



600 and Counting



Russell Canderton
Ashford Town FC

There are few games more exciting than a local derby on Boxing Day. For Russell Canderton, captain of Ashford Town (Middlesex), this season’s festive fixture at home to Egham Town was particularly special, as it was his 600th starting appearance for the Ash Trees.

The four-time ‘Player of the Year’ has turned out for his hometown club for some 14 years, having moved to Ashford from neighbours Staines Town in 2002. At that time, Ashford Town (Middlesex) were in Division Two of the Isthmian League; by 2006 the club had won promotion to the Premier Division of that competition.

After four years at Step 3, the Tangerines were relegated to the Southern League Division One Central and suffered a further relegation in 2014. At a time of turmoil, one player was a constant throughout and Canderton’s commitment and loyalty were rewarded at the end of last season when Ashford returned to the Southern League, promoted as runners-up in the Combined Counties League.

The 36-year-old central defender, whose composure on the ball has earned him the nickname ‘Ginger Bobby Moore’ has been an integral part of his club’s rollercoaster ride through the National League System. The highs have been significant – Ashford have won the Isthmian League Cup, Middlesex Charity Cup,

Surrey Senior Cup, Southern Combination Cup and Aldershot Senior Cup with their talismanic skipper in the side. Two promotions – from the Southern League Division One South & West and Combined Counties League – as divisional runners-up plus an appearance in the Middlesex Senior Cup Final have also been achieved during Canderton’s time at the Robert Parker Stadium.

Reaching the milestone of 600 starts for the club is an even more remarkable achievement considering that Canderton spent six months in the Reserve Team at Ashford before making his debut and even briefly stopped playing altogether in 2008 after losing his place in the side. Reflecting on his ‘retirement’, Russell Canderton observed that “I’d been on the bench for a while and when we went all the way to Forest Green Rovers [for an FA Cup Fourth Qualifying Round replay] and I sat on the bench, I’d had enough. So I said to [manager] Mark Butler I was calling it a day. I soon realised I couldn’t sit around getting in my missus’ way, so

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I came back. I decided I was too young to give up; it’s not just about the football, it’s about the Tuesday, Thursday routine and being part of the group. It was the wrong decision because straight away I missed the club, the changing room banter and all the lads”.

It’s perhaps telling that Canderton was prepared to stop playing altogether rather than join another club. Although he has had ‘a few offers’ from rival clubs over the years, Ashford always felt like home: “It’s a small club and everyone here works together. It’s special to me; I like the atmosphere in our clubhouse and it compares well with other local clubs.”

The low point that was omission at Forest Green came less than two years after a game which Canderton rates as one of the highlights of his long spell in Ashford’s distinctive tangerine & white stripes – the away match at Brackley Town which Ashford won to secure promotion to the Isthmian League Premier Division. Brackley went into the fixture in second place, with Ashford in third. League officials were on hand with the runners-up trophy and ribbons in the hosts’ red and white colours, but none in tangerine.

The visitors’ mood was not helped by the referee ruling that their kit was too similar to Brackley’s red and white hoops. Thanks to an overhead kick by Scott Todd, Ashford won the game 1-0, ‘wearing their kit’ as Canderton recalled and tied some socks on the trophy in lieu of ribbons!

After coming back to the club, Canderton was made the club captain by successive managers, not least by legendary goalkeeper-turned-manager Paul Burgess, whose 680 games is one of the few club milestones left for the defender to aim for. Under Burgess, the club enjoyed some success and won the Middlesex Charity Cup and Aldershot Senior Cup, but by the autumn of 2014 Ashford Town (Middlesex) was struggling at the foot of the Southern League Division One Central. New manager Ben Murray was unable to stave off the drop, but has subsequently led the club to consecutive top-three finishes back in the Combined Counties League and consolidated the club’s Step 4 status this season, using Canderton as an ‘elder statesman’ within a young squad.

This is a role that suits Canderton, who has also moved into coaching by helping out with Ashford’s Under-13 team, in which his son plays. He is unlikely to be coveting the First Team manager’s role any time soon though, observing that “having seen the stress and aggravation my friends Paul Burgess and Ben Murray go through, I don’t know if that’s for me”.

Instead, the veteran centre-back intends to keep playing – at least for now. “I’m not aiming for 700 games, but if I can make it that would be great. My legs and body ache a lot more now than before so I will have to consider my work and health first.”

If the much-respected defender carries on, he may still achieve the one ambition he has yet to realise during his playing career – a place in the First Round Proper of The FA Cup. Ashford Town (Middlesex) has reached the Fourth Qualifying Round twice during Canderton’s time at the Robert Parker Stadium, only to lose to National League opposition on both occasions.

With more than 20 substitute appearances and 28 goals to add to his stellar playing record, he may yet challenge Paul Burgess’ 680 games and the 650 played by former Secretary and current Vice-Chairman Alan Constable. Even if Russell Canderton does not surpass these milestones, he has made a significant, positive impact on Ashford Town (Middlesex) FC.

