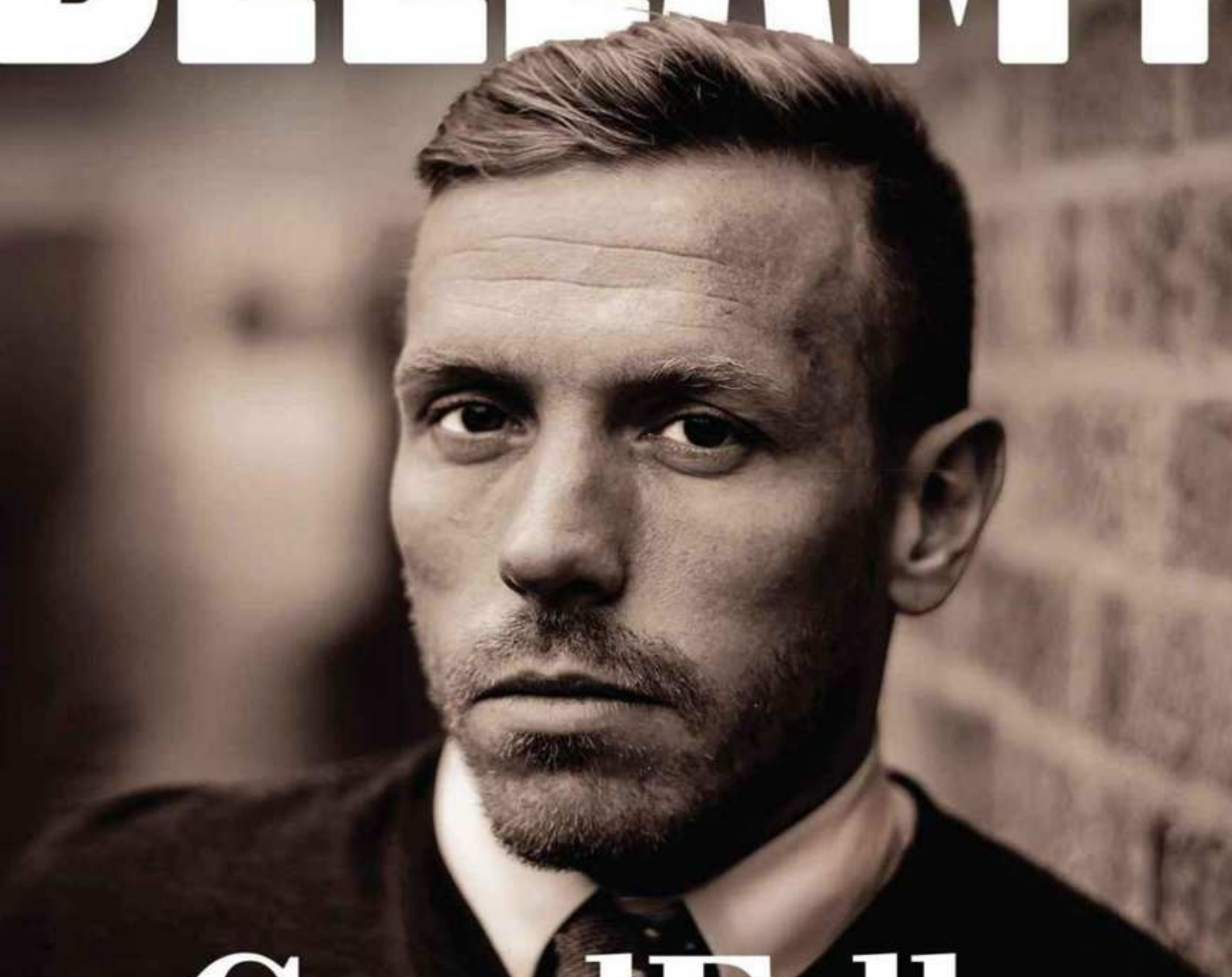


BELLAMY

C R A I G



GoodFella

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

FOREWORDS BY STEVEN GERRARD & MARK HUGHES

C R A I G
BELLAMY
GoodFella
M Y A U T O B I O G R A P H Y

Sport Media 



By Craig Bellamy with Oliver Holt

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My mum and dad have always loved and supported me and I'm so grateful for the fact that we are as close again now as we ever were.

My brothers Paul and Matthew are two good men who I'm proud to call my family.

Sometimes divorce obliterates the good memories but my ex-wife Claire and I shared some happy times in our years together before we grew apart and went our separate ways.

I'd like to thank every manager that has had to put up with me. They have all left a mark on me. I didn't really want to mention any of them individually but after this season with Cardiff, I have to state my gratitude to Malky Mackay. He's been tremendous.

I could not have asked for a better agent than Steve Horner. His advice has been fantastic. I might not have listened to him all the time but I should have. I wouldn't have got into as much trouble.

Phil Baker, my business adviser, has been a good source of advice, too, as well as a mate. And my PA, Suzanne Twamley, has been a true friend who has been watching me play football since I was eight.

Dr Steve Peters has had a huge impact on me and still does now. He has shown me what happiness is.

