

A quiet word with ...

# Kevin Kennedy

It's almost as though the scripts had been written by fate;  
the man who plays Coronation Street's long-time loser,  
Curly Watts, is, in real life, a Manchester City fan.  
Oh, how we laughed.

story: Michael Hann photos: Dougie Firth

You forget that Coronation Street really does matter to some people. Especially in Manchester. The window of the city — centre branch of Dillons is filled with copies of the autobiography of Tony Warren, Corrie's creator; the Granada Studios theme park (focal point: the Corrie set) towers above the canals a few minutes' walk out of town; and when Kevin Kennedy goes to watch City suffer yet another drubbing the fans aren't above turning to his televisual alter ego for inspiration. 'Yeah, I do get the occasional "Curly, Curly give us a song", he says. "I got it against Sheff U and started singing "Blue Moon" — and to my delight the whole stand joined in. Otherwise I'd have looked a right prat, sat there on me own, singing.'

If you watch Coronation Street you know all about Curly Watts. If you don't, then Curly is the epitome of all things sad - despite his desperate attempts to cultivate an air of what passes for sophistication in the fictional Manchester suburb of Wetherby, he can't hold down a relationship, he moves from supermarket to supermarket as a never — quite — successful manager, and he can be relied on for pathos when the cheery backstreets humour starts to grate.

Years of following City seem to have brought some of Curly's characteristics to the fore in Kennedy. You know when Curly's just been dumped on by yet another girl (Kimberley, Angie, Raquel, whoever) and he starts to sneer defensively, revealing a spite you thought he could never possess? That's what Kennedy's like when he talks about life at Maine Road in the new dark ages. And even more so when he talks about man United and their supporters.

'It's very fashionable to support United but it's got a bit out of hand with [he pauses, curls his upper lip in disgust and leans forward] Posh Spice and David Beckham. It's all that kind of stuff that isn't anything to do with the beauty of the game.' He pauses again before launching into a gag: 'How many United fans does it take to change a lightbulb? Well, does it really matter? As long as you change it every half hour, it costs \$70 and it's a different colour.' He doesn't bother with a laugh. Not even one of those mirthless ones that James Bond's adversaries specialise in.

The subject of United's newer fans is one Kennedy can't keep away from. Asked why City inspires such loyalty he replies: 'I was talking to a mate of mine who's a United fan — a proper one, he's from Manchester and he's got a season ticket — and he gets really fed up because it's become a

fashion thing at United. You get these women who've gone shopping and then go the the game afterwards and talk all the way through about what there're doing that night, which I would find incredibly irritating.' That really is the way he speaks; the entire final clause is emphasised with verbal italics.

So, what's he saying? People should stay quiet at games and women should just stay away? 'No. I'm terrible at games — at City you tend to get a bit vociferous. And my wife's worse — she's a very beautiful, demure woman but when she's on the terraces... her favourite was Niall Quinn and if anyone went near him she'd go into a torrent of abuse that even the Italian fans would find offensive. I've had big hairy — arsed blokes asking me if I can tell her to keep it down. And that was in the kippax.'

Kennedy is now in his 25th year as a Blue. He first went to Maine Road in 1973 to see City (typically) lose 1-0 to Norwich. He was taken not by his father but by the local Catholic church ('So that's what they did for me: "You're a City fan. Oh, and you've got A—levels in guilt"). He had several years of relative success before City began their inexorable decline — he got to to Wembley three times, for the 1976 Leagues Cup final victory and for the two games against Spurs in 1981. But since then, nothing. He's still a season ticket holder, though, and the six-day Corrie shooting — schedule permitting he goes to away games, too. 'It's not so bad these days because we're so shite we're playing loads of local teams like Bury and Stockport. But that's horrible. What we want in United.'

So why does he stay with City? 'Good humour, no trouble... it's just good fun, it's a good crowd. And it's a bonus when they win. But it gets very frustrating. This lad ran on the pitch the other week and ripped up his season ticket. Well, he said he ripped up his season ticket. I reckon he kept his ticket to one side and y'know those FA Cup vouchers? I reckon he's got them and gone [he mimes angry ripping of ticket and makes incomprehensible noises meant to signify fury]...then pocketed his actual ticket and run off.

