

'There's a horse on the pitch!'

There's more to a football club than 90 minutes of action. Mike Ward unearths the individuals who have one thing in common... a love of the Albion



We've seen the odd squirrel on the pitch at Withdean. Seagulls gather there too, of course. But you need to go back a fair few years to remember the last time a horse galloped on to the field of play.

It wasn't during a match, somewhat disappointingly, but in the middle of a training session. Oh, and it wasn't a real horse, I should add.

It was Albion's webmaster Tim Dudding, dressed in one of those pantomime gee-gee outfits that used to make an appearance at the club's racedays.

Him, that is, plus another member of staff (the front half) whose identity he's diplomatically refusing to reveal to me, even six years after the incident.

"The team were training at Withdean ahead of the FA Cup match at Spurs," Tim tells me, "and everyone seemed a bit on edge. So we found this costume and thought it would be hilarious to dress up in it and run out into training.

"So we put it on, bowled out onto the pitch, and Guy Butters shouted something like, 'Hang on, there's a horse on the pitch!'

"At that point they all started booting balls at us. Then we got ragged silly. I remember Paul Watson dragging me about 20 yards through the mud. The costume was a little worse for wear after that..."



Tim and Ken Barnard film 'Ken's Fries' at Elland Road

"But I think we served our purpose. I like to think it contributed to our fine performance at White Hart Lane the next day!"

It's perhaps surprising, then, that Tim wasn't hired to be a full-time morale-booster. But by that stage he already had a lot on his plate, work-

wise, helping develop the Albion's online presence – something that's since evolved into the slickest, most sophisticated link between the club and its fans.

Tim came on board in 2002, after a spell of work experience. But the website was a tad more basic back

"At that point they all started booting balls at us. I remember Paul Watson dragging me about 20 yards through the mud"

then. "We mainly just had text-based stuff," he reminds me. "There was a small amount of video, which was free, but it was just low-res goal highlights. There were no interviews, no club-produced content.

"These days we've got centrally-produced highlights but we've also got the local stuff I work on, like *Hart of the Matter*, Martin Perry's stadium blog etc, plus youth team and reserve team highlights."

All of which, I assume, is a particular boost to Albion fans abroad?

"Definitely. Fans all over the world log on, and it's perfect for them. They can watch videos, interviews – and match highlights, which they can't get anywhere else online. The BBC highlights are only for UK users.

"They can also get match commentaries on *Seagulls Player*, wherever they live."

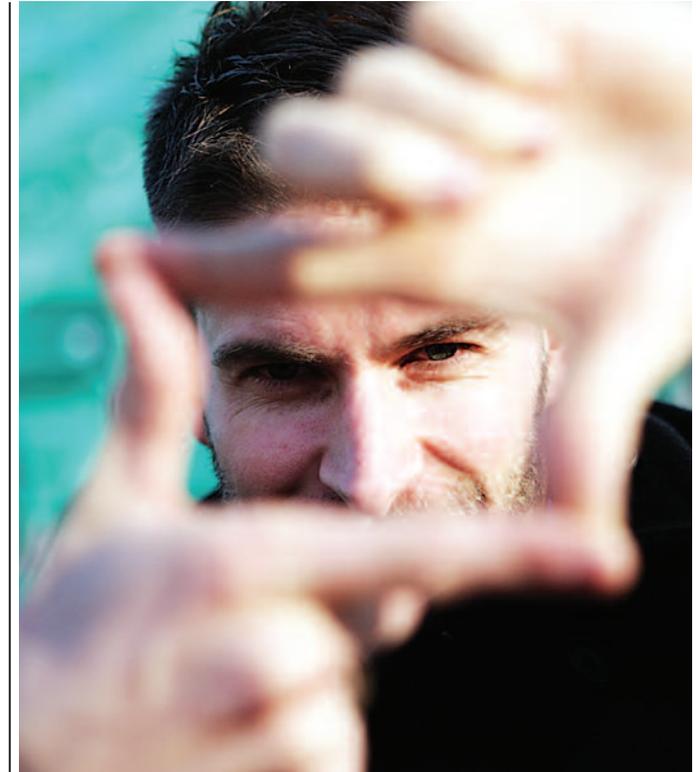
And presumably all this is just a glimpse of things to come? "Well, yes, the next step would be to broadcast games live on the internet. The technology is there already, but in reality it'll be a long time before it can be done by all 72 league clubs.

"Also you have to remember what viewers now expect. When Sky cover a game now they've got a multi-camera shoot. They spend £50,000 on each match and have a massive team of cameramen, editors, production staff etc."

Talking of TV, Tim and the rest of the Albion media team are also hard at work on plans for the Amex's matchday TV output.

"We want to create a brilliant experience – high-quality highlights, interviews etc – up on the scoreboard and on TVs right across all the concourses and executive boxes. It'll be a cutting-edge product that encourages fans to come early and stay after the final whistle."

So, given all these challenges right



now, I take it there's no such thing as a typical weekday for Tim Dudding?

"Not really. You can plan your day but then suddenly something unexpected happens – a player gets injured, for example, or there's a new signing – and those plans go out of the window. You have to react to what's happened, such as meeting and interviewing a new player, getting that onto the website, handling the local press..."

"Luckily the club realises how important the media side is for the future, which is why they've let us expand the department. We've brought Will Jago in to help on the written side, as well as Luke Nicolì, the programme editor, who also

contributes to the website. Then of course there's Paul Camillin, the Press Officer, plus myself and photographer Paul Hazlewood.

"It's a lot of hard work but I'm not complaining. I know I'm in a privileged position and I enjoy every moment.

"Best part of the job? The people I work with, particularly the guys in the media team who are all extremely hard-working and genuine.

"Also, I get to meet incredibly talented people. I'm constantly learning from real professionals like Dave Beckett and Nic Small, who work on our season ticket DVD, while the likes of Ian Hart and Stephen Grant, who present our podcasts, have me in stitches."