

THE MOST HATED MAN IN FOOTBALL?

so say fans of AFC Wimbledon about Pete Winkelman. But what does he have to say for himself? Quite a bit...

Interview by Luke Nicoli

We have called MK Dons the bastard child of Wimbledon FC; others sense with all vestiges of "love" and centre on the "bastard". And for the fiercer Wimbledon fans who broke away to form the successful AFC Wimbledon, anyone involved in taking the old club to Milton Keynes is automatically a hate figure. It is that music entrepreneur Pete Winkelman finds himself as perhaps the most hated man in football. A driving force behind the move north, he has been vilified by AFC Wimbledon and derided as the leader of "Franchise Football" – especially after taking outright control of the club. While the brickbats have flown, Winkelman has remained relatively low-profile – but he has decided to redress the balance. "And it is to be with *FourFourTwo* because it has so much sway with the fans," he says. "If he expected a smoothly-run PR firm, he couldn't have been more wrong. I asked AFC fans to give us their questions. Winkelman comes out fighting..."

Did you really become a football fan?

Early on.

I went to Wolves with my dad in the '60s, people like Peter Knowles, Cyril Weir, was in the team. My favourite was Waggy Wagstaff – when he was out of the team for six weeks, it seemed like six years. As a I got older and music became

a big part of my life, football took a back seat but I rediscovered it through my son, who's played for Wycombe and Northampton's youth teams.

Where were you when Wimbledon won the FA Cup in 1988?

Sam M, Chesham

Watching it on the Beeb at home. You couldn't help but know about the exploits of the Crazy Gang. Wimbledon forever swam against tide and Milton Keynes are the same. For years, people have said to me, "You're not going to Milton Keynes, are you?" But it's a fantastic place to live and there are 20,000 people involved in youth and junior football every week. Unfortunately, we don't have a football culture yet and that's now our task.

How much money do you personally stand to make from the development at Bletchley, which includes the stadium and Asda?

Jon Bassett, Sutton

That's an easy one – nothing. But let's deconstruct that question. Stadiums are now created by the developments around them. Very often they are in the middle of retail

parks because the stadium generates parking opportunities which works with big retail and, secondly, retail delivers the best value in terms of land prices – it's the most expensive bar residential. A stadium works 30 times a year, yet costs £30m to build. You can't make that work. Asda came on board when we couldn't come up with another way of delivering the value to

help create the stadium. There's an Asda at Man City's new stadium, there will be a Tesco at Coventry and Cardiff. I'm not reinventing the wheel here.

All of the money you create goes back into the development – there is no money to go anywhere else. That's why my partners are public partners. And that's why I'm bored with all this talk about property development. I've never been a property developer in my life.

When the stadium is built and the consortium have their development, will you continue to run the football club?

Simon Munk, Sutton

I will continue for as long as I can continue to

drive the club forward or until there is someone I think is better to take the reins. I'm surprised to be running the club, I never expected it but I'm bloody proud to be doing so. There is a battle against us but the football family will respect us if we can earn our place. If we take 2,000 fans away we'll get respect, but if we take 50, we won't. I can't tell you the time frame but we're going for it.

What would have happened to the development plans if you hadn't attracted a professional football team to MK?

Lawrence Hardy, Buckingham

We didn't have to have a Football League team, the plans were there for a much lower level, but my aspirations were always for League football because with it comes a community scheme, and it also delivers an Academy. When my son was at Wycombe, it took a massive commitment: a four-hour round trip three times a week. I know it sounds crass but I want League football for the kids in MK – there are 50,000 under the age of 19 – so they can watch or train for their team by jumping on a bus.

You tried to lure Barnet, QPR and Luton to MK before Wimbledon. What happened?

James Carr, London

The first club I went after was Barnet. I met their chairman, Tony Kleanthous, when the Football League was on the verge of kicking them out. Meanwhile, their fans created Keep Barnet Alive, which was a success: once their league status was assured, we withdrew. Their fans did something to help the chairman keep hold of his club and they should be applauded for that.

Luton always looked like moving to Milton Keynes but having met with two successive chairmen, Mr Kohler and Mr Bassett, the latter was keen to keep the club in Luton so I went to QPR. I wasn't proud, I was just trying to get a club to MK. It has been badly reported by some QPR fans but I went to a pub 100 yards from Loftus Road and they said: "Pete, you're a complete nutcase – there's no way we want to move from Loftus Road, but we totally understand your position. Why don't you come down and help us out of our mess?" Chris Wright didn't want to know because he'd had such a hard time already. ▶

Below: Izale McLeod (left) scores on his MK Dons debut against Barnsley. Bottom: Rather more people watch Wimbledon celebrate their 1988 FA Cup win



PETE WINKELMAN

but I've got respect for him because he stayed in at the hard end of football.

And all the time I was trying to talk to Wimbledon. Eventually I spoke to Charles Koppel after he'd spent eight months trying to find a solution in London. He was not looking at MK as a first resort; he was simply trying to keep the whole thing going. It was costing £10m a year and who's going to keep putting the money in if there's no future?

In our agreement, he had a clause that said he would have to move to MK, not to Dublin or Belfast or anywhere else, but he could always move back to Merton if the chance presented itself. One of his ideas was to buy Kingstonian's ground, and he actually discussed that with the fans, but they refused because it was outside of the borough, even though the reserves played there.

In the end, Charles did a deal with us and I was absolutely delighted. I thought that we were offering Wimbledon the chance to survive, a new home, and a new start. It was definitely Wimbledon FC moving to MK at that stage.