I am not the easiest person to work with when I'm recovering from injury so I'd like to thank all the physios down the years who have allowed me to keep playing. I would like to single out Andy Williams, the knee surgeon, as well. A huge thank you to him.

Not many people know Kieron Dyer properly but I am grateful for the fact that I do. He's a very intelligent man and my best friend in football.

I owe a lot to Dato Chan Tien Ghee, better known as TG, the former Cardiff City chairman. His determination to get me to come to Cardiff never waned and his passion was amazing. He had many kind words for me in tough times.

In the moments after we won promotion, I was lucky to be able to share some of the joy with the Cardiff City doctor, Professor Len Nokes. I can't think of anyone I would rather have been with right

then.

I want to mention James Reardon, better known as Jimmy Ray, a great friend of mine who died too soon.

I want to mention all the clubs I have played for, all the people who work for those clubs, all the fans who support those clubs.

And, of course, I want to mention Gary Speed. The impact he had on my career while he was here was incredibly important. In a strange way, his influence on me since his death has probably become even greater.

Craig Bellamy, 2011

*For Nana Mary.
Not a day goes by when
I don't think of you.*

Foreword

by Steven Gerrard

When I first heard that Craig Bellamy was joining Liverpool in the summer of 2006, I thought that, as captain of the club, I might have a challenge on my hands.

I had played against him, had a few spats and arguments and words. I was expecting a bit of a hothead. I was expecting someone who was more interested in being a footballer rather than actually living like one.

I was totally wrong. It was my fault. I was guilty of judging someone before I had met him. And when he arrived, he was the opposite of what I thought he would be.

Nothing surprised me on the pitch because I had seen him with my own eyes. I knew he was a good player and I knew he would offer us a lot.

But his character surprised me. It surprised me how professional he was. It surprised me how much he loved the game.

He is a bit similar to me in a way. He has got certain small insecurities. If he doesn't train well or play well, it hurts him. And if he loses, it hurts him. But I think they're great insecurities to have as a player because they help you to find consistency and they help drive you to the top. But you wouldn't think that of Craig if you hadn't met him. You'd think he'd be a person who doesn't care. Well, he isn't.

On the pitch, he is one of those players that you would rather have with you than against you. Everyone knows what he can do. On his day, he can destroy any defender out there because of his pace. When you are playing against a side he is in, every manager is wary of Craig Bellamy. It's his character, too, the way he never gives up, the way he never stops harrying you and hassling you.

He played for Liverpool in two different spells, of course. The first time he came, when Rafa Benitez was the manager, I was disappointed he did not stay longer than a single season. I thought that, if he had stayed, he would have offered us more and more. I felt we would have been a better team with him in it and when he left, we didn't really find anyone of his quality to replace him.

I wanted him to stay. He was a player with real quality and that is one of the reasons the club brought him back. After his second spell at Anfield in 2011-12, I understood why he wanted to go and

play for Cardiff City and to be closer to his children. I know that he is a Liverpool fan but he loves his hometown club, too. I think he has got the same love for Cardiff that I have for this club.

I think what people will admire about this book is that there will be an honesty about it because there is an honesty about him. A lot of footballers say the politically correct thing. They want to be liked too much. Sometimes, you have to say what you really think and be honest and I respect Craig's honesty.

When you are a footballer, people say you have to respect the media but he hasn't done that really. Rather than saying the nice thing over and over again, he has said what he thinks and sometimes that upsets people.

At Liverpool, he worked incredibly hard in the gym and set a good example of how a senior player should behave. If he saw anything around the place that suggested people weren't pushing in the right direction, he would help you as a captain and back you up. He wanted the right thing for this club.

He ended up being a terrific ally for me at Liverpool, as well as becoming a good friend.

Steven Gerrard, 2011

Foreword

by Mark Hughes

If I had to pick out one reason why I always loved having Craig Bellamy in my football teams, it is the intensity he brings. It's his desire to affect the game every single time he plays. He has a strong will and I like that about him.

Some people thought he was trouble without ever really getting to know him. Some of the things he does can be misinterpreted and maybe there were some who did not like his intensity. Maybe some of them were unsettled by it or worried about the reputation he earned in his younger days.

Sure, there were numerous occasions when he played for me for Wales, Blackburn Rovers and Manchester City when he looked like he was going to combust on the pitch. I didn't have any dramatic remedy for that. There was no particular secret. I just gave him a smile and a knowing look and he tended to calm down fairly quickly.

He was always a great asset to me. He is the type of player the fans love because they know he is giving it everything he has. He inspires players around him, too.

It has never really occurred to me that he is difficult to manage. I actually always found him very rewarding to manage. If you understand him and support him, he will play his heart out for you.

I played with him for Wales when he was younger and, yes, he could be quite volatile but a lot of people have also been surprised by how professional he is.

Like most of us, he has changed as he has grown older. He had some injuries and the fear of losing a career that was precious to him turned him into someone who is utterly dedicated to the game.

He doesn't take any prisoners. He says it as he sees it. He is honest and up front and he expects people to be the same with him.

He has got a lot of strengths. Diplomacy isn't one of them.

