

## **Joey Beauchamp – the player of a generation**

My dad spoke about it evocatively, a moment of silence, a collective disbelief. In the split of a second your mind slows the world down to allow your brain to comprehend what you've seen, converting it into a physical reaction. It happened to him once, watching Wolves in the 1960s, a moment in a game where your perception of what's possible and the reality of what you've seen leaves a silent, motionless gap.

It lasts a nanosecond, but you can live in it for an eternity, even when it passes, fragments of your memory retain it. You can revisit it when you need a safe space. Physically, you move on, metaphysically, you can rest.

I've been there twice; against Wrexham in 2009; we needed a goal deep into injury-time to sustain our unlikely promotion charge out of the Conference. The ball was worked out to Craig Nelthorpe. At the other end, Billy Turley theatrically threw himself to the turf, he couldn't watch, but we didn't need him anymore, it was now or it was never. Nelthorpe looped in a cross, James Constable leapt, straining every muscle. He connected, guiding the ball towards goal. It clipped the underside of the bar and dropped down behind the line. The forging of what you want and what you get. And there it was, that moment of disbelief, a glimpse of hyper-reality, that silence. And then, an eruption.

But it was the first time that was most memorable and a moment that lives in the collective psyche of those who were there. Thirteen years earlier, almost to the day, we were emerging from what looked set to be an underwhelming season. Then we tacked into a strong following wind, suddenly finding ourselves on a run that was taking us closer to the play-offs. The next visitors to The Manor were Blackpool; top of the table, five places and thirteen points ahead of us. Win, and

a play-off chance would become a genuine promotion charge, lose and the whole season would likely be over.

It was Easter weekend, The Manor was cold and grey, that was my favourite kind of day, a day an outsider wouldn't understand. These were days for the most loyal. The game was tight and intense, good quality for the level. Eric Nixon, a long-term tormentor of Oxford from his days at Tranmere, kept the game goalless. We knew without a breakthrough we were vulnerable to a counterattack. On this moment the season would pivot.

Deep into the second half, Oxford were probing with increasing urgency, long balls played into giants like Paul Moody and Matt Elliot, hoping to get a knock down for poachers like David Rush or Martin Aldridge. It wasn't always pretty, but it worked. Right back, Les Robinson floated a hopeful ball into the box; the Blackpool defence repelled it back into midfield. With it bouncing awkwardly at hip height, Joey Beauchamp brought the ball under control with his instep. Beauchamp, back from his a miserable time at West Ham and Swindon, had yet to show the player he once was. His first touch brought the ball to heel, then in a single movement he contorted his body to hook his boot around it on the half volley sending it looping towards the London Road goal.

And then, the moment. I remember it vividly, the ball clipping the bar and nestling in the back of the goal. The rattling noise from it hitting the net. Through it all, a disbelieving silence. And then, an engulfing mayhem that flooded the senses; bodies, noise, a bombardment. Milliseconds earlier it looked like it was going over, maybe for a corner, but there in a moment was the breakthrough.

This was the defining moment of Joey Beauchamp's career, perhaps the defining moment of every Oxford fan standing in the London Road that day. Twenty-four

years later, it's a moment that needs no further elaboration. To Oxford fans, the goal is just 'that goal', and Joey Beauchamp is simply 'Joey'.

Beauchamp represented the slenderest golden thread from the glories of the mid-eighties to the more modest successes of the mid-90s.

He'd been a ball boy at Wembley for the 1986 Milk Cup Final and he got caught up in the post-match celebrations.

"The players came down the steps and got together for the team picture," he told the Oxford Mail "Then I looked to my side to realise that every other ball boy had gone. I was stood in the middle of the pitch at Wembley and I was the only person there."

He'd been discovered playing for Summertown Stars and nurtured to become one of the club's brightest prospects. His professional debut too had a nod to those glory days, coming on for Lee Nogan for the last game of the 1989/90 season against Watford. In goal for Oxford that day was Wembley 'keeper, Alan Judge.

Oxford is different, walk around That Sweet City and you're struck by its beauty. Dig a little deeper; take an unprepossessing side street and you find quiet, eccentric genius; The Chronicles of Narnia, Radiohead and the educator of nearly 30 Nobel Prize winners. Strange and wonderful things. Fittingly, Joey was different; for all his talent, he was shy and understated, seemingly unaffected by his ability. He didn't have the classic swagger of the great players; but when he played, he was mesmerising, among the best wingers in the country.

At the end of the 1980s we were readjusting to life as a second-tier club. Like a self-made millionaire who'd lost it all, we were still getting used to our life living in a semi-detached terrace house and driving a second-hand Ford Focus. For

nearly a decade, Oxford had a conveyor belt of talent; Kevin Brock, Mark Wright, Andy Thomas alongside choice finds like John Aldridge, Ray Houghton and Dean Saunders. But the pipeline was running dry and, as we approached the 90s, the hangover of the 80s party was kicking in and it was difficult to know quite where we were going next.

Initially, there were delusions of bouncing straight back, Mark Lawrenson was a marquee manager fresh from a stellar career with Liverpool, but Robert Maxwell's interest in the club was seeping away and with it any delusions the club had about returning to the topflight. After a brief loan spell with Swansea, quietly Beauchamp worked his way into the starting eleven building a reputation as a talented, tricky winger.

