

Interview with a Formeroo

Greg Stock speaks with Ken Vairy

In the late 1940's and 50's the Granville Magpies Soccer Club was considered the envy of other Sydney teams in the way they managed to produce so many talented junior players. Bill and Andy Henderson, Ray Marshall, Frank and Alan Garside, and Eric Hulme are all names synonymous with representative football in the 1950's and all came from the soccer powerhouse of Granville. Another name on that long list of talented footballers was their inside left Ken Vairy.

Ken was one of six children, three of whom wore the famous Black and White playing strip of the Granville first grade side. Ken developed through the junior feeder club Kewpies but did play one season with Bill Henderson at Granville Waratah as a 16 year old and won the competition before returning to the Kewpies. By his late teens he had emerged as a member of the talented Granville Alliance team that won every second grade premiership from the Second World War to 1951. It was a natural progression that he would play first grade and by the early 50's he was firmly entrenched as the first choice inside left forward. Alongside dynamic centre forward Alan Garside and left winger Ray Marshall, the Granville club were the form side of the 1950's.

Representative honours soon followed where Ken was chosen to represent Granville District on three occasions as well as South and New South Wales. Ken's finest hour was when he was selected for the fifth and final test against the touring South African side in Newcastle in 1955. Alongside four of his Granville teammates Ken scored the only Australian goal in that match against a Springbok side renowned for its tough defence. Studs Up caught up with Ken on the south coast of New South Wales where he has moved away from the bright lights of Sydney to the tranquillity of the country. Now in retirement, Ken recounted a little of his career and of that famous test match all those years ago.

GS : How was it that you started in soccer?

KV : "My dad came from Newcastle in England and . My dad used to play, nothing of any great standard, playing all age in South Shield in Newcastle. He worked at Clyde Engineering in Granville and it was full of Poms and Scots that had come out in those days. I was kicking the ball with them as soon as I could walk. "I had five brothers all older than me, two brothers who played first division and the others played local all age."

GS : Were you also playing soccer at school?

KV : "We played every lunchtime at school. I started at Kewpies in about 1943. I played against Billy Henderson most times and had one year with him at Kewpies. Billy came from over the east side of Granville and they had a team over there they called Granville Waratahs and Billy played most of his football there. In those days if

you lived on one side of Granville you played with one squad (Waratahs) and if you lived over the other side of the railway line you played with the other (Kewpies) because there was no transport. Plenty of times I walked for miles to play a game and then walked all the way home again. Kewpies home ground was in Blaxcell Street and they had their reunion about four years ago for seventy five years."

GS : How did the transformation from junior level at Kewpies to senior level at Granville take place?

KV : "There was an old fella by the name of Henry Norford and he used to ride a pushbike around and watch us. He'd go back to Granville and say such and such looks like he has got a bit of ability, lets say we ask him down for a trial. There was no contracts or offers of any money. You did it more or less for the glory. They'd take you down for a few trials and then say you've made it or you haven't. They didn't give you much incentive. They'd say "Come down and try out." and let you hang around for a while but they didn't say "You're going well would you like to stay with us." They would give you a few trial games and training runs and at one stage I thought I am not going to make it here so I didn't show up. Henry came up and said where have you been? I said they didn't give me any encouragement and I thought I wasn't wanted. He said your wanted alright I'll see back there next week. So that's how I started with Granville."

GS : You started in second grade?

KV : "We only had the two grades, first and alliance grade. It was a progression but when I luckily went Billy Henderson went (too), and in an unusual time for the team they were mostly non drinkers and no smokers, which was very strange in those days. We played most of 1948 in reserve grade and won that competition so the next year came around and some of us were lucky enough to be promoted into first grade. There was myself, Billy and Bob Wall."

GS : You were never thought about joining any other first division club?

KV : "At that time Granville was the club and when I was a kid they played at Clyde Oval which is now Clyde Engineering. And as kids we would go down there across the cow paddock and climb the fence, get in for nothing and watch them play. I thought if I play I have got to play for Granville. We got a few rude shocks when we did play because it wasn't all glory and we used to work five or six days a week and then go and train two nights a week and if they had a successful season you got a few bob at the end of the season and if they didn't you got nothing. They supplied you with shirt, shorts and socks. We bought our own boots and if we travelled away, which we did a lot, they paid the fare away and gave us five bob for dinner. We'd have to buy on the way there. So there was actually nothing in it even though it was only two bob or twenty cents to get in the gate. Just looking at my scrapbooks there were crowds of 6,000 and people laugh at me when I say that, but there were big crowds back in those days."