Mark Hughes, 2011

The Human Snarl

I don't know what you see when you look at me. A human snarl, maybe. That's pretty much been my image for the last 15 years. A snarling, snapping, hungry, feral player who loathed himself and everyone around him. Someone who was unhappy. Someone who had a lot of things eating him. Someone always moving on. Always falling out with people. Always running.

I have always been restless. That's true. Restless in my personal life and in football. In my own world, maybe I feel I deserve more respect than I get as a player so I am always chasing it as aggressively as I can. And if I don't get it in one place, from a manager or from a crowd, I search for it in another place.

Steven Gerrard says I am driven by my insecurities. He's right. I'm always looking for a chance to show people how good I am. I went through much of my career without winning anything. So I started to chase trophies. I went to clubs where I thought I would win medals. When I failed, I moved on. I wanted something to show for my career. If I didn't win medals and trophies, my career was just a big waste. I was convinced of that. The fear of failure was one of the reasons I kept on moving.

That changed in November 2011 when my friend Gary Speed died. I was playing for Liverpool then and the club doctor, Zaf Iqbal, said he was worried about my mental state. He said he thought I needed help. He recommended that I went to see Steve Peters, the psychiatrist who is probably most famous for working with Britain's gold medal cyclists Sir Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton.

I had always refused to see a psychiatrist before. You may not be surprised to know it had been suggested to me several times. And there were excellent practitioners available at several of the clubs I played for. But I thought it was weak to seek that kind of help. I thought I was doing okay. I was a good footballer. I didn't want to talk to anyone in case it opened up a mess of issues that would affect my game. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That was what I thought. But it clearly was broken. I was broken. I was just in denial about it.

As a young kid, I was happy. I grew up on an estate on the outskirts of Cardiff. I had loving parents and a group of close mates, many of whom spiralled off into delinquency and drugs. I loved football and played every minute I could. I was a daydreamer, yeah, and I didn't achieve much at school. But I was happy. And then I had to move away when I was 15.

I moved to the other side of Britain, to Norwich, to play football, to pursue my dream. It sounds melodramatic but it killed a part of me. It taught me to isolate myself, to be single-minded, to be selfish, to exclude others, to keep everything inside. I learned to be emotionally detached. I grew distant from my mum and a lot of people who were close to me.

The more I rung home back then, the more I missed home. Nothing makes it better. In fact everything seems to make it worse. You ring home, you get upset, your parents get upset because they can tell how unhappy you are and they can't do anything about it. And then you start feeling guilty because you're upsetting them. And before you know it, you're in a phone booth outside a fish and chip shop in Norwich crying your eyes out.

That's what it was like for me. That's what it was like for a year. A year of homesickness that hurt like hell. A year of trying to conceal my feelings. A year of trying to cope with everything that was being thrown at me as a young footballer trying to make it with hard taskmasters for coaches and senior professionals that enjoyed treating you like shit. Sounds like self-pity, doesn't it? Well, I was the master of self-pity.

I spent most weekends on my own. I played a match on Saturday morning, watched the Norwich first team play in the afternoon. Then I'd stick around, clean up all the kit, watch the players and study their happiness in victory or the raw pain of defeat. Then it was the long walk home to my digs at The Limes, half an hour in the dark. Sit in my room for a while on my own. Then go to the chip shop. And the phone box.

I had a girlfriend by then. Claire and I got together before I left Cardiff. In time, we had three beautiful children together. We got married in the end. And we stayed married until 2012 when she decided she'd had enough. Enough of the moving and the following me round. Enough of the absentee husband. Enough of the selfishness and the black moods and the times when I wouldn't talk to her because I was worried about a knee injury.

So we got divorced and it nearly tore me apart. I have had months of guilt about not being the husband I should have been. And not being the father I should have been, either. For a while, I didn't think about the lifestyle I had been able to give Claire and my three children, the life I have been able to give my kids who mean more to me than anything in the world. The pride in what I have been able to provide, the pride in some of the sacrifices I made, has come back now.

I caused the breakdown of my marriage. Not football. It's about more than football. I suppose that is controversial because people will say that no two people are the same but I feel that high-profile sportsmen and sportswomen are different. We're wired differently. We're not the same as other people. The same goes for a lot of other people who are very successful at what they do.

Why? Because we have to sacrifice so much. And some people can cope with that and maintain a happy family life. And some people can't. I had no experience of being around people who were doing something similar. There were no people in my area who were following that path. I had to learn for

myself. I never asked for advice and saw how they behaved.

The way I saw it, my life would begin when I was 35. When I finish football, my life starts. That's how I looked at it. Until then, nothing matters. It's the game and that's it. I want to be as successful as I can. I want to earn as much money as I can for my children. And then I can sit back and relax.

The thing is, you have to enjoy what you are doing at the time as well. Otherwise you're just punishing yourself. The sacrifice is too great. I didn't understand that. Not until it was too late. Too late for my marriage anyway. I missed out on years and years of fun. I didn't enjoy it. Not even close. I didn't enjoy my career. If a team-mate made a mistake, I might not speak to him for a week. It was bullshit.

