

ADDICTED TO
FOOTBALL

MY JOURNEY FROM ANFIELD
TO ALMOST EVERYWHERE



J O N N E W B Y

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I want to play for Liverpool

I WAS the same as any other young kid. I dreamt of playing for the team I supported, and that team was Liverpool.

My bedroom was completely covered in Liverpool posters, Dalglish and Rush especially, and as I got a bit older, John Barnes. I remember the first time I stood on the Kop in the late 1980s to watch a 0-0 draw against West Ham, I was disappointed I hadn't been able to celebrate a goal but I couldn't wait to go back.

Until then I had always sat in the Anfield Road End or The Paddock, but there was something special about the Kop. Queuing outside to pay your £4 to get in, the stairs up to the terrace, seeing the green of the pitch come into view and then finding your spec to watch the game. And then the noise, the songs, the flags, the colours, the atmosphere. There was no place like it.

I would be fortunate in that I would go on to play 70 minutes in front of the Kop for Liverpool, although those first-team appearances at Anfield seem a lifetime ago.

My first football team was Penketh United in Warrington, where we lived until I was nine. We lived in the Great Sankey area of the town – me, my mum and dad, and my older brother David.

My parents were hard-working people. My mum, originally from Leicester, was a teacher and my dad, who was from Old Swan in Liverpool, worked at the Ford car plant in Halewood.

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I used to love chasing his car up the road when he was working nights, seeing if I could beat him to the end of our street to show him how fast I was.

As a kid all I did was play football. If I wasn't playing or training for my Saturday team, I would be on the street usually with David and his mates outside our house using the green gates as the goal.

If there was nobody to play with it didn't bother me. I would be doing kick-ups or shooting by myself.

One of my earliest football memories is from 1986 on the day Liverpool were away at Chelsea and a win would clinch the league title. I was on my own playing football in the street and one of my neighbours walked past and told me Kenny Dalglish had just given us the lead.

I remember smashing the ball high in the air celebrating and running inside to check the score on *Grandstand* and then coming back out and trying to recreate the type of goal I thought Dalglish had just scored.

I played up front and all I wanted to do was score goals. Nothing felt as good as the ball hitting the back of the net. I played on Saturday and Sunday mornings and occasionally Sunday afternoon too. If there was only one game for me on the Sunday, my dad would take me to the field and pass the ball to my left foot constantly trying to improve that.

There was no getting bored on computers or the Xbox in your bedroom. In the summer we would play cricket outside the house or go on bike rides, but other than that it was just football, football and more football.

We moved from Warrington to Formby in March 1988, the weekend Everton ended Liverpool's 29-game unbeaten start to that particular season, and that year was when I first went to Liverpool's Centre of Excellence as a nine-year-old.

One of the coaches there at the time was Hugh McAuley, and he was watching his son Barry play for Formby Juniors Sports

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Club, the local team I had just joined on moving to the area. After impressing Hughie I began to train once a week at Litherland High School. There were no state-of-the-art academy facilities in those days, just an hour a week in a sports hall with a few footballs. That was it.

The coaches when I started at Liverpool were Hughie, Dave Shannon and legendary Liverpool winger Steve Heighway.

I stayed at Liverpool until I was 22 so I never knew any other youth coaches and I may be biased, but to me H, Dave and Steve are without doubt up there with the best youth football coaches this country has ever seen. They brought through McManaman, Fowler, Matteo, Carragher, Thompson, Gerrard and Owen. How much would that lot cost in today's market?

Even back then they wanted to make you a better person as well as a better player. They had standards that they had learnt as players with Steve and H both having been at Liverpool for a long time.

All three of the coaches demanded focus and concentration in every training session and when I see them work these days, they are exactly the same. About five years ago Steve was taking a session with the under-14s and asked a few of the coaches – me, Mike Yates and Phil Charnock – to join in. We had all been at the club as boys so knew how Steve worked, but even on that day we all said afterwards that when he said well done to one of us during the session, we got the same buzz out of it as if we were 12 again. He was still the man we wanted to impress, even at 37! That's how important he was to all of us as players.

Liverpool as a football club still has those same standards now. You couldn't fail to become both a better person and a better player when training with the coaches. Even at such a young age you didn't want to be the one who made a mistake and give that Adidas tango away. It was a healthy fear, though, and at no stage was anyone afraid to express themselves on the ball.

