

# Giantkillers on the prowl again

## Frozen in Malmo, feted in Riga... now Johnson dreams of glory in Somerset

GARY JOHNSON has spent half his life on an epic football journey around Europe that has taken him to Sweden and Latvia via Cambridge and Watford. Here, the football nomad talks to IVAN SPECK about his travels and his dreams.

**M**AGICAL mystery tours do not usually end in Yeovil. Gary Johnson's may not either, but despite darkest Somerset is where this footballing nomad finds himself — and the town in the middle of nowhere is all the better for his coming.

Johnson's epic journey has taken in Newmarket and Riga, John Beck and Merion Parkers, Liverpool and Gerard Houllier are next, in the FA Cup third round on Sunday.

It is an odyssey that would normally open a mind to the possibilities that exist in football and beyond — except that the mind of the likable Johnson is precisely what allowed this remarkable adventure to begin in the first place. Spend time in the company

**‘I did avoid some traditions, but not the cognac toasts’**

of this 48-year-old and you quickly realise that opportunity is his favourite word.

Opportunity is what he has given the young players of Yeovil Town who will face Liverpool at Huish Park on Sunday night. And opportunity is what was denied Johnson the player.

After failing to establish himself at Watford, he joined FC Malmo in his early 30s. From then on, the eyes have remained wide open and every pore of his body has acted like a sponge — absorbing ideas, techniques, manners. Like the cold-water treatments he experienced at Malmo and later took to Cambridge United as assistant manager to Beck.

Johnson said: ‘Our coach used to make us dip our head in a bucket of cold water after a long journey up to the north of Sweden to get the sharpness and the adrenaline back into you. Becky took it a stage further at Cambridge by

penny. Throughout his odyssey, Johnson's agile mind has absorbed everything from tactics and techniques to local customs and eating habits. Here, the football nomad talks to IVAN SPECK about his travels and his dreams.

having cold showers and buckets of cold water thrown over you. ‘It was quite fun until we got somebody like Steve Claridge, who absolutely totally refused to do it. That was hard work fighting him every week, trying to get him in the shower. Steve doesn't like cold water or slow horses.’

Johnson performed every function at Cambridge — even commercial manager. He was later part of Graham Taylor's coaching staff at Watford. Throw in a football schools holiday business he built up in Newmarket and you give up trying to apply logic to the sequence of events that took him to Latvia as coach of the national side.

It went something like this. A Russian football agent was sent to England to find someone who could line up clubs for Latvian players. Johnson was that man. He flew to Riga, spotted Premiership potential in Maris Pahars, told his mate Dave Jones and Southampton bought him for a million quid.

Johnson said: ‘From that point on I was king of Latvia. The next thing I knew, they asked me to be their national coach and technical director. We'd just got Watford into the Premiership, but how many times does an international job come up?’

The marriage made in Hertfordshire blossomed in eastern Europe. Johnson did not learn Russian because the Latvians did not want him to. Being part of the Soviet Union was one thing they wanted to forget.

He did, though, immerse himself in Latvian life, taking a flat in Riga and coaching seasons with the country's leading club, Skonto Riga, for whom nearly all of the national side played.

There were cultural differences. ‘Like the fish restaurants we went to. I wasn't used to picking out my fish that was still swimming. I always thought the fish came out of the sea with neither round it.’

‘There were a lot of traditions which they understood if I sometimes refrained from. But they like to toast with cognac and I did that.’

‘When I was over there, I was very much in the hierarchy. They looked after me. They wouldn't allow me to drive anywhere and there were cars waiting whenever I needed them. I was the new kid on the



Up for the Cup: Johnson with the trophy when it was taken to Yeovil this week *Picture: ACTION IMAGES*

block because everything had been Russian before.

‘They probably needed someone with my personality, which wasn't ‘do it my way’ but ‘I'll give you some ideas and let's see what we can achieve’. That managed to get them all outside.’

So outside that the Latvians required no invitation to toast the improvement in their results. Johnson disposed of the Russian-inspired sweeper system to bring in a back four — a system adopted by all eight of the country's professional clubs.

His work ended two-and-a-half years ago, but his glorious legacy is the two-legged victory over Turkey last month and qualification for Euro 2004 achieved under his former No.3, Alex Stankov. After winning the bronze leg 1-0, they came

from 2-0 down in Turkey to draw 2-2.

Johnson said: ‘We managed to get the players believing in themselves, trying to win games instead of trying not to lose. Getting the players out into European clubs gave them the experience they needed when, for instance, they were losing in Turkey.’

‘For Latvia to qualify gave me as much pleasure as it would give me to beat Liverpool this weekend. I know the work we put in over the two years and we really did change the mentality of the country.’

Johnson will be in Portugal in June as Latvia's football consultant. His legend in Riga means he was even invited to be part of the country's hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest. ‘Then there is a treasured cutting from a Russian

newspaper, whose headline reads: ‘Russia needs Gary Johnson.’

So do Yeovil. And they have him. In two-and-a-half seasons in Somerset, he has brought the FA Trophy, promotion to the Football League after 108 years and now Liverpool. Yeovil are no longer tiny, non-League giantkillers.

‘I wouldn't have taken this club on if I didn't think it had the potential that it's coming to,’ he said. ‘We've got no chance of winning the FA Cup and Latvia have got no chance of winning the European Championship but both teams are good enough to create a problem or create an upset along the road. And that's where we're dangerous.’

Dangerous and open to every possibility. *i.speck@dailymail.co.uk*

## YEOVIL TOWN... THE BIGGEST SHOCKERS

YEOVIL, then in the Southern League, beat Second Division Bury in the 1948-49 competition to set up a clash with Sunderland at the old Huish ground, complete with its famous sloping pitch. A crowd of 16,318 packed themselves in on January 29, 1949, to watch a visiting side that included such players as the great Len Shackleton. Goals from Eric Bryant and Alec Stock, later a renowned manager, put Yeovil through 2-1 after extra time. The home fans were unable to contain their excitement when the referee blew for a free-kick near the end. Mistaking the call for the first whistle, they invaded the pitch. Order was restored and Yeovil completed their most famous FA Cup victory. The fairytale ended in the next round, when Yeovil lost 8-0 away to Manchester United.