GS : As a first grade player were you also holding down a full-time job and trying to have a social life?

KV : "Because you're young and enthusiastic not only did we work five days a week but I played tennis a couple of nights a week and went dancing. I can remember we went to Newcastle and played soccer up there. I got back to Parramatta about nine o'clock and went up to the dance till eleven or half past. Later on it became hard when I got married. I had the opportunity where I worked then to work on Saturdays. All our soccer was played on a Saturday and it made it damn hard. I used to work on Saturday mornings just so I could get away and play soccer in the afternoon. It was hard because you need the money when you just got married and we were building a house. It was hard work because you were working 48 hours per week."

GS : What was it about the Granville team of that era that made it such a strong club?

KV : "My opinion is because we were all local lads and got encouraged by the local people. You'd go down to play your game and come out and all the local people were there. I grew up with the fellas I played with. I came out of the juniors with some of them and there was a good mateship between us from Granville, Guildford and Auburn. There was nobody getting any special money to play."

GS : So even your Socceros like Eric Hulme, Alan Garside and Billy Henderson all got the same money as the regular team players?

KV : "Yes, and that's what helped a lot. I never worried in those days about the internal workings of the club but as far as I know nobody got any more than anybody else and we pulled our weight then. We all got stuck into it and if you got hurt it was bad luck. I had my fair share of injuries."

GS : Any serious?

KV : "I finished up about three years getting a replacement knee put in. I didn't know it at the time but I had torn my cruciate ligament and I had gone all these years with it and since they put in a new knee it feels great. The knee was terrible but I've had a broken leg, collarbone, ribs and they reckon soccer was a sissy game (laughing).

GS : How did you find out about Socceroo selection?

KV : "One of the fellas with whom I used to work was on the committee of the association. I was just coming out of the factory and Alex Craig was waiting for me, put his hand up and shook my hand. I said what's that all about and he said you're in the Australian side next Saturday. So that's how I found out and when I got home there was a letter to say be there next Saturday at 2 o'clock in Newcastle."

GS : No pre-match training?

KV : "That's right. There were one or two fellas from Queensland and you met them in the changerooms and you were then expected to get out there and perform against the top South African team with no run together. It was ridiculous . I played inside left with Ray Marshall on the left wing and Alan Garside at centre-forward. In the South African test that was what stood us in good stead. The three of us got

picked and South Africa had been thrashing Australia 6 or 8 nil and they beat us 4-1 but that repour had a lot to do with it."

GS : What were the selectors thinking?

KV : "They tried out quite a few players in different tests and it didn't work out and I think they made the decision to put in a combination about four tests too late. They should have done it after the first test after they got thrashed. We all went up and came home together in Bills' car. On the way up we struck a traffic jam. We were supposed to be there at 2 p.m. but we got there about twenty to three and we were supposed to kick off at three so there was a bit of panic. But even though we got beat on the way home we sang a few songs and told a few jokes and I can remember that test above everything else. There was only about three or four thousand which was a bit disappointing. When you got on the field the crowd disappears but they do tend to lift you with their voices and cheers when you're down and making a comeback. Individually you wouldn't know who was in the crowd even though my mum and dad travelled all the way up there too."

GS : And that goal.

KV : "Oh yes because I scored the only Australian goal that day. The goalkeeper was six foot tall and I was lucky enough to get a bit of a break on the defence and I just dropped it in over his head."

GS : A cause for great celebration?

KV : "Yeah but we never went on like they do now days. They slide all round the ground, kiss and hug one another. We knew we were there to do a job and if you scored, well, good. But you never went on with all the bull they do now."

GS : You also played for Granville District against the visiting Chinese and FK Austria club side. What were they like?

KV : "I broke my leg against China. I took a shot and the bloke jammed down on my shin as I came through with the kick. It was a foul tackle and that meant many weeks out. At that time I was still single and I managed to get by but there was no compensation from the club, absolutely nothing. I was out for ten weeks and then back next year."

Ken Vairy continued his career until he retired from senior football in 1960. He stayed loyal to Granville during the federation-association split of 1957 but in 1959 he transferred to Auburn and then to Prague. It was his knee injury and his professional career that eventually led him to hang up his boots permanently. Kens' considerable footballing experience has been channelled over the years into the many junior teams he has coached in the city and the country. Amongst the top echelon of footballers of his era, he is, justifiably still quite proud of his footballing career and that day where he so proudly wore the green and gold.