



More than a few Chesterfield fans will have had their introduction to **Tommy Lee** via Jeff Stelling, and "Soccer Saturday." We'd have had it on the telly at home on a typically idle FA Cup third round day in January 2007, and we'd have heard that, having pulled it back to 2-1 by half time, Macclesfield had had their keeper sent off at Chelsea in the 48th minute by Lee Mason which, even in those days, meant that you hadn't had to have done very much wrong.

4,080 of us saw him for the first time in the flesh the following season. Four wins in August and September had put Chesterfield dangerously high up the league, and When Macclesfield came to The Rec in October we were second, having just come back from a 4-0 win at Wrexham. An adventurous Macc side twice came back from a goal down to go away with a share of the spoils. Beaten twice on the day, Tommy's performance didn't stick in the Spireite consciousness, but Rochdale saw something they liked later that season, recruiting him for their tilt at the League Two play-offs. With Tommy in the side, Keith Hill's men made it to the Wembley final, losing out 3-2 to Stockport County.

The departure of Barry Roche in the summer of 2008 left quite a hole between our sticks. Scott Flinders was drafted in from Crystal Palace for a couple of pre-season friendlies but didn't catch the eye, so Tommy lined up against Sheffield Wednesday at The Rec on July 29, alongside left-back Alan Goodall. Both were offered terms on the strength of good performances. It was rare for one of our pre-season triallists to amount to anything, much less two, although that game's third triallist, a German-born, Ghanaian-qualified midfielder who had played most of his career in Belgium named Akwasi Oduro, fitted the usual Spireite triallist profile by coming on for the last twenty minutes before disappearing out of the front door with an uncertain "We'll be in touch" from the manager.

Tommy made his Chesterfield debut against Barnet at an Underhill ground bathed in an August downpour. A quiet 18 minutes of fairly relaxed-looking stuff from both sides was abruptly halted when Tommy allowed a hoofed free kick from around halfway to sail over his head and into the net. "How could we sign this guy, and let that Ghanaian bloke go?" asked disbelieving fans. A Jack Lester brace helped Chesterfield to come home with a 3-1 win that day, and Tommy made important late saves to keep the score like that, redeeming himself for his earlier gift. The season's second game saw Bury come under the new management of Alan Knill, once Richardson's assistant. Insider knowledge helped them do a comprehensive job on us that day, but Tommy carried an unfair share of the blame for a 3-1 defeat, being replaced by the on-loan Trevor Carson.

Carson played 18 league games but began to suffer a loss of form for some time before his last game, a 2-4 home defeat to Macclesfield that saw Martin Gritton score his way onto Chesterfield's radar. Tommy returned at Droylsden, in the famous "lights out" win, and kept his place as Carson was recalled by his parent club. With Tommy in goal and growing in assurance, the team climbed from 14th to as high as 7th. Penalty saves in the 76th minutes of two consecutive homes games against Bournemouth and Exeter earned wins and cemented the crowd's respect. His bravery and aerial ability were noted features, but the strongest part of his game was a positional sense that usually saw breaking forwards forced out too wide to be able to trouble him with a narrow-angled shot.

The following season saw Tommy rather unfairly demoted to number two again, when new Manager John Sheridan preferred his goalie coach Mark Crossley for the opening game at Torquay, but a lacklustre performance saw Tommy return for the next match and keep his place until Crossley was given a three-game run over the Christmas period. Back in the side, Tommy conceded just six times in eleven games as the side pushed, unsuccessfully, for the play-offs.

Barnet visited the B2Net Stadium for its first-ever Football League game on August 7th 2010 and might have spoilt the celebrations had Tommy not made a fine, diving save from Mark Byrne with the game just seven minutes old. The next league game saw Tommy save the first penalty taken by an opponent at the new ground, although he may have been helped by a referee that seemed to insist that Hereford's Valentine, the penalty-taker, commence his run-up from the edge of the "D."

Tommy finished that season ever-present, with a League Two championship medal and a place cemented into the affections of the fans.

Tommy's run of 77 consecutive league match appearances came to an end the following season when a thigh strain picked up in the 83rd minute of a 1-0 win over Bury kept him out of the side and allowed Greg Fleming, that season's deputy, to be promoted. Fleming had a torrid time behind a team that had not been properly strengthened after promotion, and was on its way back down. That season's highlight was the Johnstone's Paints Trophy win at Wembley. A remarkable, instinctive save from a deflected Lee Holmes shot on 29 minutes was vital in preventing Swindon taking the lead at a time when they were at their strongest.

Another 14 league games were missed in 2012-13, Paul Cook's first season at the helm. Despite this, another run of five goals conceded in 11 games indicated that Tommy was enjoying some of the best form of his career, and it was thought to be no coincidence that, in Richard O'Donnell, there was a deputy who was worth a place in a league two side on his own merits.