He was quick and direct with close ball control, he terrified defenders, they'd backtrack in hope of a moment to reset themselves. At the moment his opponents were most vulnerable, Beauchamp would cut inside to throw them off balance. He could be unplayable. Each cross and shot was a whole-body movement. It was pure poetry.

By 1992, Beauchamp's career was in the ascendency just as the club were heading in the opposite direction. Robert Maxwell's death the year before, and the scandals related to his fraudulent millions, ripped the funding and with it any hope from the club.

Beauchamp's first goal came in a home win over Sunderland at the end of 1991, three months later, a confident Swindon Town side came to The Manor. Swindon in 9<sup>th</sup> were managed by Glenn Hoddle and hunting a play-off spot. Oxford were second bottom and hadn't beaten their local rivals for nearly ten years.

Despite going behind, Oxford roared back to lead. At 2-1, Beauchamp terrorised the Swindon backline running the length of the pitch to make it 3-1 before half-time. In the second half he doubled his tally and scored Oxford's fifth, in his signature style. It ended 5-3 win and was a classic. Beauchamp had arrived.

Despite these moments and Joey's impressive form, our grip on the second tier was loosening. As we headed into the final game of the season away to Tranmere Rovers we were a point adrift of Plymouth Argyle in the relegation zone. We needed to win and for Plymouth, at Blackburn Rovers, to lose in order to survive.

Tranmere were full of experience featuring former internationals John Aldridge and Pat Nevin. Aldridge had scored nearly forty goals in a team which, in the following seasons, would see Rovers pushing for promotion to the top-flight. It was a day for bravery, not just ability.

Fifteen hundred Oxford fans travelled in hope on a swelteringly hot day. Beauchamp, Oxford's youngest player, tore into Tranmere in the first half, his direct running coming close to winning it in the first half alone. It was as if the unassuming junior of the side had taken on the responsibility as a personal mission to save his hometown club.

With the season on a knife edge and Aldridge and Nevin ready to pounce on any error, Oxford still looked vulnerable. Just before the hour, a poor back pass allowed John Durnin in to give Oxford the lead. Two minutes later, the ever-ruthless Aldridge, equalised giving him a club record goal haul and threatening to send his old team down. With 25 minutes left, Beauchamp ran through, bouncing off a defender before slotting the ball between Eric Nixon's legs for the winner. With Plymouth losing at Blackburn, Joey had saved us.

The celebrations were euphoric, the game etched into Oxford folklore, the local boy was a hero. But it was just brief rest bite from the trajectories both parties found themselves on. As we gradually succumbed to the inevitable aftermath of the glory years, Beauchamp's path was clearly upwards; perhaps to the very top.

After another season in a struggling side, Swindon Town began making their first enquiries about the winger. They were heading for the Premier League and Beauchamp would have slotted right into their ambitious plans. Beauchamp, however, turned them down.

The parting eventually came at the end of the 1993/4 season. In the league we suffered a terrible start, in part due to the disruption caused by Brian Horton's unexpected departure to Manchester City. He was replaced by Denis Smith who faced a race against time to find a winning formula.

The FA Cup offered a relief from the pressure. In the third round we drew Leeds United. In these pre-internet days, tickets were bought in person or on the phone. I was at university and missed out. Oxford, kicking down the slope towards the London Road, started like a rocket. A beautifully weighted ball from Beauchamp set Jim Magilton free to cross for Alex Dyer to score the first. A Matt Elliot drive doubled the lead before Leeds fought back to force a replay.

At Elland Road, Oxford again took the lead with a John Byrne goal, then Beauchamp and Chris Allen combined to make it 2-0. Unfathomably, in the final minute, Oxford contrived to concede twice, forcing the tie into extra time. Despite having thrown away giantkilling opportunities twice, against all odds, Jim Magilton lobbed home to seal the win.

It was a famous night, but ultimately one which damaged Oxford's hopes of avoiding relegation as Jim Magilton was sold within days of the win.

In the fifth round, Oxford drew Chelsea and I was determined see this one. My train across London, and the bus out to Headington was tortuous and I missed kick-off. I hustled through the turnstile, climbing the steps into the densely packed London Road. As I perched at the back of the stand looking for a gap to sneak through there was a tangible swell in the stand, my eyes focussed on the pitch just in time to see the ball loose just outside the six yard box, arriving at speed to open the scoring was Beauchamp, the celebrations drew me into the swarm. It was a moment of joy, but we couldn't hold out, Mike Ford missed a penalty as we slipped to a 2-1 defeat.

It was a highlight of an otherwise bleak season. By May, Oxford faced another final day with their fate out of their hands. This time, the gods weren't with us and despite Beauchamp scoring a remarkable winner in a 2-1 victory over Notts County, results for Birmingham City and West Brom ensured it was no more than a valedictory. We were going down; Beauchamp, though, was going up.

Oxford were crippled with debt with no financial backing and a much loved, but crumbling, Manor Ground. The Hillsborough disaster in 1989 changed regulations for stadia in the UK, The Manor's capacity was reduced by 40% over five years. The ever-stretching elastic holding the club together finally snapped.