Kennedy is proud of the City fans' gallows humour, the thing that separates them from other, more boastful fans. He thinks the rest of football likes it, too. 'Other fans like us. We're a soft three points and we're a laugh as well. When we were getting beat 6-0 at Liverpool we got a round off the Kop which is very difficult to do. Mind you, we were singing "Alan Ball is a football genius" at the time.

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Even Scousers, when they weren't nicking our hubcaps, thought it was funny. If we take the piss out of ourselves better than anyone else can then we're really putting them down.'

Even leaving aside the playing side, there's plenty to laugh at with City. Last summer the club's stocks of their new kit were stolen...the day before it was due to be unveiled to journalists. "That was typical," says Kennedy. "It's Moss Side, innit? And we had that fella we were going to sign from Milan, but he was done for car ringing so we couldn't get him.

He would have been a perfect candidate for Maine Road, Moss Side. "Car ringing/ I'm in. Football on the side/ I'll be with you on Saturday afternoon!"

There's a strong football — following contingent within the Corrie cast. Kennedy has a fellow Blue in Amanda Barrie who plays Alma. Phil Middlemiss (Des) follows Liverpool. Matthew Marsden (Chris) is a baggie. The rest, says Kennedy, are United fans: 'I had a weird time with Bruce Battersby... sorry, Les Battersby, who plays Bruce Jones,' says Curly, sorry Kennedy. Clearly it's not only the public who tend to mix up soap stars with their characters. 'No, I'll start that again. Bruce Jones, who plays Les Battersby. We went to Stockpool and got stuffed 3-0 and we were in the wrong end. And it was like Rourke's Drift [the battle immortalised by Michael Caine in Zulu], it was that hairy. All we needed was Michael Caine going: "Stop chucking those bloody spears!" We made a rapid exit. I can't wait to get them to Maine Road, see how tough they are then, when I'm sat in the Kippax.'

Kennedy's big fear is that his commitments to Coronation Street will stop him getting to Fance this summer. He went to the World Cups of 1982, 1990 and 1994 — the latter two offering him the chance to follow the Republic of Ireland (he comes from an Irish family). While the republic won't be there in June, Kennedy still fancies the trip. 'A friend of mine's Scottish and he might have a couple of tickets for the opener, which I really quite fancy.' (It's those bizarre emphases again.) 'But you've got to be diplomatic about getting time off. this year I'm meant to be working right through the World Cup.'

What about proposing a Jack-and-Vera-style spin off video: curly goes to the World Cup? 'But then it'd all be: "Action!" And I'll be: "Not now!"

It's almost as though the Corrie powers-that-be have something against football. Apart from making it tricky for Kennedy to get to City games, the Monday night Rover's return crowd are never seen watching the live game. Surely the pub is wired for Sky? 'Ah, I don't know how that

works,' says Kennedy, diplomatically. Is it, perhaps, that Granada doesn't want to be seen promoting a rival TV station? 'Maybe that's the logistics of it. I think it's down to what we can get away with. But they won't even let me wear my City shirt on screen. They don't want to promote any side, otherwise we'd all be at it.'

Is he never tempted to go to Old Trafford, if only to see a bit of half-decent football? 'Never. Never, never. Though I did go there to see Germany against the Czech Republic in Euro 96. Me dad's a Red and so's me father-in-law. But me dad's been to Maine Road more than he has to Old Trafford 'cos you can't get in there. He comes with me 'cos it's a day out, a laugh. Not that he's a decrepit old thing.'

The only time he's been on the Stretford End was to support City - when they were beaten 5-0: 'I couldn't tell you how much stick I go.' So why did he put himself through such ridiculous misery? 'You can't not go, can you?' Well yes, actually. 'No: you're City till you die. The Blues are playing, you can't let those people walk all over you, you've got to show your support.' And could he, from the middle of the Stretford? 'Well, I did my best. When United scored I had to sort of air-clap. It was alright. Not, it was bloody dreadful.'

So bad, in fact, that he burned his lucky scarf after the game (It didn't bloody well work'). As an unashamed smoker does he subscribe to the 'lucky fag' cult? 'Oh yeah. I chainsmoke right through games and I have that thing of: "If I light one now, they'll score."'

So finally, what would he do if he had a spare \$600m and ran City? Buy Juventus, he suggests, use their whole squad. Then he has a better idea: 'Or I could just go and but United, just to piss them off.' He laughs. All I can think of is Raquel walking out.

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