

The BIG interview

Tony Kempster
(Non-League expert/website founder)

By **STUART HAMMONDS**

HE'S NEVER been a player, coach or manager, and he says his real claim to fame is running the line in a Southern League game at Hillingdon Borough in the early 70s.

But log onto the internet and you'll find FC United fans wearing Eric Cantona masks chanting his name in a YouTube video and hundreds of forum tributes describing him as...

- "An absolute god in the Non-League world"
- "The only person in the world who understands the Non-League system"
- "The living legend that is Tony Kempster."

The reason? A 59-year-old who has devoted 11 years of the dot-com age to bringing grass-roots football fans all the information they need at the click of a mouse has just announced his site will be frozen this month. It comes after doctors told him the bowel and liver cancer he has been fighting for almost a year means it is unlikely he'll see 2010.

Tony's English Football Site – found at www.tonykempster.co.uk – is his permanent legacy to the Non-League Pyramid. It earned him a Football Supporters' Federation award for services to fans last year. But who is the man behind it and how did it come about?

As we sit in his living room drinking tea made with the raw goat's milk that helps fight his tumours, he says: "I've got my head around the fact that I've not got long left, and my family and I have had to stop reading all the wonderful messages because we were so choked."

"We all had tears in our eyes that people would say such touching things and I'm very lucky because most people don't get to read eulogies before they go. I'm getting all these plaudits for it."

"But I don't just want to be remembered for the site. I've done so much more than that."

Born and bred in Harefield, Middlesex – "I was gutted United just missed out on the Spartan South Midlands title by one goal last Saturday" – Tony, a Bradford University graduate in Mathematics and Statistics, worked for Post Office Telecommunications in Uxbridge. Then he landed a sales job with confectionery giant Rowntree in 1973.

Promotion took him to York in 1975, he married Anne the same year and sons Stuart, now 31, Martin, 30, and Ian, 28, followed.

His legacy, he says, will be a close-knit family, despite his eldest living in Norfolk and youngest in Croydon. Martin, who is autistic, lives in a residential home 75 minutes away in Sunderland, but regularly accompanies his parents on visits to his brothers and their children, Abigail, two, and Sam, one.

Tony has been a school governor, PTA committee member, treasurer of local organisations,

THE LIVING LEGEND:
Tony Kempster may only have months to live, but he's as busy as ever



Non-League legacy being left by Tony

while managing a team of 30 as sales operations manager for the firm now known as Nestlé.

"I dealt a lot with IT and when the internet came to life, I wanted to create a website," he says. "I'd always been interested in the configuration of league tables, so I decided on Non-League football."

"The site's got no bells and whistles, and it was only when I retired in 2003 that I started to develop by looking at the mileage teams have to travel, crowd figures and plan what restructuring might look like."

Even then, when not taking calls for advice from FA and league bigwigs, Tony was helping raise £1m-plus a year for the Confectioners' Benevolent Fund and doing volunteer work as a Red Cross ambulance driver and signaller on the North York Moor Railways.

"I always liked to watch Non-League football," he says. "Recently, I've stayed local – Haxby Town, Whitby, Pickering, Selby or Tadcaster – so I could get back quickly to update the site. I get on well with all the leagues. They email me the

results and attendances. I have help on Step 7 from Philip Steinson, based in Finland, and Paul Crankshaw on the Scottish leagues, but I'm usually finished by eight o'clock on Saturdays."

"Tuesday games are updated by 11.30pm and I do the odd hour here and there in the week. I'm staggered and overwhelmed by how it's taken off. We usually get 200,000 hits on a Saturday, but on the last day of the season we had almost 300,000."

Discussion on what is easily Non-League's most intelligent messageboard has opened among Kempsterites on how to maintain Tony's English Football Site for future generations.

"I've spoken to Anne and the boys about this and I don't want anyone to continue my site," says Tony. "I'd love someone to start something similar themselves and link it to mine, but I'm freezing mine for posterity at the end of the season."