The message back then was all about passing the ball. Pass and move, and if you needed to dribble make sure you had something in your locker to get out of trouble.

I can still hear Dave Shannon shouting, 'It's like watching Boca Juniors!' when one of us played a one-two. It was the best footballing education that I could wish for growing up and was kept so simple.

As the years progressed at Liverpool, I just kept getting asked to come back. I enjoyed it so I kept going and every now and then we would get a night where we would train at Anfield and imagine we were playing for the first-team.

Often we would train on the all-weather pitch at Melwood, but back then that all-weather pitch was shale. There was no artificial turf, just gravel that had puddles all over it when it rained and scraped your legs to bits if you fell over, but if it was good enough for Barnes, Beardsley and Rush then it was good enough for us.

When we trained on the grass pitches at Melwood we would normally just play a match among ourselves and you were hoping to be on the team that got to wear the red shirts with Candy on the front and a number on the back. 'Number ten, I got Barnes!' you'd hear from the crowd of excited kids. It was a massive thrill just to pull the shirt on at the place where our heroes trained.

I remember signing schoolboy forms for Liverpool on 29 January 1993 and being very proud, but I didn't see it as a big deal – I just loved playing football.

I was 14 then, but still tiny and as skinny as a rake, and Dave Shannon had given me the nickname Bambi as apparently I had legs thinner than the deer in the film. It is the name Dave still calls me now every time I see him at Liverpool.

Those skinny legs could run, though. I was lightning quick, scored a lot of goals and had a footballing brain – and with the help of Hughie, Steve and Dave I kept progressing.

I had a year during the under-15 age group where I struggled. I was growing and that seemed to hinder my pace, which in turn

affected my confidence. I was very quiet as a kid in the Liverpool environment and when I wasn't playing well my confidence would be affected further, which would be something I would struggle with throughout my career.

It was at under-16 level when things started to become a bit more serious, because that was the season where you would be offered YTS forms at the club or be released.

I was fortunate that this would be one of my best seasons. I can even remember the game when everything seemed to click. We played Blackburn at Melwood on the B-team pitch one Sunday morning in November.

Before then I had been progressing steadily, but that morning things seemed to fall into place and I didn't look back. I scored one in a 3-0 win and followed it up by putting one in the top corner the week later at Littleton Road in Salford as we beat Manchester United 4-2. I then scored two against Everton a week or so after that.

Even back then there was no better feeling than scoring against Everton. In recent times Liverpoolians have seen Manchester United as our main rivals, but for me it's always been Everton and always will be.

Even now I hate derby day. Even with a watching brief. I can't eat on the day of the derby because I'm that nervous.

That day as a 16-year-old, both of my goals in the 3-0 win were set up by Steven Gerrard. As a forward you were delighted if you knew Stevie was playing in midfield behind you because if you made a run, he would find you. His vision and range of passing even then was outstanding and nobody doubted he would go on and be the player he was for Liverpool.

Back then there were a lot of local lads at the club. As well as Steven there was Tommy Culshaw, a no-nonsense centre-half who is now a first-team coach at Glasgow Rangers, Stephen Wright, who played for Liverpool's first-team, Michael Yates who has been at the club for over 25 years as player and now coach, and

Andy Parkinson who had a successful league career, plus many others like them.

All of these players had been at Liverpool from a very early age, like me, and lived in or around the city. We knew how lucky we were to represent the club and the standards were drummed into us by the staff very early in our time there.

Steve, H and Dave were our coaches and mentors and letting them down was not an option. As players we all came through the ranks together and we knew we were in a position that many other boys in the city were desperate to be in playing for a club like Liverpool.

We travelled abroad for European competitions, and I can remember playing Barcelona in one final at under-16 level in France and us being nervous standing alongside the Spanish team in the tunnel waiting to go out on to the pitch. Our physio Frank Skelly started to sing 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. We all joined in and belted out the anthem together, stood in the cramped stone tunnel, and the words echoed which made it sound even louder. Even now the hairs on my neck stand up when I think about it.

Barcelona didn't know what to make of it standing there right next to a group of lads belting this famous anthem out and, coincidence or not, we scored in the first 25 seconds. That was our way of saying, 'We are Liverpool.'

The end of that under-16 season was always going to be interesting. I had been offered YTS forms but I was never going to be able to sign them. My mum was big on my education, being a teacher, and there was no way she was going to let me leave school without doing my A levels and having something to fall back on as she put it, should the football not work out – and there was no guarantee it would.