If I did something good in a game, I'd just tell you about all the bad things I did instead. That's what kept me up at night. And I thought keeping myself up at night was improving me. If I woke up at 3am, thinking about something I didn't do, that's what made me a better player. If I wasn't doing that, I thought I was taking my eye off the game. If there was a game on television on Friday night and I didn't watch it, I thought I was showing football a lack of respect and I would pay for it on Saturday. That's how crazy I was.

I wouldn't leave the house two or three days before a game because I wanted to save my legs. If I didn't save my legs, I thought I would pay for it on Saturday. If I won on a Saturday, I would wake up at the same time the next Saturday, leave the house at the same time, drive the same route to the game, wear the same suit. If I was forced to do something differently, I was convinced I was going to lose. I was borderline insane.

So, yes, I was difficult to live with. I worked away a lot. I was apart from my wife and family for long periods. Several years ago, they moved back to Cardiff to give my children a stable base for school and I commuted from London or Liverpool or Manchester or wherever I was playing to see them. It's hard to have a successful relationship when you're living like that.

Being away from my kids on a daily basis made me very unhappy so why the hell was I doing it? Why did I put myself in that situation? I felt that when I came home, it wasn't my home. I felt guilty for not being around the children so I tried to make up as much time as I could with them in the short while I had. But I also had a young wife who wanted my time and affection and I couldn't do it all at once and the next thing I am back up the road.

That was part of the reason I became the human snarl. I was unhappy and if I was going to be unhappy, I wanted to make damn sure everyone knew I was unhappy and that they were unhappy, too.

It took the death of Gary Speed for me to step back and find happiness within myself. It wasn't my wife's fault that I had been unhappy. It wasn't a club's fault or a manager's fault. It wasn't because I had had an argument with Graeme Souness or Roberto Mancini. I was stopping myself from being happy. I'd been doing it since I left Cardiff at the age of 15.

If I had not got help, if I had not begun talking to Steve Peters, I was facing a dark, empty future.

Gary Speed's death, the fact that he apparently took his own life, shook me to the core. It scared me.

There are a lot of similarities between me and Speedo.

I understand myself a lot better now, I think. I have been able to cope with the separation and divorce from my wife. I still find it very hard not being able to see my children when I want to but I am coping. I am not sure how I would have dealt with it if it had happened a few years ago.

It's not always been pretty but I am a better man for having been involved in football. It's taken me to different countries. It's put me in a position where I have been able to found a football academy in Sierra Leone and try to help people make a better life for themselves through the game. Maybe one day, people will be able to see beyond the snarl.

There was a time when I thought that when I retired from playing, I would have a period away from the game but I know now that I can't be without football. I would miss it too much. If anyone else comes into my life, they have to be prepared to share me with football. It doesn't drive me mad any more but it still consumes me. Any job can make you unhappy if you let it. Finally, just in time, I've come to understand that if I love football this much, why not just enjoy it.

And I am enjoying it. I'm enjoying it more than I've enjoyed it at any time since I was a little kid dashing around on ABC Park in Trowbridge with my mates. I'm enjoying it more than I've ever enjoyed it. It's the greatest game in the world but it's nothing more than that. Apart from my children, it's been the best thing in my life. I wake up every morning and I can't wait to go to training. I feel grateful for that.

Craig Bellamy, 2011

Where I Belong

My home is Cardiff. More specifically, my home is Trowbridge, on the eastern edge of the city, on a 1960s estate near the Eastern Avenue, the dual carriageway that cuts a swath through the suburbs on its way out to the M4. I live in Penarth at the moment, on the south side of the city, in an apartment that looks out over the sea. I'm recently divorced. I'm exiled from the house I once lived in with my wife and children in the countryside to the west.

But I'll always think of Trowbridge as home, the 1960s estate, with its streets named after Welsh towns and areas. Abergele Road, Caernarvon Way, Prestatyn Road, Aberdaron Road, Menai Way.

They're the names of my childhood, the names of the streets and crescents I used to dash along to get to ABC Park, where I'd play football with my mates.

Along those streets I'd sprint, through the little alleyways where knots of youths used to gather to smoke dope or sniff glue or try to get high from air fresheners. I'd join them in time, watching and shuffling around uneasily, trying to be part of the group.

I suppose some people would think of it as a rough area, a place of unemployment and delinquency. It never seemed that way to me. I had a happy childhood. I grew up a happy kid. Happier there than I ever have been since, happier than when I was a footballer living behind gates and walls and fancy intercom systems with built-in cameras.

When I was a small kid, we lived in Swinton Street, by Splott, close to the docks, closer to the city than Trowbridge was. The railway tracks were at one end of our road and trains trundled past there heading out of Cardiff Central east towards England and London. At the other end was Splott Park and behind that was the giant spread of Allied Steel and Wire where my old man worked. They closed down in 2002. It was sold on to a Spanish company. Its great blue bulk still dominates that part of the area, but most of the jobs went.

There was a time in Splott when you could see the flames and the sparks dancing in the night from the famous old Dowlais ironworks and women worried about putting their washing out on the line because it would get covered in a film of fine red dust. Cardiff used to be an ironworks and steel town but the industry was dying when I was a kid. In 1978, the year before I was born, thousands of jobs were lost when the East Moors Steelworks closed down.