Another League Two championship medal came Tommy's way in 2013-14 and again, Tommy's ability at keeping out penalty kicks was a feature of his game. Either side of a penalty shoot-out win against Oldham in the JPT, in which two opponents'

penalties were saved, Tommy stopped one from Barry Corr in an FA Cup defeat to Southend, and stopped another from Reuben Reid against Plymouth, after Matty Brown had become the first player ever to be sent off after scoring on his Football League debut. Tommy's 20 clean sheets in that ever-present championship season was beaten only by one keeper in another, when Chris Marples remained unbeaten 21 times in 1984-5.

Tommy was ever-present again in the league in 2014-15, missing only the season's last game, the second leg of the play-off game at Preston, with an ankle injury picked up at the end of the first leg. Earlier that season Tommy became the first Chesterfield keeper to be sent off since Mark Goldring at Millmoor in 1991-2 when Sheffield United's Ryan Flynn collapsed under his challenge on the edge of the penalty area, but the card was later rescinded.

Paul Cook's departure brought the swift dismantling of his side, and there were strong rumours from both clubs' fans surrounding Tommy's departure to Portsmouth, to reunite with his old boss. Happily for Chesterfield, there was no substance to them, and Tommy stayed to enjoy another ever-present season. He shouldn't have reached that milestone, though: what started in a long-forgotten game as a bit of a niggle in his shoulder persisted. Rather than rest it, he played in two games of no real consequence at the end of the 2015-16 season and made the injury much worse.

The whole of 2016-17 was missed with a struggle to properly diagnose and treat the shoulder injury, and Tommy's attempted comeback last season proved sadly unsustainable, the damage being too great to heal to the extent necessary to permit him to throw himself down onto the joint for a living. While Tommy's loss was not even a contributing factor to the calamity that befell Chesterfield in his absence, it is safe to say that the club missed him enormously: Cameron Dawson and Aaron Ramsdale are bound for good careers but watching the other five of his seven replacements over the last two seasons has left this spectator feeling rather spoilt by having watched Tommy in his prime.

Where does Tommy stand in comparison to the best of Chesterfield's goalkeepers? Appearance-wise, he is second behind Ron Powell, who first pulled on a green Chesterfield jersey in 1952 and didn't take it off, figuratively-speaking, until being injured in the car crash that killed Ralph Hunt in 1964. At the time of injuring his shoulder in 2016 Tommy was about 150 games behind Powell's total of 471, and would have needed another four relatively injury-free seasons to have claimed Powell's mantle. He would have been around 35 years old at the time of breaking Powell's record, so age would not have been a barrier.

Despite having to give up playing before reaching this milestone, Tommy set many benchmarks by which future keepers will be judged. His total of 328 appearances is some 78 more than the great Ray Middleton, regarded by many older fans as our

finest keeper ever. He was ever-present in four of his ten seasons on our books, a figure bettered only by Powell and Middleton, with five each. His 95 clean sheets were achieved at a better rate per game than Powell's 113 or Middleton's 72; of significant keepers in the last 50 years, only John Turner, Alan Stevenson and Billy Mercer can better this.

While Tommy stands 17th in the list of Chesterfield keepers in terms of their "goals conceded per game" figures, context is given to this by the fact that, of all those above him, none played half the games for us that Tommy has. Most of the others had one or two good seasons before being snapped up by bigger clubs and avoided any seasons of marked decline, whereas Tommy has played in a relegated side; Tommy has also played most of his Chesterfield career in teams managed by John Sheridan and Paul Cook, whose philosophies lean towards the marvellously gung-ho idea that we might happily concede three goals a game, so long as we scored four.

Will we ever see his like again? Well, when you're watching Mark Goldring get sent off at Millmoor it probably seems that no-one would ever step forward to challenge Ron Powell's record, but Tommy came along and did just that, so we shouldn't say "Never."

Yet games played, clean sheets and so on are all just figures in a column; what is harder to assess is a player's impact on his club as a character. Tommy was remarkable, in this respect. In an age where players have the freedom to move at their contract's end for an extra fiver a week somewhere else, Tommy stayed to serve Chesterfield FC for ten seasons. He bought completely into the idea of a club as a family, being committed to the idea of engagement with supporters and the club's wider community (If you subscribed to his social media feeds and saw the obvious strength of his own family bonds, then you know where he got this from.) Strong family ties influenced Tommy's character in such a way that he was nothing but a positive, decent man to have around the club.

After leaving Chesterfield in early 2018, Tommy became a part-time academy coach at Sheffield United, before moving across the City in August 2018 to join Sheffield Wednesday as their full-time academy goalkeeping coach. Two years later he was reunited with Jack Lester at Sheffield United as their academy goalkeeping coach and in October 2022 returned to Manchester United as the Head of Academy Goalkeeping.

For Chesterfield: 328 Football League appearances, 95 clean sheets; 397 conceded.

Career: 401 + 1 Football League appearances.