

Press Release

Backroom Quiet Man Puts Steel In the Blades

Fire and passion will be the order of the day as Neil Warnock revs up his team for the gladiatorial battle against Premier Division aristocrats Arsenal, at Old Trafford on Sunday April 13th. But for one man, former RAF serviceman and now Sheffield United's Sports Therapist Dennis Pettitt; calm, patience and attention to detail will be his focus, as he quietly gets on with dealing with all the quirks, foibles and last minute repairs of eleven highly charged athletes about to play the game of their lives.

But for the insight of Blades former caretaker manager Steve Thompson, Dennis might still be working in private practice back in his hometown of Scunthorpe. He said: 'I had worked with Steve and Colin Murphy at Notts County. When Steve linked up with Nigel Spackman, the club had an injury crisis and he asked me if I could come in and help out. I had 17 injured players to deal with on my first day and I'm still here!'

Unlike the lords of the Highbury Manor, the Sheffield club have a nucleus of just 26 players and this includes first year pros. Such a small number puts increased pressures on all of the staff, not least the medical team. Dennis alongside therapist Nigel Cox, Team Doctor Bob Muggleton and fitness coach Dean Riddle know that close team work and discipline is essential.

An FA coaching qualification gained while in the services, a stint playing for the RAF as well, and seven years as Sports Therapist to Mansfield FC gives Pettitt an added insight into the stresses and strains of the modern day footballer and a good understanding of their behaviour. His quiet manner belies a steely determination that epitomises his work. There's definitely no time for reading the back pages in his treatment room.

Pettitt smiled knowingly as he said:

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'Players need rules and I don't mind fining them if they don't stick to them.' He continued: 'The manager can't afford to have players spending unnecessary time in the treatment room and neither can I. With such a small squad we all want to get them back playing as quickly as possible.'

Help in the treatment room can sometimes come from the most unlikely quarters. Manager Neil Warnock is a qualified chiropodist and has been known to apply his skills to the most indelicate of feet. 'It's a sure way to get you out of the treatment room in a hurry, seeing the boss coming with a scalpel', said midfielder Michael Brown.

Football invariably throws up many coincidences and this cup clash is no exception. Dennis is a member of The Society of Sports Therapists, the lead organisation in the UK for Sports Therapists. Chairman of The Society, Professor Graham Smith recalls his first meeting with Dennis:

'I was a newly arrived student physiotherapist at RAF Halton. I had been there less than a day when Sergeant Pettitt, Dennis that is, had recruited me for the football team and training that night. Our paths have been crossing ever since and we have remained great friends.'

Professor Smith went on to set up the FA Rehabilitation Centre at Lilleshall, before setting up The Society of Sports Therapists. He also developed the first ever FA Diploma in the Treatment & Management of Injury.

He continued:

'Dennis moved on from the forces and was coaching youth team football at Mansfield part-time. He was also working as a Practice Manager with 4 doctors in Castle Donnington as well. I knew he was interested in sports medicine and I felt the new FA Diploma would be ideal for him. This time it was my turn to do the recruiting'.

Having survived the course, Pettitt was faced with the inevitable final year exams. One of his examiners turned out to be none other than Gary Lewin, Head physiotherapist at Arsenal FC and England and also a member of The Society. Gary will be Dennis's opposite number on the Arsenal bench on Sunday but there will be no grudges to settle here, Lewin passed him with flying colours.

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The Blades backroom team will be expecting a busy week prior to the cup clash, with games against Crystal Palace on Saturday and Wimbledon on the Monday. Two games so close together, puts added pressure on the players and the medical team. Everything will be crossed on Monday in the hope that no one picks up any serious knocks.

With an early kick off at 1.30pm, pre match details are already carefully planned. Like many football clubs, superstition often plays a major part in the build up to a game. Dennis and the backroom staff will be only too ready to help steady the nerves of the players. But for the ebullient and often vociferous manager Neil Warnock, he needs no help:

‘Coach Kevin Blackwell and Dean Riddle will take the warm up for half an hour before the game’ said Dennis. ‘We all have to vacate the dressing room for ten minutes so that the boss can get his thoughts together before his final team talk to the players. He just likes to be on his own in there. Whatever he does or wherever that inspiration comes from, it’s worked a treat so far. Not that I’m superstitious but I’ll make sure we’re nowhere in sight.’

End



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