

Lucky black cat

Sunderland idol happily put his nine lives on the line for British soldiers

Interview: Richard Lenton

WHEN I arranged to interview Peter Reid I was looking forward to hearing tales of his legendary tussles in the midfield engine room of Everton over a few pints of something cool and fizzy.

Unfortunately for me, the former Goodison Park enforcer was only 24 hours away from completing a month's abstinence from the demon drink, and his self-satisfied glow was enough to convince me that he wasn't about to fall off the wagon.

So instead of a back-street boozier, I caught up with Reid at Sky Sports' studios in London where the former England international, who managed Manchester City, Sunderland, Leeds and Coventry City, now works as a pundit and matchday summariser.

He'd just flown in from Manchester to talk about that night's Premiership action and had been handed the keys to a none-too-shabby hotel room nearby. It's fair to say that life is treating the man christened "Monkey Heed" by Newcastle United fans pretty well.

On top of the punditry work, the ever chirpy Reid is also a man in demand when it comes to celebrity-style assignments, and it was one such "gig" that found him facing an audience of soldiers in southern Iraq last summer.

It was an unforgettable experience for someone whose patriotism came gushing to the fore when he spoke reverentially of Britain's peacekeeping soldiers.

"You see on TV what the lads go through out there, but it's not until you go that you fully appreciate what they do," he said. "The heat is so oppressive. I was dripping with sweat just from

standing there and can't imagine what it must be like in full body armour.

"It opened my eyes to what soldiers go through and filled me with a great feeling of pride in our Armed Forces.

"We have a reputation for having the best Army in the world and, when you see what they're doing, you can't argue. Our lads wear that uniform with enormous pride.

"However, I'm not sure our troops get the appreciation they deserve back at home. You don't hear about the amazing things that they do on a day-to-day basis so that ordinary Afghans and Iraqis get a chance to live a normal life in freedom.

"I was delighted to be able to go out there, tell a few stories and speak with the lads – even if some of the younger guys were much more impressed with the two young models who went with me.

"The Newcastle fans among them weren't shy about giving me some stick over my Sunderland days either."

From Basra, Reid flew to Afghanistan, where the likeable Scouser was forced to endure something far more frightening than a two-footed tackle from his great Liverpool rival, Steve McMahon.

"I was at Camp Bastion and there were rockets going off and at five o'clock one morning I woke up to gunfire. I was petrified," he admitted. "That was, until I was told by someone in my billet that it was just the lads shooting on the range. I thought there was an attack imminent."

The most dangerous situations Reid encountered during his much safer career playing the beautiful game occurred on the battlefields

of Old Trafford and Anfield, where the diminutive midfielder tangled with the likes of Bryan Robson and Graeme Souness during Everton's halcyon years of the mid-1980s. Under Howard Kendall's astute leadership, the Toffeemen won two league titles, an FA Cup and a Cup Winners' Cup.

"The likes of Robbo and Souness were very tough customers, very physical. It was certainly a lot tougher than today," explained Reid, who joined Everton from Bolton in a cut-price

£60,000 move following a spate of injuries.

"We worked hard and played hard, but it was a different game then. Let's just say we refuelled our bodies a little bit differently than they do today. We had great camaraderie and a great side at Everton under Howard Kendall."

However, Everton's glorious era under Kendall almost came to a premature end when fans

demanding his sacking following a poor start to the 1983-84 season.

"He was reputedly one game away from the sack, but we went on to win the FA Cup that year with a lot of young players and then won the league for the first time the year after," said Reid. "All credit to clubs and boards of directors who have kept faith with their manager and stuck by them."

From the tone of his voice it's obvious that Reid feels let down by certain boardroom figures during his own managerial career.

He took his first step into the dugout – as a player-manager – at Manchester City in November 1990. Despite twice finishing fifth in the old First Division and ninth in the inaugural season of the Premiership, Reid was surprisingly axed the following October.

"The chairman, Peter Swailes, acted a bit hastily," Reid insisted. "We had a lot of good young players coming through and if we'd been able to go after the players I wanted we could have built something worthwhile."

From City, Reid moved on to Sunderland, where he twice guided the Black Cats

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Picture: Craig Prentis/Allsport

That winning feeling: Peter Reid celebrates promotion to the Premiership with Sunderland following a 2-1 victory over Birmingham City on May 9, 1999

to the top flight during his seven years in the North East. It's hard to believe now, but, on New Year's Day 2001, the Weariders had risen to the giddy heights of second in the Premiership.

"When we were second we needed to buy top international players to take the next step, but we weren't in a position to financially and we ended up seventh," he added. "The following season we only just avoided relegation and then the year after, nine games in, after the chairman had given me money to spend, he decided to sack me. It was a crackers decision.

"We were fourth from bottom of the Championship when I went there and we managed to get a stadium and training ground built because of the success the club had while I was in charge. Whenever I go back there it fills me with an enormous sense of pride."

After being handed his P45 by the Black Cats, Reid was hired for a seven-game salvage mission by a Leeds side in free fall, and managed to keep the club in the Premiership. But, after being persuaded to stay on at Elland Road, Reid was axed early the following season.

"I didn't realise how bad their financial plight was. I was told that if I sold players I could reinvest, but it

wasn't the case," he said. "They've gone into burn-down because of the money they spent previously and it's hard to come back from where they are now, struggling in the Championship."

The 50-year-old has now been out of the game for two years, and if he has a care in the world then he's doing a masterly job of hiding it. But, despite the comfort of the Sky commentary box, and the trials, tribulations and pressure associated with life in the dugout, he remains keen to dust off his managerial overcoat.

"I would love another crack, but it would have to be the right club and with an ambitious chairman who had a three-year plan," he told *SoldierSport*. "You can't build a team in six months."

Reid was recently hailed as an ideal candidate to succeed Peter Taylor as England U21 boss, but he was overlooked in favour of Manchester City manager Stuart Pearce.

Reid glows with pride when he talks about playing for his country, adding: "It's the biggest honour you can have. I've got 13 caps, I played in the World Cup in Mexico in 1986, and playing against someone like Maradona was amazing. Even though he cheated

England with his first goal, he was incredible," said Reid recalling England's 2-1 quarter-final defeat to Argentina.

"I still have nightmares about his second. I was half a yard away from him but I could not even get close enough to foul him."

Reid looked to have established himself as a regular in the England side in

Mexico, but was once again hampered by injury on his return.

"I've no regrets. When I ruptured my knee ligaments early on in my career at Bolton I was told to fear the worst – that I would never play again.

"Everything I've achieved since has been a massive bonus." ■