West Ham's £1.2 million bid was too good to turn down. Beauchamp was faced with his tormenting reality; he wanted to play football; he just didn't want to be a star. Ultimately the choice was stark – either Beauchamp signed or Oxford United would go bust.

“I didn’t really want to move at the time” Beauchamp told *Rage On* fanzine “I was buying a house and I needed the money that I’d make from a move. I didn’t know what to do when West Ham came in for me. I really didn’t know whether I wanted to move or not.”

What happened next has been raked over endlessly, though rarely in a satisfactory way. With the inevitable pressure and expectation of his big move, Beauchamp’s insecurities bubbled to the surface. He didn’t want to be there, just days after arriving, he wanted to leave.

Beauchamp said his agent told him he could live in Oxford while commuting to East London. Beauchamp bought his house and signed his contract at Heathrow Airport, just 45 minutes from his home. On the face of it, it was a dream move; money, Premiership football and living in his home city. What he hadn’t accounted for was that playing for West Ham meant battling through peak rush hour to compete within a squad full of machismo with the likes of Julian Dicks and Martin Allen. For a self-confessed family man and local boy, it was an entirely different world.

Even now, when Beauchamp’s story is told, people talk disparagingly about the fact you can get from Oxford to London in an hour. They don’t talk about the additional hour it can take to get out to the east side of the city. Ironically, those who use this to claim Beauchamp was somehow soft, are making the exact same mistake he did when he signed.

More importantly, only recently people have told this as a mental health story. Beauchamp was a young man thrown into an unforgiving macho world with no support. For years Harry Redknapp, West Ham’s assistant manager, capitalised on Beauchamp’s failings by pumping up his own role in the proceedings. It’s all



part of Redknapp's happy-go-lucky persona; how he can effortlessly blow a £1million on a pup and walk away unchecked. A proper Jack the lad. He talks about it like he'd bought a Ford Capri but left it with a Police Aware sticker down a back road. All a bit of a laugh, nobody got hurt. Apart from Beauchamp, but in Redknapp's world, he didn't count.

Although Redknapp has dined out on the story for years, the man who brought Joey to West Ham was manager Billy Bonds. The player signed a three-year deal worth £2000 a week and was briefly West Ham's record signing. At his first training session Beauchamp announced he'd made a mistake and that he should have signed for Swindon.

Bonds was initially sympathetic, recognising his own shyness when first joined The Hammers as a teenager. But when Beauchamp turned up for a pre-season friendly against Portsmouth and appeared to put in little effort, he became less accommodating. 'The boy was a total wimp.' Bonds said in his autobiography 'I just told him to keep his nut down because the fans weren't going to be too happy with him either.' It was hardly helpful advice for a young and troubled man.

There are few pictures of Beauchamp playing in West Ham colours, ironically, most come from a friendly in his hometown against Oxford City. In it Redknapp apparently gave an abusive fan a place in the West Ham side to prove his worth. Another story for the Redknapp mythology.

Relations rapidly grew strained as Beauchamp tried to extract himself from his nightmare. Eventually the PFA stepped in to facilitate a move to Swindon for £200,000 plus defender Adrian Whitbread. He'd been a West Ham player for just 58 days.

Bonds described the signing as his worst ever, and the affair is widely believed to be a significant factor in him quitting a few weeks later. However, with Redknapp taking over, the internal politics at Upton Park couldn't be ignored.

Just six weeks after signing Beauchamp had found an escape, of sorts. Swindon were ambitious for a return to the Premier League and a commutable distance from Beauchamp's home. It's not what he wanted, but it was better than what he had.

The move wasn't as bad as is sometimes suggested. In his first season, he played over 50 games. Beauchamp was an exciting flare player, one of the best in the country who could propel The Robins back to the Premier League. But, if he was to truly settle and gain acceptance, his backstory meant he had to do double the work of anyone else to win people over.

Wingers are frequently inconsistent, and Beauchamp was no exception, his initial performances were underwhelming, his first goal came against Wolves in October 1994, a 25-yard low drive in a 3-2 win. He ran to the touchline and leapt into the arms of manager John Gorman, who he'd later describe as 'brilliant'. But Swindon were already in trouble; Gorman had taken over from Glenn Hoddle who had masterminded their ascent to the Premier League before being poached by Chelsea. Their Premier League experience had been brutal, winning just five games and conceding 100 goals. The assumption was that they could dust themselves off and return, but the reality was far tougher. Gorman, a good assistant who took England to the World Cup in 1998, struggled when faced with the top job.

In the end he wouldn't make it to Christmas, a 3-2 defeat at local rivals Bristol City meant he was sacked in preference for Steve McMahon.

“Within a few weeks of McMahon coming in he made it clear that he didn’t like me” Beauchamp said “He didn’t like me, Andy Mutch, Adrian Viveash or Brian Kilcline. We were the four that he wanted out straight away.”

McMahon was an old Liverpool warhorse whose career had been built on his metronomic reliability. He didn’t want show ponies like Beauchamp, they were too inconsistent, an indulgence. Their problems were deeper than that and their collapse resulted in a second successive relegation. McMahon put Beauchamp on the transfer list.