Of all the boys who join a club aged nine, like I did, only an extremely low percentage go on and play for the first-team or have a lasting career in the game at all.

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My dad, on the other hand, would have loved me to sign for Liverpool there and then. He had grown up in the city with my nan and grandad and his four brothers. The whole family were massive Liverpool supporters and had been going to the match for years.

To see a Newby play for Liverpool was a dream for them. I'm sure there were many arguments between my parents as to whether I was going to be allowed to sign these YTS forms, but in the end my mum won and officially becoming a Liverpool player would have to wait for a year or so.

I think in the long term staying at school may have done me a favour. Some of the lads found it hard being at Melwood from 8.30am until 4.30pm every day and I don't know whether being quiet would have seen me swallowed up in that environment, coming straight out of school.

My schedule was very different from the rest of the lads. I continued training two nights a week as I had done for the previous few seasons, but with the age group below me, and then I would play in the A or B team on a Saturday. I felt fresh and looked forward to my football at the weekend after a week at school and I was full of energy and confidence.

That season was my first experience of the FA Youth Cup, the major competition in youth football throughout the whole country. As I was still at school I didn't expect to be involved and in the first two rounds I wasn't, but the regular forwards Michael Johnson and David Larmour were both injured for the next round and I had been playing very well in the B team so I found myself selected for the game against Sheffield United at Anfield.

The other forward selected alongside me didn't train at the club every day either. He was based at the FA National School at Lilleshall and if I thought I was quick then my strike partner was like Road Runner and he could put the ball in the back of the net better than anyone I've ever seen. His name? Michael Owen.

In those days all the clubs used to play their FA Youth Cup games at the first-team ground rather than being pushed out to a local non-league or rugby ground, and I remember sitting in the dressing room at Anfield before the game being unbelievably nervous.

The stadium seemed massive during the warm-up and every shout could be heard with not many people in the crowd. The game itself was physically very tough – they kicked us all over the place – but I scored my first goal at Anfield when Stuart Quinn crossed from the right and I slid in to finish with my left foot at the Anfield Road End as we won 3-2, with Michael scoring the other two goals.

We were into the quarter-final where we drew Manchester United, again at home. It was a much tougher game and I remember finding it hard against the centre-half pairing of John Curtis and Ronnie Wallwork, both of whom would go on to have long careers in the top divisions. We went 2-0 down with only 15 minutes or so left, just enough time for Michael to score three quick goals at the Kop end for a 3-2 win.

It wouldn't be the last hat-trick he would score for Liverpool and we all knew that then. He was without doubt the most single-minded footballer I ever played with. His self-belief was unbelievable. Nothing fazed him, he played with no fear at all and lived to score goals, and, had he not suffered with the horrendous hamstring tear at Elland Road when he was still young, I believe he would have gone on to be England's record goalscorer.

The semi-final saw us paired against Crystal Palace with the first leg being at Anfield. We won 4-2 with another hat-trick from Michael, and travelled to London for the away leg a couple of weeks later, staying at a hotel in Croydon the night before the game.

I remember the coaches being very nervous in the build-up. The club had never won the FA Youth Cup and there was a real buzz about this team with a lot of people in the city talking about Owen, Jamie Carragher and David Thompson in particular.

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I hit the bar twice in the first 20 minutes of the game, once with either foot. I hoped it wasn't going to be one of those nights. Half an hour later it looked like it was as we found ourselves 3-0 down and trailing 5-4 on aggregate. Palace had two very strong, quick forwards in Clinton Morrison and Leon McKenzie, and they were causing our defence no end of problems.

Jamie Cassidy, our left-winger, brought us level in the tie with 20 minutes to go and the result was back in the balance. I was substituted soon afterwards but I couldn't really complain. I hadn't played poorly, but it showed the fine line between success and failure as a striker.

If both my finishes had been an inch lower in the first half then I'd have been the hero, but that was a striker's life and something I would get to understand well over the next 15 years.

The game went into extra time and Michael bagged another two as we drew 3-3 to send us through to a two-legged final against a very talented West Ham United team.

The first leg was at Upton Park and we were without Michael, as he was playing for England in an international tournament, so I was partnered up front by Andy Parkinson.

All the talk before the game was about a centre-half coming through at West Ham who was already being spoken of as a future England player, a certain Rio Ferdinand. They also had Frank Lampard in midfield, so it showed the quality that was on show in the final that year.

