

THE BIG INTERVIEW - STEPHEN HENDERSON

Recently in this publication, we featured a goalkeeper whose career was boosted in a major way by signing a loan deal at Huish Park with Yeovil Town. Asmir Begovic joined the Glovers for two loan spells after a dozen games with Bournemouth and Macclesfield; he now plies his trade in the Premier League with Stoke City and Stephen Henderson will be hoping that history repeats itself with him too.

The hugely popular Irishman's career has in some ways mirrored his Bosnian predecessor in many ways. The 23-year-old Dublin born stopper had also gone out on loan previous to coming to the club but it was an exceptional eight month stay in Somerset that brought him to the attention of some bigger fish as he is quick to confirm.

"I have to give credit to Yeovil Town and the management staff for getting the best out of me. Obviously Terry Skiverton and Nathan Jones were absolutely fantastic to me and got the best out of me and I'll never forget that. It was the happiest time for me because for the first time, I was playing first team football regularly which is all I ever wanted to do."

The likeable Hendo's not wrong about that. Signing for Bristol City in 2006, he spent more than four years at Ashton Gate making just five first team appearances in that time. During that time, he spent periods out on loan with non-league sides York City and Weymouth before moving into the Football League with Wycombe Wanderers and Aldershot. However those four loan deals brought another 31 appearances meaning that the gloveman was turning out less than often.

In September 2010 he joined Terry Skiverton's side as a direct replacement for the injured John Sullivan and suffered a baptism of fire as he and his defence conceded seven goals in two matches. Then two clean sheets in the next three games calmed things down a bit as his reputation was enhanced with every match. Some matches saw blinding displays from the youngster as he produced save after save during the Glovers renaissance after Christmas last season.

By the end of the campaign, he had kept eight clean sheets, the team had climbed the table to a respectable 14th position and "Hendo" was forced to extend his trophy cabinet as he virtually swept the board at the annual "Player of the Year" awards ceremony. He's modest about it, laughing off the suggestion that he deserved all the awards. **"I don't know if I deserved all of them"** he says **"as it was a real team effort. The rest of the lads helped me as much as I helped them and I was lucky to win so many of them; it was such an honour."**

So after 36 games in four years, he played a further 33 games in eight months, a remarkable stat and this went a long way to securing himself a move away from his Bristol City malaise. **"I was chased by four or five clubs during the summer; it wasn't unsettling at all, more a case that I was anxious about doing the right thing. I spoke to the goalkeeper coaches and felt that a move to Portsmouth was my best option. However within a couple of months of getting there, the manager that brought me in (Steve Cotterill) had left and the club looked like it was struggling financially."**

Initially starting as a number two to Jamie Ashdown, he has seemingly made the position his own now and has turned out more than twenty times in the Championship for Pompey this season. Another six

clean sheets lie in the bank as well as a trip to face Chelsea in the FA Cup at Stamford Bridge last month, losing 4-0 to a full strength side.

So where now? **“Obviously I’d like to make the Premier League one day, ideally with Portsmouth. I know that sounds like a big thing but I want to set my sights high and achieve my goals. The Championship is a huge step up from League One, no disrespect intended, as the sides there are all quality and combine some top Premier League sides with the best from League One but ultimately, I’d like to play at the highest level of course.”**

The keeper who endeared himself to Grovers supporters last season nearly left before he got his feet under the table at Fratton Park, turning down the chance to move on as one of the cash-strapped South Coast club’s most saleable assets. He explains **“I want to develop as a keeper and I back myself to be good enough for first team football here rather than be a number two elsewhere.”**

With confidence and modesty in equal quantities, it’s obvious that Stephen Henderson will go far.