But there was a great sense of community. Originally, people had been transported there from the Valleys to work in the factories and it was still a traditional working class area where it felt like every door was open. If my mum ever shut herself out by mistake, she'd knock next door and the neighbour would send her kid round through our back garden, through our back door and he'd open up for us the front.

I always felt like we had a decent living from what my mum and dad did. We were happy enough. My mum was a cleaner and my world was all about playing in the warren of streets round our house. Baden Powell School, Splott Park and Splott Baths. My dad, Douglas, worked at Allied Steel and Wire for as long as I can remember even though we moved away from Splott, a few miles further east to Trowbridge, when I was five.

My dad knew his place in the family. My mum was the number one and she ran the house. They were great parents and even though I was a bit of a daydreamer, I was a happy kid. I knew my mum loved me and we were a happy family. A lot of the men in the area would spend all evening, every evening, down the pub but my dad knew that if he went up there, there was a certain time he had to be back and he was back at that time. He abided by that.

My mum and dad still live in Trowbridge. They live in the same house they lived in when I was growing up. In times of trouble or uncertainty, that's where I've always returned. I see now that it was called one of the most deprived areas in south Wales when I was growing up but I never thought of it like that.

We had a bigger house in Trowbridge than we'd had in Splott, the roads weren't as busy and I began to play an awful lot of football. My dad loved football.

He used to go and watch Cardiff City as much as he could. He had three kids – me and my brother Paul and Matthew – so I'm not sure my mum allowed him to go that much but he would come home talking about players like Jimmy Gilligan and Paul Wimbleton, the mainstays of that team that played in the old Fourth Division.

My first game was Cardiff City against Newport County in the 1987-88 season. It was 4-0 Cardiff. Gilligan got two and Alan Curtis got two. Cardiff got promoted that year and they were great days even though there were rumours practically every week that we were close to going out of business.

I hear people now talk about fans 'deserving' something at clubs for the bad times they might have endured. In that era, Cardiff supporters turned up and watched a poor standard of football week in week out in dilapidated, decaying stadiums.

You could stand where you wanted and I flitted around so much at one game that I realised afterwards I'd watched from all four stands. When it got to five minutes from the end, I'd go and meet up with my dad at a pre-arranged spot so we could go home together.

I'm not sure whether my own love of football followed on from my dad's. Maybe. Or maybe I was

just a naturally competitive kid. My brother, Paul, was two years older than me and I hung out with a lot of his friends. That made me into a better player very quickly. We used to play down the field at the bottom of my road. It was called the ABC Park and we played there constantly.

It was a bit of a higgledy-piggledy park, shoehorned between the rows of houses on the estate. It sloped quite heavily from north to south. I'm not even sure why it was called ABC Park. I think it was because there were some climbing frames there and they had been labelled A, B and C to differentiate them from each other.

There were no goalposts and there were so many kids playing that, most of the time, you couldn't find a spare patch of grass. They've built a BMX track there now. I see articles about it in the Western Mail sometimes. The last one was about the fact that the council had had to put security guards there because gangs of kids were congregating and throwing stones at local houses. There's graffiti sprayed on the garden fences that back on to it.

I played my first match for my school, Trowbridge Juniors, when I was seven. My dad was surprised when he found out I'd been selected. Most of the kids in the team were a couple of years older than me and I was small for my age, too. I was skinny and under-developed but I was quick and clever and I was always desperate to win. My dad was still dubious about it but Paul told him how good I was, so he came to watch.

We played against Gladstone Primary School from Cathays and I won a penalty when a kid tripped me in the box. Whoever got brought down for the pen usually took the spot-kick. Those were the rules in park football, anyway, so I thought it was mine. But this was serious stuff. They told me there was a regular penalty taker and it was my mate Stuart Solomon. The Gladstone goalkeeper had glasses. I thought we couldn't miss but those specs were working wonders for him and he saved it. We drew the game and went away feeling very deflated.

I soon got other opportunities to play. When we had our kickabouts down at ABC Park, a scout from Pentwyn Dynamos would turn up sometimes. We were miles away from Pentwyn, on the other side of the Eastern Avenue, so they must have been pretty desperate but they still wouldn't consider me because I was too small. So my dad told me that if I got enough players together, he would help me start a team.

I went around loads of kids' houses, knocking on doors. My dad found someone who ran a team called Caer Castell, near Rumney High School, and I had soon found enough kids for us to start an Under-10s side there. Our first game, inevitably, was against Pentwyn Dynamos. We played at Rumney Recreation Ground and won 4-0 and I scored all four. That was the start for me. I played on Saturdays for the school team and on Sundays for Caer Castell and when I was nine or ten, I was selected for the Cardiff and District boys side. I played for Cardiff Schools, too. One cup game over two legs, we played against Deeside Schools and Michael Owen was playing for the opposition.

I became a good player just by playing. By playing constantly and by playing with kids who were

both older and better than me. I saw tricks other kids did and I had the ability to absorb what had just happened. I'd try to imitate it myself and then I'd practise what they had done. Then I'd try that trick on another kid.