We had a team full of personality and characters, Scouse lads who could play, but when needed could battle as well. Roy Naylor was our keeper. Lee Prior was our right-back and up there as one of the funniest characters I ever met in the game, and someone I would have hated to play against, while Phil Brazier and Jamie Carragher were in the middle of the back four and Welshman Gareth Roberts was at left-back.

Two talented Scousers played wide in midfield, Stuart Quinn on the right and Jamie Cassidy on the left, with David Thompson

and Mark Quinn in the centre of the park and me and Andy Parkinson up front. Most of us had been at the club since we were about ten years old, and this was the biggest game we had played in with about 20,000 people packed into Upton Park.

I think Steve, H and Dave were more nervous than us in the build-up and a memory that sticks in my mind is the team coach pulling up outside at a pub on the way to the match and the three of them heading inside for five minutes – clearly for a quick drink to settle the nerves!

When we returned to the dressing room after our warm-up, we were boosted by seeing first-team manager Roy Evans and his assistant Doug Livermore, as they had a game in London the following night. There was no big speech from either of them; that wasn't the Liverpool style. It was just a quick 'good luck and enjoy it' before they left us to it.

H gave us his usual team talk about working hard first and foremost. 'Win your battle and then you can play,' he would say. To this day I know his chat before a game would be very similar no matter what team he was coaching. Tactically H was very clever, and we would work on tactics during the week in training, but before a game it would be about working hard and earning the right to play.

I can't remember too much about the match itself, other than the two chances I had in the first 25 minutes. The first was after Stuey Quinn skipped past his full-back on the right and pulled it back to me near the penalty spot and I used the pace on the ball to side-foot it high into the roof of the net as Rio Ferdinand closed me down. I peeled away to my left, my heart nearly leaping out of my chest and was mobbed by the rest of the lads.

The game was live on Sky Sports, so it wasn't a bad time to score. My second chance came a few minutes later from Cass down the left who pulled it back. I caught it perfectly with my left foot, but this time the keeper made a magnificent save, tipping it around the post to keep the score 1-0 going into the break.

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As I was not training full time, I wasn't at the same fitness level as the other lads and was replaced after about 70 minutes, with David Larmour coming on to grab a second goal. We were heading back to Anfield with a 2-0 lead.

I didn't sleep a wink that night when I got home, but there was no rest for me the following day as I'd already had two days off school for the match. There was no warm-down and massage at Melwood, just double history at school!

There were about ten days before the return leg but it was hard to focus on anything else. The game was all that mattered to us. We were 2-0 up, we had Michael Owen returning and would have an expected 25,000 crowd behind us at Anfield. Nothing could go wrong, could it?

It did, after just 47 seconds, when the ball fell to Frank Lampard on the edge of the box and he smashed it high into the Kop goal. West Ham were right-back in the game and with Rio Ferdinand playing further forward they were looking a real threat.

Our nerves were calmed when Michael bundled home an equaliser minutes before half-time and when Stuey Quinn smashed a left-footed drive home at the Kop end midway through the second half, we knew the cup was ours for the first time in the club's history.

It was an amazing feeling walking round Anfield celebrating in a front of a packed Kop end and like all the boys that night I hoped I would be doing similar in a first-team shirt in years to come, although none of us were under any illusions of how difficult it was going to be to break into that first XI.

Those FA Youth Cup days were special. Even the players who went on and played at the very top will still look back on that year as being memorable. The characters in that dressing room were some of the best lads I would meet in my career and the togetherness, whether you were a massive personality or one of the quieter lads like me, was unbelievable.

The cup that year was won mainly by mentality. We were never beaten even if it seemed like there was no way back. No egos, just Merseyside lads who were willing to give absolutely everything for each other and realised just how much it meant to play for Liverpool.

Some of the stories from inside that dressing room could fill a book on their own but many couldn't be printed! Football dressing rooms are very different places these days, and maybe that's for the best, but that Melwood dressing room was character-building and no place for lads who couldn't play.

One story that still makes me laugh involves a lad who had been told he wasn't getting a contract at the end of his YTS days and although he still trained at Liverpool during the week, he would go on trial at other clubs at the weekend from about April onwards hoping to find a new club.

At the time Stan Collymore was at Liverpool and was one of the first players to wear coloured boots, with his choice being a distinctive bright red Diadora pair.