The following season, Beauchamp scored against Cambridge in the League Cup and started against Carlisle the following weekend. The rapid-fire opening to the season continued with the visit of Oxford the following Tuesday. McMahon dropped the winger to the bench. I remember Joey appearing on the touchline to warm up, swamped in a giant coat as Oxford fans sang songs about his girlfriend, Chloe. The Swindon fans feigned their support for him, which he must have known was superficial and just to goad the away fans. He looked sad, lost in a world not of his choosing. Rejected by one side, objectified by the other. Some players feed off this kind of notoriety but he wasn’t that kind of player, there was no on-field persona to cocoon him from the abuse. Eight minutes from time, he came on but failed to make an impact as Oxford secured a creditable 1-1 draw.

Beauchamp played just more three more minutes for Swindon, despite interest from Birmingham and Millwall, Beauchamp asked to return to Oxford. Showing his characteristic stubbornness, McMahon agreed. The deal was said to be worth £300,000 but a substantial amount was saving Beauchamp’s wages. The real figure was likely to be less than a third of that.

I’d expected Beauchamp’s return to be a triumphant one; the streets lined with supporters, The Manor full to the brim, the returning hero. We knew he was still the million-pound match winner West Ham had bought,] now we had him back.

In fact, the reality was quite different. Our season had been fitful, the core of the side with Matt Elliot, Phil Gilchrist, Paul Moody and others meant that as proved in the draw with Swindon we could be competitive against the best teams in the division. But with injury to goalkeeper Phil Whitehead and pre-season signing, the ageing Wayne Biggins not scoring, the overall impact was like a boxer who'd shed a few pounds to make the weight, superficially we looked competitive but in reality we were drained.

Beauchamp returned against Stockport County at The Manor. He was immediately put in the starting line-up but was largely anonymous in the 2-1 win. He was obviously still struggling from the experience of the previous few months. The next three games Beauchamp was substituted, and by the time we played Shrewsbury Town at the end of October, he was on the bench. The difference from his experiences at West Ham and Swindon was that Oxford's fans and management would give Beauchamp latitude to settle in, in a way the others wouldn't.

By November, Oxford's season had been pedestrian, home form was propping up poor away form; the play-offs and promotion were seemingly out of reach. An FA Cup first round tie against Dorchester Town was a welcome distraction. Dorchester, featuring former Oxford goalkeeper Ken Veysey, had their spirit broken with two early goals. In the second half David Rush ran riot as more flooded in. Beauchamp was introduced in the second half to torment the beleaguered non-leaguers. Charging down the left flank he cut inside in his customary style to slot home the eighth. It was the most Beauchamp of goals and proof he could still do it. The final score, a record 9-1 win was significant, but Beauchamp breaking his duck somehow more so.

That hoodoo dispelled, Beauchamp set about reclaiming his place in the side, interviewed in the Oxford Mail around Christmas he challenged Denis Smith to play him. It was a risk, but it worked.

By the end of January he was playing again. Then, there was a key breakthrough, an FA Cup tie against Nottingham Forest was postponed with the players already on route to the game. The Denis Smith diverted the coach and gave the players an impromptu training session. In it, he worked on a new system they'd planned for the Forest game. It was eventually road tested on a cold foggy night at Burnley with Oxford registering their first win on the road.

After another month of so-so form we headed for Carlisle United. Despite going a goal down, Oxford fought back with Matt Elliot firing in a 30-yard rocket into the top corner. Before half time, from a Phil Gilchrist long throw, Martin Aldridge poked home the winner. It fired a sequence of five consecutive wins that changed the course of the season. Significantly Beauchamp was ever-present, scoring his first league goal in the 1-0 win at Bournemouth. He wouldn't miss another game all season.

The squad suddenly found the perfect balance; up front, there was battering ram Paul Moody or the goal poacher Martin Aldridge. If they could be contained, then there was always David Rush. Supply on the flanks came from Beauchamp and Stuart Massey. The midfield of Martin Gray and Dave Smith anchored the operation in front of a defensive wall of Les Robinson, Phil Gilchrist, Matt Elliot, Mike Ford and Phil Whitehead.

With the run looking more than just a flash in the pan, Swindon Town were back at The Manor. It was a Tuesday night, the darkness enveloped The Manor, blocking out the space in the surrounding streets. Inside the ground, the stands were full without a space between one fan and another. With Swindon top of the table and Oxford being the form side in the division, neither side would give an

inch. There was a density, a completeness, a single whole, the biggest game at The Manor for a decade. At the epicentre of it all was Joey Beauchamp.

The run-up to the game wasn't without incident; I'd got a ticket for a friend at work and washed it into a mulch in my jeans. After a panic, the club replaced it, and we headed to The Manor.

The Beauchamp affair had turned a grumbling dislike between the clubs into open hostility. The singing was loud and shredded the throats. Midway through the first half with Swindon pressing menacingly, the ball dropped to Matt Elliot who swung a tree trunk sized leg at the ball. He connected perfectly arrowing the ball through the crowd in front of him. From the London Road it was possible to follow its trajectory all the way into the bottom corner. The melee in the London Road knocked me off my feet and span me round. I was no longer in control of my movement; I had become part of an amorphous whole. My friend, who was 6ft 4inch with the darkness of Nick Cave, was no longer next to me, then he appeared across my line of vision - somebody had grabbed him around the waste and was bouncing him around like a rag doll. He submitted to it with a huge child-like smile on his face.

