

The long and winding road...

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



They don't dish out awards, as far as I know, for travelling Albion fans who clock up the biggest annual mileage. Possibly because it would be a no contest.

But even though she'd surely have that title in the bag, you're unlikely ever to find Liz Costa behind the wheel. At least, not for first-team fixtures.

For these, Liz is in charge of the Supporters' Club coach, a job she first officially took on back in 1996. "We take a coach to every single first-team game," she says, "whether there are two people on it or 52."

Liz, who's also the Supporters' Club vice-chairman, is the first to admit it's not everyone's ideal way to go to a game.

But she's immensely proud of the service's record and reputation.

"We've had derogatory comments about 'Costa's blue-rinse brigade'," she confesses. "But it's a great atmosphere and a really good mix – from seven years old to one chap who's watched the Albion since before the war.

"We've even had people who've ended up getting married!"

The police, Liz explains, treat her and her charges with great respect – not least because she insists on high standards, behaviour-wise.

"We take a lot of youngsters," she says. "But I always treat them exactly

the same as the adults and I expect them to behave that way.

"Strong language is definitely not allowed," she says. "And for legal reasons we don't take alcohol on board."

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Liz's interest in football began after the Munich air crash of 1958, the game having become a national talking point.

It wasn't until she saw the legendary John Charles play his first match for Roma, however (she was living in the Italian capital at the time, and taken to the game by her policeman boyfriend), that she became hooked.

"The buzz was phenomenal," she recalls. "When I came back to the UK I really wanted to go to more games. But it wasn't until I moved to Sussex that I began to follow the Albion."

And was it love at first sight?

"Well, when I first got involved," she confesses, "it was to escape being at home on a Saturday afternoon, that's the truth of the matter.

"But if I hadn't liked it I wouldn't have gone back. I just loved the whole atmosphere, and I soon learned that if you're a woman on your own, a football match is the safest place to be. Everyone is there for the same thing and you quickly get to know all the people around you."

Liz has lost count of how many Albion matches she's seen over the years – "but there certainly aren't many I've missed, even when I was banned by our former chief executive (David Bellotti).

"I spent a number of those matches listening on the radio, sitting in a car outside the Goldstone.

"It's quite an exclusive club – those of us who were banned by the old regime. A badge of honour. And we did have fun!"

"The guy opposite the ground had a little raised platform outside his place and I used to park there. We used it as an office to some extent when we started campaigning.

"I could see what was going on upstairs in the boardroom. A certain gentleman kept peering out to see if I was still there. I knew I was winding him up!"



So does she miss those days?

"It's a weird feeling, to be honest. We spent so long being 'football fans AND . . .

"Now we're just football fans.

"People ask, 'Aren't you bored?'

Thankfully, what's happening on the pitch is now a topic of conversation before, during and after the match. It used to be just incidental."

As for the Amex – the glorious result of all that toil – "whenever I drive past I burst into giggles. I have to pinch myself and ask, 'Is this our club?'"

She considers it vital, however, that the Albion maintains its Sussex roots. Hence she's also a regular at youth matches. "It's all about continuity," Liz explains. "We feel we've watched the next generation coming through – the likes of Tommy Elphick and Adam El-Abd."

Indeed, it's one of the former youth team players, Wes Fogden, whom Liz considers her greatest unsung Albion hero.

Wes was diagnosed with a tumour on his spine and told he'd probably never walk again – "but he's fought back and is playing a good level of football." (Wes picked up two Player of the Season awards at Havant & Waterlooville earlier this year – from team mates and fans).

"He's one of the bravest young men I think I'll ever encounter," she says. "And a lovely lad."

So that just about sums it up for Liz Costa, really – a connection with her club that goes way beyond just 90 minutes on the pitch.

Like a second family, perhaps?

"Yes, but in many ways it's more than that. Families row, they split up, they stop speaking to one another. "In football you stick together no matter what."