Why did you register

www.mkdons.co.uk back in 2000 if the aim was to save Wimbledon FC?

Mike Terry, Cheam

This was a long time before Wimbledon moved here. I just registered everything. If I spoke to Charles, I'd go and register a name, if I spoke to Chris Wright, I'd then register another. This was at the time of the dotcom boom and I registered about 50 websites, some that came back to haunt me. But MK Dons would have been here in some guise, even as a nickname. Most domains were let go a long time ago but I never let go of the mkdons one because certain people made such a big issue about it.

Why did you choose the England v Croatia game at Euro 2004 to announce the name change?

Karen Simpson, London

If I'd wanted to play that [publicity] game, I would have chosen the France game. The date was agreed with the Football League and the name change didn't happen the way we wanted it to. I had a plan, which had the backing of everyone in MK, to put three names to a ballot and the mayor would read the results out. You can only change the name if you own the club and we should have owned the club before the end of last season, but in the end I had to make a decision because we'd reached a point where the Football League needed to know for their fixture list. I had to make a decision and hopefully the name will live on long after I'm gone.

The original plan was for the club to jointly own the stadium; now the plan is for the club to rent the stadium. How are they better off than renting off Ron Noades at Selhurst Park when [pre-boycott] they were attracting bigger crowds?

Barry Barker, Herts

This is an absolutely incredible question. The ownership of the club is identical to the ownership of the stadium and the stadium



Top: The AFC 'deserters' shuffle on to Kingsmeadow, the Old Trafford of the Isthmian League
Above: MK Dons' new insignia

developments. It's more joined up now than it could ever have been, but I didn't go out to buy a club and move it. I went to do a partnership with the people who owned and ran a football club to move it. We only bought Wimbledon out of administration in the end because we had no other choice. It was liquidate or do something and there was no way I was going to let it liquidate.

Now that you've renamed the team, and changed the badge and colours, do you agree that AFC Wimbledon carry the true spirit of Wimbledon FC?

Pat Smythe, Surbiton

Good God, no. I think that both the MK Dons and AFC Wimbledon share the same heritage but we're the real child of Wimbledon because of the actions of the AFC Wimbledon group: they left their team before their team left them. Many chairman have said many things to fans over the years, many have had mad ideas, but football survives. Nobody is walking away from clubs like Bradford City or Leeds United. When push came to shove they always give it a chance. The fans who went off to form AFC Wimbledon just didn't give the club that chance. They said Charles was moving the club to Milton Keynes, but he never did that. Instead of continuing to fight for their team, they simply gave it up and started another one.

And they didn't start another team that was really difficult to run; they went and became the Manchester United of the lower pyramid, taking 3,000 fans from an ex-Premiership football club. Not a local football team that started at the bottom and grew, like Raynes Park from that neck of the woods. They get 100 fans. Imagine how low the costs are in that division, and then you have AFC Wimbledon getting 3,000 fans every other week.

'We'll have a Wimbledon Hall of Fame and pictures of the Crazy Gang as part of our new stadium tour'

Do you worry about the vitriol aimed at you from AFC Wimbledon fans?

Pete Hopkins, via e-mail

I'll admit I've lost respect because of the mo and have upset people, but the AFC people should also take a long look at themselves. They turned their back on the team; that was the first massive mistake they made. What happens, it's not the players' fault. They all call Charles Koppel a club killer? What kills? How he kept it going and paid the wages as long as he did - the guy is a genius. He was trying to keep the club going, which was what he was trying to do. Last June he had to stop, when the club went into administration, but where were the fans then? They moved away a year early with great glo and lots of "Oh isn't it fun" - Wimbledon a losing millions and they're making money.

They didn't even try and buy the club back. "They didn't have the money," you might say. But hang on a minute, they raised enough money to go and buy someone else's ground in another borough - Kingstonian - the same ground they didn't want Charles to buy! No it's not someone else's stadium in another borough - it's the fans' stadium in Kingston and we let Kingstonian play there. Well that's bloody nice of them - Kingstonian have been playing there for bloody years. Do you think the football administrator would have allowed me to move the club to MK if they'd had been there? Do you think that I would have tried to go against 4,000 people at that point to make it work? But they weren't there. I might have made a bit of money under the original scheme, probably not, but suddenly we save the whole club. We thought it would originally cost us £2m to keep it going for a season. It actually cost £5m, that's how bloody difficult it is, and we stand to lose £2m a year until we move into the new stadium.

Will you hand over replicas of the FA Cup and FA Trophy to AFC Wimbledon?

Jeremy Thompson, via e-mail

No I won't. They abdicated their right to all when they walked away. They didn't walk away because the club had moved - they walked away because the club said it was going to move. If every set of fans in the history of football had turned their back and killed the club, whenever their chairman went off on one, well there wouldn't be many clubs left. We plan to have a Wimbledon Hall of Fame and pictures of the Crazy Gang as part of the stadium tour when we move in. That as much for the fans who have continued to support us from London - they're the ones who've had to put up with this shit for so long.

Are you disappointed at the attendances since the MK move?

Simon Simpson, via e-mail

I am disappointed, but not surprised. We couldn't have moved in a worse predicament. We threatened to come here three times, but we finally came here in administration, the we had to sell players when things started to go right. Twice! It's hard to support a losing team but we've a hardcore 2,000 which is as good as we could have hoped for. If it takes a few years to grow, then so be it.