The goal propelled Swindon to pile on the pressure and seek an equaliser, as league leaders they weren't going to give up lightly, and certainly not to us. Early in the second half a quick break away allowed Martin Aldridge to bundle home the rebound from a David Rush drive to double the lead.

The job was to keep possession and not invite any kind of fightback. Deep into the second half, Paul Moody dropped deep to pick up the ball up on the right flank. Just a few paces ahead of right-back Les Robinson, in his own half, he was in alien territory for a target man. With few options he set off on a lengthy run directly down the flank. His rangy gate gave the impression his intentions were just to stall. As he advanced, Swindon backed off more, drawing in more

defenders towards the looming threat. Moody suddenly found himself on the edge of the box, instinctively, he put in a low bouncing cross. Arriving at the far post was Beauchamp, all alone to slot home on the half-volley; super-Joey homesick, the soft lad, the wimp, vengeful and ruthless. He continued his run across the Cuckoo Lane terrace where the Swindon fans were penned in, swinging celebratory rabbit punches in their direction, a strangely Beauchamp like response. Instinctive but understated, it capped one of the great nights at The Manor.

The goal marked the first of four in the next five games for Beauchamp culminating in his wonder strike against Blackpool. From there on, the season turned into a riot. Days after the Blackpool win we went to Wycombe, who had beaten us 4-1 at The Manor earlier in the season and held a hoodoo over us since becoming acquainted a few years earlier. We thundered to another famous win in as Beauchamp whipped in the corner to allow Stuart Massey to score Oxford's second of three goals.

A numbing last-minute draw against Notts County followed but it didn't knock our momentum. Beauchamp set up Paul Moody for Oxford's second in a 2-0 win at Bristol City. Three days later, he set up three and scored another in a 6-0 destruction of Shrewsbury, all six goals coming from headers. The penultimate weekend we were away to Crewe, themselves fighting for a play-off spot. Chaos reigned as Oxford fans worked their way into all parts of the ground. Already a goal up, Beauchamp glanced home a second half header from a David Rush cross in a 2-1 win. Critically Blackpool, 15 points ahead a few weeks earlier, were losing at home to Walsall.

Having lost only six games all season, Blackpool had gone on to lose four and draw two of the next six. They had choked in the most remarkable way. Spooked by the nature of their defeat to Oxford, and Beauchamp's goal, manager Sam

Allardyce had chosen to go for promotion with the minimum possible risk, but he'd gone too far, too defensive; it had backfired spectacularly.

Oxford moved into the second automatic promotion spot; if they could match Blackpool's score in their last game against Peterborough, they would be promoted.

Seven days later, The Manor was full and expectant; the first half tense. While Peterborough were content to see the season out, they weren't going to lie down and let us take the glory. Despite making a handful of chances, by half-time we still hadn't broken through. The tension cranked up a notch. Half-time gave the players time to think about the challenge ahead, confront the fear of failure. The risk was that with the adrenaline of the first half draining away over the break, we'd descend into paralysis.

Shortly after the re-start we won a corner in front of the London Road, Beauchamp swung the ball in through a crowd of players, Peterborough striker Ken Charlery got his head to it, but it simply created chaos in front of the Peterborough goal. Juiliano Grazioli, the other Peterborough striker, could do nothing but steer it into his own net. The divine intervention of an own goal broke the seal and from there on it was one-way traffic. In six rapid-fire minutes, David Rush added a second, taking his shirt off and using it as a flag in celebration. Matt Elliot and Paul Moody weighed in with the third and fourth. If there had been any justice, Beauchamp would have rounded things off, but it didn't happen. It's one of Beauchamp's biggest regrets "I could try and claim the first goal because it was from my corner that Grazioli headed into his own net, but I really wish I had scored." He later said.

Promotion was sealed and all the fear and toil drained away.



Afterwards, the players wandered around shell shocked that it was finally over. With no trophy to pick up the afternoon lacked an obvious end point. For no obvious reason Denis Smith appeared in a red wig, reminding people that he was once considered a future England manager. Possibly by himself.

Beauchamp's journey was complete; back at his boyhood club and at a level that he could thrive. Early in the new season we were back at the County Ground. The hostility off the pitch was predictable, but Beauchamp's former manager Steve McMahon also seemed keen for retribution.

Swindon centre-back Mark Seagraves led the way, raking his boot down the back of Beauchamp's thigh. Mark Walters' kicked him in the face during a tussle on the ground before Seagraves exacted more verbal abuse. The petty fouls continued with referee Gurnan Singh seemingly content it was just part of the blood and thunder of a derby, part of the narrative. It was a brutal and ugly game in which Swindon snatched a 1-0 win.

McMahon's post-match interview was grim, "I was delighted he got so much stick." He said "I don't want him coming here and people clapping him. It's our job to make it difficult for the opposition to play and if it means giving people the bird that's absolutely fine by me."