I still do that now. I never stop learning. I could see a 19-year-old kid do something today and I try it tomorrow in training. I think that's given me an edge sometimes, that ability to innovate. My biggest concern with most young kids now is that they don't have that edge to want to be better than their mate. You don't see kids on the parks now, not the way it used to be anyway, and when they're attached to clubs, I think they're comfortable in their own zone. Football takes such good care of you now at every age group that some of the hunger's gone.

I wanted to be the best against everyone. Mainly, when we were kicking about, we used to play something we called FA Cup Doubles or Singles. I'd be distraught if I didn't win it. If we had an eight v eight game, I had to win that eight v eight. That was when I got the most pure enjoyment out of football, better than any time I've been playing as a professional.

There are a lot of kids I haven't spoken to since then whose names I still know off by heart. I hope they've gained some satisfaction from what I have been able to achieve because I certainly appreciated what they gave me. Even some kids who might not have thought they were any good, learned something from them just by the fact they were enthusiastic enough to come out and play every day. Playing against them every day improved me as a player.

There was one kid I remember in particular. His name was Andrew Evans. He was four or five years older than me and when I was eight or nine years old, I thought he was a kind of football god. We used to play in informal matches on Tesco's Fields, which was an expanse of pitches a couple of miles from my house, and Evvo played in this brilliant blue Everton strip with white shorts. He had tricks. He could do body swerves, he had everything. Whenever I tried to tackle him, I couldn't get anywhere near him.

He could have been somebody. He really could. There are kids like him in a lot of communities, kids that have got a raw talent that makes them stand out when they are young. But, like a lot of those players, Evvo just didn't have the commitment you needed to make it. He was such a good player but he was totally relaxed about it. Too relaxed.

A lot of people tried their hardest with him. One of the coaches used to go round to his house just to get him to matches and now and then Evvo would say he didn't fancy it. He'd say he was staying in bed. One day, when I was 11 and he was 15 or 16 and still in school, he told me he was going to be a dad. I asked him whether he wanted a boy or a girl but most of all I wondered how the kid was going to grow up and how Evvo was going to provide for it.

It hit me a bit, that. He was still a hero of mine and he was a hero round the area because he was such a good footballer. He went to play men's football when he was 15 or 16 and he was scoring five or six every game. But he was never going to go anywhere because he didn't want to. He was never

going to push himself through it. Seeing the way he drifted out of the game helped me because I knew what I had to do.

It made me realise that it wasn't enough just to be supremely gifted. It made me realise, even as a kid growing up on an estate, surrounded by normal kids who just wanted to have a laugh, that I was going to have to live a different kind of life if I was going to have any chance of making it. I was going to have to be separate. There would be loneliness and I realised that, too, but I wanted to be a footballer so badly that it didn't deter me.

Evvo drifted into doing what most boys drift into. He had the ability to be special but only I know his name now. The only time he has ever been mentioned in the newspapers is when I have mentioned his name in an interview.

I find that sad, really, because people should have known his name, all around the world. He had the talent but he did not have the strength. Every area in every city in Britain has got people like that.

Choices

I began to live a kind of double life. I was football mad, devoted to it, determined to succeed. And then there was my life on the estate, trying to fit in, trying to be a normal kid, trying to be part of the gang. Suddenly I was at Rumney High School and there were kids from St Mellons, Rumney, Harris Avenue and Llanrumney and it was a melting pot. I wanted to look right. I wanted to make sure I had nice trainers. There were girls, loads of girls. I saw a lot of kids grow up quickly.

Around that time, a guy called Stan Montgomery, who had played for Cardiff and been first team coach at Norwich City, scouted me for Bristol Rovers. I was training with Cardiff at Trelais School but then but the facilities were beyond poor and so when Stan approached my dad and we realised I would be given kit at Rovers and the coaching would be better, we went for it. It was about an hour's drive but I didn't mind. It was just another place to go and play football.

I did well there and word got around. One night, the phone went at home and my dad answered and I heard him talking for a while. He came back into the room and said that it had been someone from Norwich City. They wanted me to go and play in a game in Somerset. It was like a trial, I suppose. I went, I played well and then they asked me to go and play for them in a tournament in Denmark called the Dana Cup.

I'd never heard of it. My horizons were not exactly wide at that time. But it is one of the world's largest football tournaments and it takes place at the end of July every year in the town of Hjørring, a long way up in the north of Denmark, about 300 miles from Copenhagen. It felt like a massive jamboree when I got there. There were thousands of kids from all over the world. I had never experienced anything remotely like it.

I'd been on the odd holiday with my parents. We'd been to Benidorm and Corfu but this was way outside my comfort zone. It was challenging enough just travelling with a football club. All the other kids were from places like Colchester and

Ipswich and there was me, fresh out of Cardiff, a long way away from home.

The people at Norwich could not have made me feel more welcome. Perhaps it was partly because I was a good player. That always helps when it comes to being accepted as a kid. I felt, even in their company, even at that age, that I stood out straight away. I played well in Denmark. I really enjoyed

and a month later, I started training with Norwich's young development team, which was called Canary Rangers. I trained with them for a week and had a great week. I did well again and from then on, all my football development was with them.

