with his friends. We don't talk about any of those games. We don't care.

We have much to talk about, though. This summer break isn't going at all well for Boro. Bad news keeps rolling in like a sewage-topped tidal wave. Jamie 'Reidy' Reid – 22 goals last season, although just the two after January – has returned late after playing for Northern Ireland, for whom he made his international debut in March, four months shy of his 30th birthday, 11 years after he last played for their Under-21s. It's a maternal grandmother thing. That's fine, of course, but, more pressingly, he's returned with some condition the club aren't sharing and he'll miss August. The goalkeeping situation I mentioned takes another dark turn, for it turns out Taye has done his finger in. (Is 'done his finger in' a medical term? I believe it is.) Cultured midfielder Jake 'JFC' Forster-Caskey, who limped out of last season's culinary ill-fated Carlisle game early on, isn't even close to being ready.

And there's Terence 'TVC' Vancooten, who's been here for seven years. Unlike Taye, he turned down a new Boro deal and allowed himself to be seduced by mighty Burton Albion for an 'undisclosed' fee (why 'undisclosed'? He's a lower league footballer, not *The Haywain*) that seems to be £500,000. I never knew the Guyana international's best position. Full-back? Centre-back? Chaperone of the defence? But he'll be sorely missed and he played Oscar at some computer game when TVC and a few players turned up at a computer shop in Stevenage town centre a couple of years ago to meet their adoring public. TVC triumphed. But only because 'I let him win; didn't want him to be upset during the next game.' Oscar is still pursuing this line two years later, so it must be true.

There was more: every time we picked our way through the Lamex car park pre-match. We'd seek out TVC's Mercedes – 'Very expensive,' speculates Oscar, who knows the value of such things – with its personalised number plate and we would touch it for luck. Another pleasure gone forever.

Striker Tyreece Simpson arrived for, yes, an undisclosed fee. On the one hand, he's only 22, although, self-evidently, experience and leadership are essential to either escape League One or keep a club in it. On the other hand, Simpson looks like a beast. On the third hand, he signed a biggish deal for Huddersfield Town in 2022; ten appearances and no goals later he was loaned out to Northampton, thus becoming Boro's second summer signing who couldn't get in Northampton's starting XI. Just the three Northampton league goals for Simpson, half as many as Louis Appéré, but three more than Vadaine Oliver. Simpson's first tweet as a Boro player, 'reset, restart, refocus', could have come from the instructions to my mobile phone, but it's followed by a reference from St Paul's 1 Thessalonians, 'give thanks in all circumstance'. None of which feels like a ringing endorsement of his reduced status. 'He was shite,' tweets a Huddersfield fan.

Meanwhile, a former manager, Mark Stimson, is fined £1,052 and convicted of assault, while the goalkeeping situation is partly resolved when Murphy Cooper arrives on a season's loan from Queens Park Rangers. Pre-season passes without Taye playing a minute.