With streetwise striker Nigel Jemson leading the line, Beauchamp and Oxford enjoyed a solid return to the second tier. But trouble was looming off the pitch. Early in the season owner, Robin Herd resigned as the club's planned move to its new stadium ran aground. Without the financial support or prospect of moving from The Manor; the club were more exposed than ever. Matt Elliot was sold to Leicester City for £1.6m to prop the club up. The season ended with a creditable 17<sup>th</sup> place, three points clear of Swindon, including a satisfying 2-0 revenge win at the Manor in April.

The 1997/8 season saw a familiar trend; the foundations of the club began to crumble while Beauchamp's star began another familiar ascent. By Christmas, he'd scored 10 goals, playing in a more central role, but the team were showing the strain of playing above the level they were financially equipped to cope with. By Christmas, Oxford were just two points clear of the relegation zone.

On Christmas Eve 1997, manager Denis Smith was poached by West Brom, the attraction of a bigger and more stable club heading for the play-offs being too good to turn down. Seeking inspiration, the club turned to Milk Cup winning captain Malcolm Shotton.

Shotton was a disciplinarian, more in the mould of Beauchamp's nemesis Steve McMahon. While noting how hard the training became under his new manager, Beauchamp wasn't a soft touch, he was more mature and had become steeled by his past experiences. Shotton had to tread a fine line if he was going to get the most from his prize asset.

Shotton was formally unveiled before a home game against Portsmouth. Not having met the players, he chose to sit in the Beech Road stand and allow caretaker Malcolm Crosby to take control. In an edgy relegation battle, at half-time Peter Rhodes-Brown announced that Shotton was in the dressing room sending a buzz of anticipation through the terraces. In the second half he appeared on the touchline barking instructions. His presence seemed to have the desired effect. In the last minute Joey Beauchamp latched onto a deep cross at the far post to score the winner. Two Oxford legends, from different generations combining.

A week later, Beauchamp added another brace, the second a breathtaking solo goal from the flank, taking his tally for the season to 14 as Oxford registered a 3-1 away win over league leaders Nottingham Forest. Suddenly there was momentum inspired by Shotton and executed by Beauchamp.

With the goals flowing, Beauchamp's reputation was gaining renewed traction. His ability began shining through the reputation that had been tainted by the West Ham and Swindon debacles. In addition, there was no doubt there was a price that Oxford couldn't ignore. For Beauchamp, now 27, if he had any ambition to play in the Premier League, any move would have to be soon. Bolton were first to enquire, but Shotton held firm.

With Beauchamp in the form of his life, Shotton's influence was transforming the team; Denis Smith's West Brom were turned over at The Manor, Beauchamp steered home a goal in a win over Manchester City at Maine Road. There were wins over Reading and then Swindon, with Beauchamp providing assists for both goals in a 2-1 win.

The remarkable turnaround saw Oxford safe from relegation before they were, at least mathematically, out of the promotion race. Youngsters Simon Marsh and Paul Powell were called up to the England Under 21s, there were even suggestions that Malcolm Shotton should win manager of the season. While outside promotion hopes ebbed away, the star of the show was Beauchamp, who scored 19 goals and missed just two games, even though it was Les Robinson who won player of the season. Beauchamp speculated whether his Swindon days had played against him in the vote.

Inevitably, the summer was full of speculation about Beauchamp's future. Denis Smith put in a £800,000 bid from West Brom. Shotton alluded to the fact he would be ready to sell, if it allowed him to strengthen elsewhere.

Even into October, bids were coming in and the speculation seemed to be affecting Beauchamp's form. He spoke with Fulham after the clubs agreed a £1m deal but couldn't agree personal terms with boss Kevin Keegan, who had been in

the players' lounge at the Swindon game. Then, as a takeover bid for the club fell through, Manchester City made an enquiry, Beauchamp, again, was reluctant.

Speaking to *Rage On* around that time Beauchamp said "If ever I did leave it would be a big wrench, I love it here and now everyone knows it. I'm a local lad and I'm playing for the local team and that's something that I wanted to do since I was young."

By the middle of November 1998 a move seemed to be coming together. Shotton agreed an £850,000 deal with Dave Basset at Nottingham Forest. With the move set to go through Beauchamp failed a medical due to back and toe injuries. Beauchamp protested, claiming, quite reasonably, that he rarely missed a game through injury. It fell on deaf ears.

The collapse of the deal was significant; financial problems at the club were biting. For the second time in his career, it seemed Beauchamp's talent was the only way out of the mess. He could feel the pressure building and Shotton couldn't hide his frustration at his unwillingness to comply.

A bid from Southampton collapsed when Beauchamp asked for time to think the move over. With food parcels being delivered to back room staff, Beauchamp – often the club's saviour on the pitch - couldn't or wouldn't be one off it.

The club continued to limp along with relegation and bankruptcy the most likely outcome; Beauchamp's goals, so plentiful the previous year, had dried up.

Three days after Christmas, he was sent off in a game at Portsmouth resulting in a three-game ban. The red card wasn't just a blow to the club's relegation fight,

it also meant Beauchamp would miss Oxford's upcoming FA Cup 4<sup>th</sup> Round tie against Chelsea.