That was when my double life started in earnest. I would head off from Cardiff to Norwich or to a tournament somewhere abroad. We slept in dormitories or camper beds. Training was brilliant, the facilities were brilliant and I started to learn about what it meant to be a professional footballer.

I learned a bit more about life, too. Norwich started to educate me about pleases and thank yous. I'm not saying that my parents didn't but Norwich really did develop a professionalism in me that I managed to keep. We had a youth coach called Kit Carson, who was a big influence on me. He wanted us to keep the ball at all costs so I was brought up to pass the football, to play one-twos, not to hit it long but to be patient, to pass it across the back four. Kit Carson just stood there quietly, watching us play, never saying a word. Parents weren't allowed to come and watch training or come to the games. We were allowed to swear and, as long as we were responsible and respectful, we were treated with that kind of respect from Kit Carson as well.

That was one half of my life but at home, I was still hanging around with kids who were two or three years older than me. We used to meet at the Trowbridge shops: me, Anthony, Gareth, Stuart, another Anthony, my brother, Paul, and Omar and Mohammed. Omar and Mohammed were new. They were refugees from Iraq and from day one, they could look after themselves. Omar was a hard bastard. Fearless. They were good kids to grow up with. There was a gang of 13 or 14 of us and we used to meet up at the shops down the end of my street and then wander into school.

By the time I was 12, my mates who were 14 or 15 weren't really interested in playing football in the park any more. They were doing stuff that was a little bit out of my league. Girls were being chased and I was getting roped into that. I mean, I was an immature kid. I was small. I didn't mature like most boys. I was a late developer. I found that tough.

So I was playing for Norwich, then going back to Cardiff and hanging round with kids who were drinking and smoking. It seemed the coolest thing to do at the time and I felt pressure to be a part of it. I started having a few drinks when I was 12. The odd bottle of cider, a beer here and there. I stayed away from cigarettes because my old man told me it would make me slow and I would lose my pace. I didn't want that.

After being introduced to alcohol, I drank fairly regularly. Maybe it was another way of chasing girls. It gave me a bit of Dutch courage. I felt I had to do it, which was a weakness in me. All my friends were doing it and although I knew it wasn't right, I didn't want to be on my own.

So I would go off and drink with my mates. My parents caught me a few times and I can't imagine what was going through their heads. Then, I saw other kids smoking cannabis and on other drugs. Glamorgan was frequent around the area. At first, I viewed those people as down and outs. But I started seeing people who were close to me smoking cannabis and doing air fresheners and it started to seem normal.

Glade, the air-freshener that was sold in those tall, thin canisters, was a big thing round our way. You put a sleeve over the nozzle at the top and pumped it and sucked through it. Apparently, you got a ridiculous head rush for five or ten seconds and then you did it again.

Being left on my own was too hard to contemplate at that age. Some of them were trying to lead me down a particular behavioural route because maybe they didn't want me to have success. They knew about my other life in football and the chance I had. Others could see that I was risking everything just by hanging around with them. Some of them would say 'Bellers, no chance, don't do it'. They wanted to protect me.

Perhaps inevitably, some of my mates started getting into trouble. If they were buying £15 worth of cannabis, well, they had to get £15. A lot of the people who sold it let them buy it on tick. They would give you a deadline and you had to have the £15 in four days or a week.

If you're a kid, you don't have the discipline to save up. So you have to find another way to get the money. They turned to crime. The main target was car stereos, the pull-out ones. It was like a dream if you found a car with one of them. People were looking for pull-outs like you wouldn't believe. It was an easy way out. It would be a window, an elbow through it and 'bang!' You could sell that pull-out for £25. If it was a Panasonic, brilliant. If it was anything else, a different make, you could still get a few quid.

I used to hang out with mates who did that. Generally, it was more about me going along and watching them do it. I would keep an eye out for them while they were stealing from the cars. I never physically stole anything myself but I know that's no excuse. Helping out is just as bad as stealing.

There was a period when I was 13 or so when I was skiving off school quite a lot. Once, I went missing for two weeks. How can you go missing for two weeks as a 13-year-old kid without anybody from school ringing up? But they didn't.

The only reason I got found out was because another lad got caught. His mum was dragging him up to school and she made him grass me up to the head teacher.

Because a lot of my friends were a couple of years older, a lot of them just stopped going to school. One or two of the boys in my class got expelled. A mate called Bingham was expelled for abusive behaviour. He wasn't that kind of kid but when he got up to read in class and the other kids started sniggering, he would feel so embarrassed that he would shout at the teacher. He went to another school and got expelled again. And his parents wouldn't allow him to go to a special school, so he was 13 and not going to school at all.

Bingham was one of my best friends. His dad left for work about 7am and his mum left at ten past nine. I'd wait for her to leave and then I'd go in and wake him up and spend the morning at his house until his mum came back at lunchtime. And then I only had a few hours to kill before I could go back to my house, pretending everything was normal.

There'd be a few of us round Bingham's house every morning. I kind of liked that excitement

being somewhere you shouldn't be. It would be wrong to say I wasn't concerned about my parents finding out but I also knew it wouldn't be the biggest thing in the world. I think my parents wanted me to learn but in the back of their minds they thought I was going to make it as a footballer with Norwich so they weren't quite as bothered.

