

Grounds for success

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



To be honest, I'd expected to find Paul Samrah a wee bit more upbeat than this. Maybe not exactly turning cartwheels – he is, let's not forget, a chartered accountant – but a tad more, how can I put it, celebratory.

He has, after all, achieved his dream. The glorious prize for which he's been striving for what seems like forever.

He's got Falmer.

Not the village, I should stress – that would be greedy – but the glorious, gleaming new Amex Stadium that's rising majestically alongside the A27. Stop me if I've mentioned it before.

Paul hasn't secured this single-handedly, of course, but as chairman of the *Falmer For All* campaign, he's been the figurehead for one of football's most extraordinary off-field battles. It's dominated his life since the dark days of the mid-90s, when the club was forced to leave the Goldstone – and, against what at times have seemed insurmountable odds, it's finally ended in glory.

So why, as we chat, does he seem a bit subdued?

"I'm quite nervous in a way," he confesses. "Partly because I can't quite believe it's happening. The history of this club has been that

we've always struggled, and yet suddenly we've got this magnificent temple, effectively a monument to everyone who's ever done their bit to help us achieve it.

"That feels really strange.

"I'm sure I'll be incredibly emotional on the day it officially becomes our home, but to be honest I don't think I ever thought that day would come. Even now, I still can't quite envisage 22 players coming out on to that pitch."

Paul also admits he'll miss certain aspects of being an Albion fan these past few years – "the recognising faces, the camaraderie, the fact we're a different club from everybody else because of what we've been through.

"Having said that, I do appreciate that we're moving to a 22,500-seater stadium, so we're bound to lose some element of that. I just hope we're careful not to lose too much of it."

Paul also strikes me as a lot more philosophical these days. And understandably so, given what he's been through these past few months.

Back in March, during a routine health check, doctors discovered two tumours on his heart. "They had to remove them because of the threat of heart attacks, strokes etc.," he explains, "I got about three weeks notice of the operation, having felt perfectly well beforehand."

So, has that experience left him with a different perspective on life?

Mike Ward is the TV Critic of the Daily Star and the Daily Express Saturday Magazine. Hear him on talkSPORT's Hawksbee & Jacobs Show every Monday at 3pm, and call him and the BBC Sussex Sport team every Saturday from 5pm (0845 9570057). More at www.mikewardblogs.com



"Yes, big time. I'm now very conscious of the next generation, very conscious that we're not immortal.

"It was a hell of a shock for me. I didn't even know I was unwell, and suddenly I was told I needed five hours of open-heart surgery.

"All sorts of thoughts crossed my mind, including, 'My God, I'm not going to see Falmer!'

"It also brought home to me how we've lost so many people during the years of this campaign. Once we're at the new ground, I'd like to see a minute's silence for all those fans who've passed away while we've been fighting for Falmer."

Paul admits to being a creature of habit, like so many fans – and confesses that the move will take some adjustment. "I'm going to have to work out how to get there, for one thing!" he points out. "But my sons, Toby, who's five, and Sebastian, who's 12, are just really excited about it. They don't understand routine and ritual. That's something for us die-hards."

would Falmer have happened via any other route than the one we were forced down?

"No," Paul concedes, having mulled this over for a few moments, "I don't think it would. If we'd already had a ground, I think it would have been impossible in this NIMBY age.

"Whatever we may feel about Withdean, we wouldn't have got Falmer without it. It's been our Trojan Horse."

As for the battle, Paul readily admits he'll miss it. "We achieved so much together," he reflects. "That's the proudest thing. What we've done has been a blueprint for other clubs.

"I was never naïve enough to believe we could just build a stadium or buy the ground or buy the board out; I knew that was impossible, we didn't have the money or resources.

"But unless you start battling, you never know what might happen. We did our bit, and Dick Knight came along – and now Tony Bloom. It's been like a jigsaw.

"Suddenly you find all the pieces and it's complete."



Paul Samrah