



A 1930's SHRIMPER CENTURION - LEN BOLAN



Back in July we received an email from Stuart Bolan. The name seemed familiar.

Stuart lives in Canada and was planning a trip to see his parents in Suffolk in a couple of months' time. He said that his dad, David, was the son of former Southend United player Len Bolan who had played for us in the 1930's, and Stuart wondered whether we had any pictures of his grandfather in a Southend United shirt.

We looked up Len's Shrimper record – a solid 27 goals from 121 appearances from July 1935 up to the outbreak of WWII. A Shrimper centurion – that was it ... a few months earlier we had put together a SUEPA 'Pitch Invasion' poster (and t-shirt/polo shirt range for our inaugural steps into the world of high fashion) which had on it the name of every player who had clocked up at least 100 first team appearances for us. Len's name was there, sitting on the right side of the attacking penalty area.

We instantly sent Stuart a picture of the print and undertook to do some digging to see what else we could find, which was plenty. Len appears in both the 1937/38 and 1938/39 Southend United team photos – squads full of illustrious names from our past such as keeper Ted Hankey (who played for us either side of WWII), club stalwart Frank Walton, fellow Shrimper ton-up man and later local journalist Alf Smirk, and goal-machine Harry Lane (whose 75 goals still place him seventh in our all-time scorers list). In many ways those squad pictures are tinged with sadness, as soon all those smiling faces would be faced with the horrors of the second great war of the 20th century.

So, what of Len's footballing career? Born in Lowestoft in 1909, and not knowing at that point that football was going to be the key focus of his life, he left school to become an apprentice shipwright and initially worked in local Lowestoft boat yards. However, Len loved football and

also started to play for his local town team where he attracted the interest of Norwich City and West Ham albeit without in the end making a first team appearance for either.

With a break in life though that sometimes just happens, Spurs came calling and he signed on professional terms for them in 1933. The inside right would ultimately go on to score three times for them in 10 matches, making his debut in a 2-0 defeat at Leeds Road, Huddersfield on Boxing Day 1933. He then did not play a first team match again until October the following season when he scored in a 4-1 win over Portsmouth. His other two goals came against Liverpool in a 5-1 win and then in a 4-3 defeat at Leeds United (a game which consigned the North London outfit to relegation from Division One) in what proved to be his last league match for Spurs before his transfer to Southend ... though that would not be the last time he came across his White Hart Lane teammates.

The Southend Standard on 17 October 1935 reported "The United Directors are still pursuing their search for a first-class winger. Unfortunately, many other clubs are engaged on a similar task and where players of undoubted talent are available for transfer, the fees being asked are prohibitive for many would be customers. As much as £1,000 and more is being asked for players of quite medium ability." But then a week later, under the headline 'United's New Winger', it declared "Southend United's search for a new right winger was brought to a conclusion on Monday by the transfer of L.A. Bolan, one of the reserve players of Tottenham Hotspur. Bolan, who is 23 years of age 5ft 7 inches and weighs 8st 10½ lbs, is a native of Lowestoft and in his nine outings with the first team last season he scored nine goals." (note: we believe that goals tally must include reserve team outings). The actual fee paid was later reported to be £400.

Len's Southend debut came in a 2-1 defeat away at Bristol City on 26 October 1935, but he then scored in the next match in his home debut (a 1-1 draw against Watford in front of 7,667 at the Southend Stadium). The Southend Standard reported "Bolan made his first appearance at the Stadium and put on a good performance crowned by a brilliant goal. Watford took the lead in somewhat controversial fashion with what clearly looked like an offside position, but the referee pointed to the centre emphatically and only when the players were in position did he consult the linesman. Bolan equalised in the first few minutes of the second half when he fastened on to a header flashed past the defence and sent in an unstoppable shot, it was a brilliant piece of opportunism."

Len made 29 league appearances for us that campaign scoring five times, but it was the FA Cup where he really shone, and in somewhat amazing circumstances. Scoring in a 5-0 romp against Burton Town in the second round, Len would have been as delighted as anyone when the third-round draw saw us pull Spurs out of the hat! We'll let the Southend Standard again take up the story:

"This match is probably the most memorable in the history of Southend professional football and been the main topic of conversation since the draw was made ten days before Christmas. Thousands travelled from Southend and district by motors, motor coaches and trains to the famous North London football centre. The scene on the London-Southend Arterial Road was a remarkable one from noon onwards, hundreds of Southend motor cars, taxi-cabs, motor coaches etc with the familiar index letters of JN and HJ passed and re-passed each other while the houses of refreshment along the highway were crowded with Southend people having a hasty