The difference between the two sides couldn't have been more stark; Chelsea were full of internationals and World Cup winners, Oxford were threadbare and broke, weakened further by the loss of Beauchamp and ineligible on loan goalkeeper Paul Gerrard.

In previewing the game, The Guardian summarised the club's plight; "In many ways, Beauchamp sums up the mad, inverted Oxford world. While the rest of football bemoans players' lack of loyalty, Oxford's finances have suffered from Beauchamp's undying love for his home-town club. The club's only £1million-plus asset, he has refused two moves to Premiership clubs this season, saying he wishes to stay on and help. Now, Shotton's one player with the skills to worry Chelsea's increasingly composed defence is suspended for the game."

As the game progressed, however, Oxford seemed to be holding their own. Early in the second half Dean Windass turned in a Jamie Cook near-post corner for 1-0. Thereafter, Oxford were treated to a man of the match performance from freshman 'keeper Elliot Jackson. There were even chances to double the lead through Kevin Francis and Jamie Cook.

As the clock ticked into injury time, Oxford were on the verge of one of the greatest FA Cup upsets of all time. A final Chelsea corner was scrambled away, Kevin Francis lunged in to win the ball from Gianluca Vialli. Referee Mike Reid pointed to the spot, appearing to judge the challenge on Francis' ungainly style as replays showed he got the ball cleanly. Frank LeBeouf converted the penalty to earn a replay. It was a footballing blow, from a business perspective, it was a godsend.

Despite the injustices of the draw, the replay provided more cash to aid the survival. Some fans even asked Chelsea to donate their share of the gate to the club's plight. Shotton kept faith in the 11 that started the first game, meaning Beauchamp would only appear from the bench. Despite taking a surprise first half lead, we eventually slipped to a 4-2 defeat.

What was happening off the pitch was even more significant. The squad were gifted a stay at millionaire Firoz Kassam's central London hotel. With Beauchamp unable to find a deal to leave, only one option remained, the appearance of a rich benefactor, Kassam seemed to offer the club hope. By April, the takeover was complete, and the hands of fate released their grip from the club's throat. For the first time in a decade, it could breathe.

The centrepiece of Kassam's plan was to restart the stalled stadium project. On the pitch, he either didn't know what to do to revitalise the team or he didn't care. The blight on the squad was evident, and with Beauchamp digging his heels in, striker Dean Windass, who had compensated for Beauchamp's loss of goalscoring form, was sold to Bradford City, ironically Oxford's relegation was confirmed his new club on the penultimate weekend of the season.

A decent start to the following campaign raised hope of a quick return. After an encouraging 1<sup>st</sup> Leg 1-1 draw with Everton in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round of the Worthington Cup, Oxford headed to Goodison Park to register a shock 1-0 away win with Beauchamp scoring winner. Despite this, trouble was brewing behind the scenes. Malcolm Shotton's uncompromising and sometimes confrontational style was wearing thin among a number of players who knew the club need them more than they need the club. A run of five consecutive defeats at the end of October was enough for the new owner to fire his manager.

As the sun dawned on a new millennium, fans reflected on the decade that had just passed. It had been a time that saw us survive in the face of seemingly endless financial problems, no small part of that was down to Beauchamp who was voted Oxford United's player of the decade.

Having narrowly escaped relegation at the end of the 1999/2000 season, Firoz Kassam, leveraged the uncertainty of his on-off stadium project to offer his out of contract players a single year extension. Beauchamp wanted two years and despite interest from Reading, he eventually signed up to the club's inevitable fight against relegation.

The 2000/2001 season was catastrophic, the club were tossed from one embarrassment to another conceding 100 goals and ending up rock bottom of the division. Relegation was confirmed as early as March. Even Beauchamp's talismanic presence couldn't prevent the unmitigated disaster, it was like a tsunami even he couldn't hold back. Maybe it was a long time coming, perhaps the previous decade of near misses and struggle through adversity simply caught up with us.

The bruising debacle of the previous season was softened by the completion of the new stadium, the appointment of a new manager in Mark Wright and, it was hoped, a new dawn. For Beauchamp, a player who had resisted moves to bigger and more successful clubs in the hope that his own would soon be on the up, things began to go horribly wrong.

He missed the first game at the new stadium; the toe injury which put paid to his move to Nottingham Forest persisted and got worse, the back injury too was causing him trouble. He started the second game away at Swansea and then appeared as substitute for Phil Gray in the League Cup at home to Gillingham.

But the injury flared up again as a series of specialists battled to find the source of the problem. Later Beauchamp later admitted his style of play had caught up on him “Being so left-footed with all the twisting and turning had taken its toll and my toe was agony. I was having pain-killers and injections before, during and after games just to get me through.”

Mark Wright was quickly under pressure from a poor start to the season. He finally broke his silence, criticising Beauchamp and Paul Powell for their lack of commitment.

“It seemed like he had it in for me and Paul Powell from the word go,” Beauchamp said later “We were the local boys, who he maybe felt had it easy because all the fans loved us.”

But it was Beauchamp’s injury that Wright had the biggest problem with.

