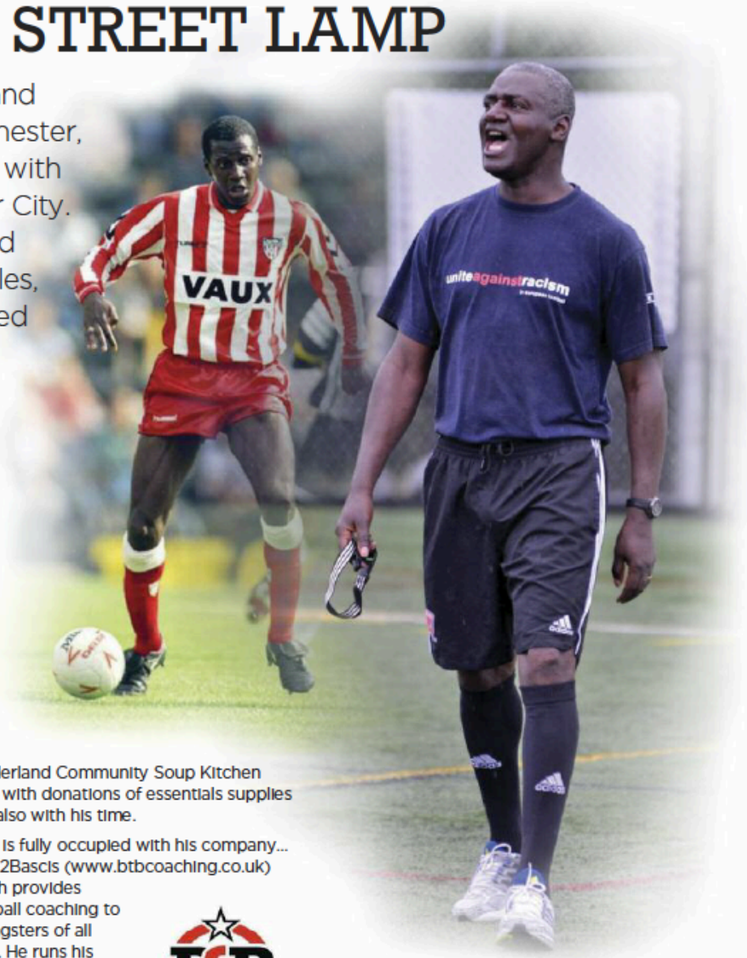
In conversation with...

Gary Bennett

tells us about his favourite and not so favourite cars.

'BENNO' 0 - 1 STREET LAMP

Gary Bennett is a true Sunderland legend. Born and bred in Manchester, he began his footballing career with the youth set-up at Manchester City. In 1981 he joined Cardiff City and then, after three seasons in Wales, Gary arrived on Wearside, signed in 1984 for £65,000.



He went on to spend eleven years at Sunderland...most of them as captain... and made 443 appearances. He scored 26 goals and was 'Player of the Season' twice.

Gary scored on his debut. It was August 1984 at Roker Park against Southampton. He headed past the England no.1 at the time, Peter Shilton, and put Sunderland on their way to a 3-1 win. When it comes to winning over the fans, it doesn't come any better. He's never looked back. Here's the Sunderland team on that day. Turner; Pickering, Chisholm, Elliott, Bennett; Venison, Proctor, Berry, West; Gayle, Walker.

Gary was a rarity at Sunderland...he was only the second black player to appear for the club. Gary's 2011 autobiography is called 'The Black Cat. A lot of fans were sceptical about signing a defender from a club that was two divisions below Sunderland. He was also a different sort of centre half because Gary liked to win the ball and then go forward, taking on the opposing players.

One of the highlights of his career came in 1991 at Maine Road against his first club. Okay Man City won 3-2 but Gary scored, and in the crowd behind the goal were his parents. A proud moment. So was representing Sunderland at two FA Cup finals.

Such was the rapport Gary had with the fans that over 20,000 turned up for his testimonial against Rangers.

After Sunderland, Gary had spells as both player, player-coach and manager.

Nowadays, Gary is busier than ever. He follows Sunderland home and away as a radio commentator for BBC Newcastle. He works tirelessly for the 'Show Racism the Red Card' campaign and it must be mentioned that he's been supporting the Sunderland Community Soup Kitchen both with donations of essentials supplies and also with his time.

Gary is fully occupied with his company... Back2Bascis (www.btbcoaching.co.uk) which provides football coaching to youngsters of all ages. He runs his own football training sessions as well as working closely with schools in the region. Back2Basics also has an education programme which helps 16-18yr olds find full time employment or gain an apprenticeship. For more information go onto their website or call 07585006908 or email info@btbcoaching.co.uk

BACK2BASICS football coaching

But...what about Gary Bennett's 'Life in Cars?' Let's find out.

What is the first car you can remember?

It was my dad's Hillman Avenger. It was his pride and joy. He bought several of them and I can picture him now, every weekend, washing and polishing the car.

What was the first car you owned?

It was an Austin 1800. Here I am, proudly standing next to it. I was playing for Cardiff at the time and was on the fringe of breaking into the first time alongside my brother, Dave. As soon as I'd passed my test I bought it. The interior was vast. You could put a football team on the back seat.

My next car was a Rover 2000. I kept that for about three years and had it when I signed for Sunderland.

What did you drive when during your years at Sunderland?

So I started with the Rover 2000 but then moved on to a Golf GTI and several 3 Series BMWs and a Mercedes C Class.

Did you ever get a sponsored car?

Yes. The two that I can remember were a boxy Jeep Cherokee and a Citroen BX. There was a Citroen dealer directly opposite Roker Park so quite a few of the players used their cars.

Tidy car or a mobile skip?

Bit of a mixture I suppose. I do try to keep it tidy but I have to admit that it can get a bit scruffy in there.

Any motoring embarrassments?

Erm yes. I got banned from driving for 3 years for drink driving. My parents were furious. Oops.

Any funny memories?

A regular trick at Sunderland was that the backroom staff or injured players would nick our cars while we were training. They'd find our car keys and move the cars or take the wheels off when we were out. It was a nightmare. You had to wander around the back streets looking for it.

What's your favourite road trip?

I've got loads, but the ones I most remember are in the very early days of my career after leaving Manchester. You can't beat driving home to see your parents. Home cooking can't be beaten. The M62 wasn't so busy then.

Steady Eddy or a bit of a speedster?

Steady away.

Worst (if any) accident you have been involved in?

I drove into a street lamp. I wasn't my fault. I was forced off Dame Dorothy Street by a car travelling in the opposite direction. I had to swerve out of the way and ran into the lamp post. The car wouldn't run after that.

What have been your favourite cars over the years?

Has to be a Jaguar XF and Lexus RX. Beautiful cars. I also enjoyed the various Mercs and Beemers.

Worst car either you had or team mates had?

One of the lads was going on and on about how he was going to get a flash sponsored car. We all got into training early the next day to see what he'd been given. It was a beige Nissan Micra.

My worst car was a Ford Escort. Hated it.

And finally....your dream car?

Simple. It's my regular wheels nowadays. A Vauxhall Combo van. It's brilliant and copes with all of my coaching equipment. It's really comfy and surprisingly good to drive. Oh, and I can leave it anywhere... nobody bothers with it.