They were right about Norwich, too. I began playing for the club's schoolboy team and when I was about to sign schoolboy forms, a couple of other clubs tried to tempt me and my family away. Leeds United offered my parents £10,000 for me to go to sign with them and Norwich fought them off by guaranteeing me a two-year YTS apprenticeship when I was old enough to take it up.

We took that like a shot but it was one of the worst things Norwich could have done for me. My life after school was sorted now, so what did I need to go to school for? That was my attitude. My friends weren't going, so why should I go? My parents would have come down hard on me for not being in school but as long as they weren't confronted with it, they turned a blind eye. They didn't chase it up and the school didn't ask them about it either.

When I started playing for the Norwich schoolboy teams, I would get the 4.25pm train from Cardiff Central to London Paddington on Saturday afternoon. I'd get the Tube from Paddington to Liverpool Street and another train from Liverpool Street to Norwich, which got me in at 9.10pm. I'd play for Norwich's schoolboy team on Sunday morning, then get a train back to Cardiff. My dad would come and pick me up.

Usually, I brought a bonus home with me. We used to get expenses and the older lads played the same system. They'd claim £100 for their fare, whatever it actually was, and they would have killed me if I'd only put in for the £25 it cost me for the Cardiff-Norwich return. So I claimed the same as them and when I arrived home in Cardiff, I'd give my mum and dad the £25 and keep the rest for myself.

On a Monday, I'd often be walking into school with £75 in my pocket. That's if I went into school which I usually didn't. I had begun to feel I could do whatever I wanted and pay for whoever wanted to come with me, too. So I'd spend the money on booze or have an entire day at an amusement arcade somewhere. Or if I liked a pair of trainers, I could get a pair of trainers. Or I could buy some cigarettes. I could do whatever I wanted and I usually did.

I learned absolutely nothing at school. That was my fault most of all but there was a lack of enthusiasm from the teachers, too. They seemed weary. They seemed to have given up. Before every lesson, the teacher would say 'if you don't want to learn, go and sit at the back of the class and don't interrupt the kids who do want to learn'. I was a kid who knew he was going to be a footballer and thought he knew it all. I would go and sit at the back, daydream and kill a couple of hours. I deeply regret that. I wish I had knuckled down and picked up as much as I could but I lived another life.

I was soon drinking and smoking cigarettes every day, ignoring my dad's warning. My football started to go downhill and because of the lifestyle I was leading, I wasn't maturing like other kids who were getting bigger and stronger. By the time I was 14, I was drinking more and more. I'd started

off on cider and moved on to cheap lager. There was no way I looked 18 but it was all easy enough to get hold of round our way. If there was a lad walking past the off-licence, we'd ask him to buy the drink for us. Usually, they'd do it if you gave them a box of matches or a packet of Rizlas. It couldn't have been simpler really.

Drinking was taking a bigger and bigger toll on my football. During the Christmas holidays at the end of 1993, there was a residential week in Norwich that was used to decide which of the kids in the schoolboy team would be signed up to apprenticeships. My place was already guaranteed but it was made clear to me that week that the Norwich coaches felt I was going backwards.

I was playing for Wales Schoolboys, too, and things weren't going well there, either. We barely won a game. We were a poor, poor team. There was a lot of infighting and jealousy. Some of the parents of other kids had been ringing up the manager, apparently, and saying that I was too small to be in the team and wasn't worth my place. The manager even singled me out after one defeat and asked me in front of everybody whether I thought I deserved to be playing.

I told him that, yes, I did think I deserved to be playing but inside I was starting to have doubts about whether I wanted to be a footballer. We were losing and I did begin to feel that maybe I wasn't good enough. In a way, those kinds of thoughts are what made me a top player. I have always been haunted by self-doubt. I have always wondered whether the next game or the next move is the one that will find me out and expose me as the ordinary player that deep down I fear I am.

The way I was living my life was eating at me, really gnawing away at me. I hated myself for my lack of discipline and the weakness I was showing with my drinking and smoking. I knew it was affecting my football but I felt torn. I was 14. It's young to have to dedicate yourself to something. It's young to cut yourself off from your friends.

I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be one of the lads. I was going through puberty, too, of course, and started to entertain the idea that maybe I would like to do what my mates were doing. There was a freedom about that.

I knew how hard I was going to have to work if I was to become a professional footballer and I didn't know whether I wanted to work that hard. No one from the area had ever done it. I had no one to look up to. There was no role model for that, no example to follow. I started to think 'what's wrong with what my mates do, would it be so bad to stick around in Cardiff and drift along with them?'

I don't know if I could say there was a low point, a point of maximum danger, a moment where I realised I was risking more than my football career. Perhaps it was the time I rode in a stolen car. I only did it once. I was skiving off school with a mate and a lad pulled up who was known around the area for stealing cars.

Me and my mate jumped in and this lad screamed up the road to my school and roared out on to the playing fields. All the other kids were in the classrooms staring out of the windows at us and this lad pulled a couple of doughnuts on the football pitches and then drove back out on to the streets. When

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