For someone who has just been told he has months to live, Tony is looking remarkably well. "The chemotherapy has stopped because it was making things

worse and I feel well now," he says. "I'm trying to do as much as I can but I do get tired."

"I'm off to the FA Trophy final next week, the boys are coming up the following two weeks and Stuart's partner Claire is expecting their second child in June. Then we've got a week away in Llandudno planned for July with friends, all being well."

"I've always been busy. That's why when the doctors told me last year I'd only have six months to live without chemo, it was such a bombshell. I'm also being very practical, sorting out my affairs so it's as easy as possible for Anne when I go. We've actually been talking about plans for my funeral this morning. I've chosen who I want to speak as I know they'll say good things and not be over-sentimental."

"The music's quite a problem, though. Do I go religious and traditional with hymns? Or do I go for some classical music? Or maybe Status Quo – Rocking All Over The World?"

Go for it, Tony. You've really made the Non-League world rock!

Dream team



JEFFERSON LOUIS
The Wrexham striker chooses his favourite XI, made up entirely of players he's played with and against in his football career

GOALKEEPER

Adriano Basso – Bristol City

I was going to go for Alan Julian, but Adriano got the nod – he's a fantastic keeper and has proved it since he went to Bristol City. I played with him at Woking. His agility and kicking ability were unbelievable – he even set me up for quite a few goals.

RIGHT-BACK

Scott McNiven – retired

I played with Scott at Oxford before he dropped down into Non-League and he was a quality player. I've never played with a defender who was so good going forward. I was so happy for him when he played again after having testicular cancer.

CENTRE-HALF

Jon Ashton – Stevenage

Another one of my old Oxford mates. Jon's a quality centre-half and there's not many better at this level. He came to us from Leicester and quickly showed how quick and strong he was. When he's on his game he's almost unbeatable.

CENTRE-HALF

Luke Oliver – Wycombe

I've played with and against Luke. It's definitely better to play with him. He's huge. I never enjoy playing against him because of how big he is, but he can also play the right way as well. I'm glad he's back in the Football League with Wycombe.

LEFT-BACK

Sam Ricketts – Hull City

I couldn't believe it when Sam dropped into Non-League with Telford. I played with him at Oxford and he never got a chance, but I knew he'd have a good career. He's two-footed, mobile and can play at centre-back. I'm pleased he's gone all the way to the Premiership.

RIGHT MIDFIELD

Michael Kightly – Wolves

I'd love to have played with Michael. He's a class act at Wolves. He was in a Grays team where he was allowed to express himself. That brought the best out of him.

CENTRAL MIDFIELD

Paolo Vernazza – Woking

Paolo's a class act and I loved playing with him at

How They Line Up: (4-3-3)



Weymouth – it was easy to see why he'd been at Arsenal. I've not played with anyone more intelligent and his awareness and passing ability is great to play alongside. He should be playing in the Football League but has been unfortunate to be labelled a party boy.

LEFT MIDFIELD

George Boyd – Peterborough

Boyd is absolutely different class. I knew from the first moment I saw him at Stevenage that he was going to go far. He's really deceiving on the ball – not explosive but has all the tricks. Posh boss Darren Ferguson rates him better than Aaron McLean and Craig Mackail-Smith. He will get to the Premier League one day.

STRIKER

Richard Pacquette – Maidenhead

I've got to pick Richard – he's my cousin, but he's in on merit. He's not as big as me, but he's really strong and powerful with an eye for goal. I've got the edge on him in the air, but since he's been in Non-League he's really worked on this to improve his game.

STRIKER

Jefferson Louis – Wrexham

I'd love to play in this team. With the service from Vernazza, Kightly and Boyd, it would be a striker's dream. I've been around a bit in my career and know how these guys play and that would help me get lots of goals.

STRIKER

Aaron McLean – Peterborough

I'd love to play up-front with Aaron – he's a real workhorse, but bags plenty of goals too. A quality finisher. For a small guy his springing ability is fantastic.

CRAIG CHISNALL