“My toe had been getting progressively worse over the years. It was so painful that I told him there was no chance I could play in one match and he came out in the paper on the Monday and slaughtered me.”

But the injury was real, and serious. Wright’s tenure was in trouble; he and his assistant Ted McMinn struggled to extract results from the new team. There hadn’t been time to cleanse the club of its previous year’s experiences, the new stadium didn’t feel like home and the squad struggled to gel. Already rocking, everything came to a head when Wright was fired after he was alleged to have racially abused referee Joe Ross in a home game against Scunthorpe. Firoz Kassam turned to Ian Atkins to revitalise the club. For Beauchamp, it felt like a reprieve.

“Everyone was saying to me that he (Atkins) couldn’t wait for me to get back which was a huge boost,” Beauchamp remembers.



Beauchamp didn't return until February. Despite being in increasing amounts of pain, he finally returned for the home game against Exeter City.

"I remember that I had trained – in pain – all week before the Exeter game. I had a fitness test on the morning of the game and the manager came over and asked me how I was. I was desperate to play and told him I was fine, even though it was really hurting me."

"But then it all went wrong."

The half-finished stadium, with its open end and gaps in the corner meant the wind blew in multiple directions at the same time. For the Exeter game, the weather was atrocious and the result seemed to rest on who could score the most goals with the wind behind their backs.

In the first half, Oxford, already a goal down, were battling the conditions as well as their opponents. Paul Powell crossed the ball towards Andy Scott, Exeter defender Steve Flack out muscled him in the air to head away. The ball hung in the wind and dropped on the edge of the box. Poised, watching it fall was Beauchamp who executed a trademark volley to fire home the equaliser.

The cross from the full-back, the knock down from the defender, and Beauchamp's crafted left foot, the goal was an almost perfect replay of his career defining moment against Blackpool six years earlier.

Poetically, and tragically, the goal and the game brought Beauchamp's career to a premature end. He was thirty-one and despite his defiant attempts to get fit and his odd appearance on the bench, the persistent toe injury just wouldn't heal. Eventually, doctors was told that he faced a terrible dilemma – have an operation to fix his toe, but risk stress fractures that would put him out for longer. With his

lucrative contract coming to an end at the end of the season, the player who for over a decade had been the club's greatest asset, had become its greatest liability.

The end was unceremonious and undignified, Kassam cancelled Beauchamp's contract. Beauchamp took the club to court arguing that he was due an automatic extension because the stadium had been completed. In the end the parties settled out of court, and while there was talk of a testimonial, it took 9 years to materialise.

Living in a modest house within walking distance of the old Manor Ground Beauchamp's faced up to the realities of his post-football career. He played for Abingdon Town and made occasional appearances in the Oxford Mail playing Aunt Sally, that most Oxfordshire of games. It's on the dog track that Beauchamp felt most at home as owner and professional gambler. Years earlier he'd talked about his passion for greyhounds and gambling – he owned two dogs Nashua Dream and Dona Madina and was on Ladbrokes' hit list due to his winnings

But, Beauchamp's story is a classic of 90s football; prior to the Premier League years, football had never been a career that would set you up for life. Footballers ran pubs or car dealerships after their playing days ended. Suddenly, players were making big money that afforded you a luxurious life. The things was, when ordinary life caught up, the bills continue to roll in. The money quickly ebbed away and the pressures of life build. Players who are idolised become ordinary; the struggle emotionally, financially and socially becomes very real.

Everything came to a head in 2009, Beauchamp was arrested after being caught drink driving in Cuttleslowe, he was three times over the alcohol limit.

In mitigation, Beauchamp told the court his life had started to fall apart after football. He was on anti-depressants and drinking heavily. Ingloriously, the final straw was a fall out over an MFI kitchen.

For a while gambling had replaced the buzz football as his career, Beauchamp claimed he earned £200k a year. But he couldn't sustain it and was now unemployed and disabled from his toe injury. There also were pressures at home as his daughter had an untreatable eye condition. He was disqualified from driving for two years and given a six-month community order.

Six months later, Beauchamp gave an interview to the Oxford Mail in which he admitted that he had felt suicidal.

“I was getting up in the morning, going to the pub and drinking all day, every day, I was taking every sort of tablet you could imagine.”

The conviction saved him, refocussed his life; after seeing a therapist, he began to emerge from the tunnel.

In the intervening years, Beauchamp's life seems to have settled. When Firoz Kassam finally sold Oxford in 2006, it helped heal a rift between the club and one of its greatest players. In 2011, Beauchamp finally got the testimonial he deserved joining Dave Langan and a host of old favourites. He became a frequent visitor to The Kassam as guest of honour as he settled into life as an ex-legend and a normal person. In 2019, manager Karl Robinson invited him to train with current first team squad in order to illustrate the impact the club has on its fans; Beauchamp was the embodiment of the club.

In so many ways Beauchamp was everything you wanted from a player; homegrown, a genuine fan and prodigiously talented. He was belligerent and

headstrong, sometimes to his detriment, but he was also fragile and vulnerable. He remains the butt of many jokes about 90s football, but for those who stood on the London Road, Osler Road or Beech Road and watched a local boy mesmerise and terrify defences he will always be one of the greats.