snack prior to the match. The special trains from L.N.E.R. and L.M.S. stations each carried over 500 supporters whilst hundreds of others travelled from the City via Liverpool Street to White Hart Lane and others went by the L.M.S. to South Tottenham. The streets of Tottenham seemed alive with Southend people and it is computed that there were no fewer than 8,000 Southend followers in the huge crowd and the cheer that greeted the visitors was equal in volume to that which welcomed the wearers of the white jerseys. 48,839 paid for admission (receipts £3,500) and there must have been over 50,000 present in all, which makes this the biggest crowd that Southend had ever played in front of, (beating the 39,700 at Sheffield United in 1920 and at Birmingham in 1914 which was slightly less). The first goal came after only four minutes when Bolan headed a Stevens cross past the goalkeeper to enormous cheers from the Southend contingent, but Tottenham were awarded a penalty shortly afterwards but MacKenzie managed to get his fingertips to the ball and push the ball past the post. However, halfway through the half after slack play from the Southend defence Tottenham equalised and four minutes later they took the lead. For the last twenty minutes it was all Southend playing like they had never played before, Bolan equalised and then the Blues forced corner after corner but just couldn't add to the score. The second half hadn't been in progress long when an Oswald cross was converted by Bolan completing his hat-trick against his old club, then half way through the half Tottenham capitalised on a shaky back pass and equalised. With thirty five minutes to go a thirty five yard shot from 'Spurs could only be pushed onto the post and the rebound was put straight into the net to give Tottenham the lead. The Southend team showed pluck and pertinacity and Lane equalised again for the Blues. The last twenty minutes were tense but neither side could score and nobody could deny Southend the right to replay at the Stadium."

The replay the following Wednesday caused tremendous excitement, a record crowd of 23,364 packing Southend Stadium, people sitting on top of the roof of the main stand hoping to witness a win to take us through to a fifth-round tie with First Division Huddersfield. There were even 2,000 fans locked outside, many who had come from London and who had arrived late due to a train breakdown. However, on a bumpy pitch the game failed to ignite to the same level as the first match. Len equalised an early Spurs goal (his fifth goal overall in the FA Cup run), but the visitors grabbed the spoils in a 2-1 win. There is a wonderful YouTube clip of some highlights from the replay (sadly not of the first match!), which can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJnEDzrTGXk>

The remainder of the 1935/36 Division Three (South) campaign proved to be a bit of a struggle. Len bagged a brace in a 4-0 win over Exeter but we finished a disappointing 18th.

Next season saw an improvement to 10th place but Len played more of a supporting striker role to the more prolific Harry Lane and Billy Dickinson, scoring five times from 29 appearances. He again notched a brace against Exeter, this time in a 4-4 draw – it was a season of high scoring matches, a 9-2 win over Newport County and an 8-1 annihilation of Cardiff City being particular highlights.

Also, during that 1936/37 season, the Shrimpers travelled to Rotterdam to play a Dutch XI in front of 10,000 fans. The Dutch national team had only lost 1-0 to England a few days before and five of that same Dutch team were playing in this game too. The home team got off to a flying start

and were two-up at half-time, but a brilliant second-half display by the Shrimpers saw us win by the odd goal in five, with Len scoring the winner.

The 1937/38 campaign was almost a mirror-image of the last, a 12th place with Len scoring seven from 30 matches and this time new signing Martin Tudor finishing top of the scoring charts with 18.

The last season before the outbreak of WWII was also 'steady-as-she-goes, another 12th place with Len chipping in with five goals from 29 appearances. The highlight was a 4-3 home replay win over Chesterfield in the FA Cup second round with Len bagging the decisive goal in extra time to set up a third-round tie at Division Two Blackburn Rovers (where a 4-2 defeat saw our cup run come to an end).

Len's last game as a Shrimper (with the first three matches of the following abandoned season expunged from the record books) was in the final match of the 1938/39 season, a creditable 1-1 draw away at sixth-placed QPR in front of 5,702 fans.

And that was it, at the age of 31, world politics effectively put an end to his professional footballing life, though he had also picked up towards the end a severe eye injury which had led to a detached retina. During the war he went to Coventry and worked in munitions, returning after the war to his birthplace in Suffolk, managing Lowestoft Town and then forming a new club in 1960 called Beaconsfield FC. These forays in to local football management proved quite successful, with a number of players under Len's charge making their way in to professional football. Len spent the latter years of his life running the Beaconsfield Conservative Club but after a prolonged period of ill health was forced to retire and passed away aged 64 in 1973.

Proudly displayed on the wall of Stuart's home in Canada is a commemorative medal that Len was awarded for playing in a Southend United charity game on New Year's Day 1936 for the benefit of the Sportsman's Appeal Fund. It is a link to the past that was further strengthened for Stuart when he learned in the build up to his visit home this month that his dad's godfather was none other than David Jack, Len's manager during his time as a Shrimper and who famously scored the first ever goal at Wembley Stadium in the 1923 FA Cup final.

We hope that, sometime in the not-too-distant future, David will be able to pay us a visit on a match day at Roots Hall when we will be delighted to present him with a framed version of our Pitch Invasion print which bears his dad's name.

Andy Leeder, September 2025