One Friday these red boots went missing from the boot room at Melwood and that afternoon we had first Ronnie Moran, then Sammy Lee and finally H reading the riot act to us with the younger lads under firm suspicion as culprits as to where they had vanished to. By the end of the day the boots still hadn't turned up and reluctantly the staff let us all go home.

The following day most of us were playing for the A team and when we turned up to the away game that Saturday morning, the lad who was in the process of being released was in the opposition dressing room playing against us as a trialist.

You can imagine the scenes as he jogged out for the warm-up with a big grin on his face pointing down at the red Diadora boots on his feet. He even commented on the comfort of his newly acquired footwear as he ambled past us. Even H had to laugh and with the boots back on Collymore's peg first thing on Monday morning not a word was said to the first-team staff.

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They were funny days with some unbelievable characters. The season after the FA Youth Cup win, 1996/97, was also my last year at school. I would finish my exams in the summer of '97 and sign my first professional contract. It was also the first time that my confidence would really affect my performances.

I was someone who analysed my own performances far too much for someone so young. Running through the game in your mind afterwards is normal for any footballer but I just couldn't switch off. I also doubted myself massively and this would hinder me a great deal over my career.

I was a massive confidence player. If I was playing or scoring, I felt like I could do anything on the pitch, even against top players, but if I was struggling with my confidence I could go the other way and look like I'd never kicked a ball before in my life. Mentally I wasn't strong enough and that is a quality that separates the good players from the great.

I remember speaking to H about it. 'You're three weeks away from signing a professional contract at Liverpool Football Club. That should give you all the confidence you need,' he said. He was right, of course, but doubting myself on the pitch would go on for most of my career.

Two weeks later I did as H had said and became a professional at Liverpool. It was a very proud moment not just for me but for my family as well. My dad and my brother David were big Liverpool fans and I had been going all over the country with David following the Reds on the infamous Barnes Travel coaches for years – and it felt great making that transition from fan to player.

My first contract was a far cry from what most first year professionals earn these days. In the summer of 1997, the deal I signed for £250 a week with a signing-on fee of £2,600 wasn't going to make me rich, but I had a chance to do what millions of people throughout the world could only dream of.

I found that first year as a pro extremely hard. The change and the step up from being at school to training with the likes of Robbie Fowler, Steve McManaman and Jamie Redknapp every day was massive and I can honestly say it took me the best part of the entire season to adjust.

Pre-season was a real eye-opener at that level. All the young professionals joined the first-team players, and the fitness levels were unbelievable. McManaman and Jason McAteer could run all day; Dom Matteo was another. It seemed effortless to them. I was a sprinter so the longer running was a killer for me, especially with Ronnie Moran and Sammy Lee shouting 'encouragement' at us and no doubt seeing what character the young lads had.

One run in particular was a nightmare, the 8-80s. It took up all three pitches at Melwood and was the one that everyone dreaded. You would arrive at the training ground and see the poles set up and your heart would sink. Neil Ruddock would be close to tears when the shout went up to head out to the pitches on 8-80s day. I wasn't far behind him!

I was still living with my mum and dad at the time in Formby and used to drive in with a couple of other lads living nearby, Paul Dalglish and Ian Dunbavin. They were two real characters, especially Bavo. He was a keeper, and they are always a bit different, but Bavo was and still is crazy.

There were many times I'd pick him up and he'd come running out of his house and jump in the car with his bowl of cereal still in his hand. Five minutes later the window would go down and he would throw his bowl and spoon out of the window on the Formby bypass. He did it most days for a couple of weeks and after that never again, presumably because he had run out of anything to eat his cereal from! He was a good keeper and went on to have a long league career with the likes of Accrington Stanley and Chesterfield.

The season itself was tough. I mainly played for the A team and got my fair share of goals, but on the few occasions I played in the

reserves I found it hard playing against experienced professionals. One game at Preston North End sticks in the mind in which we had an experienced line up with Tony Warner, Razor Ruddock, Steve Harkness and Stig Inge Bjørnebye playing, and we got beat 3-0. I hardly got a kick and was dragged off after an hour. Welcome to the real world!

I got my next chance to start for the 'ressies' a few weeks later against Tranmere Rovers, a game played at Chester's Deva stadium, and I got my first goal at that level firing in after Steven Gerrard whipped a low cross in to the box.

I started the remaining reserve team games that season including a 1-0 win against Manchester United at Bury's Gigg Lane where I played on the right wing in what was probably my best game of the season. It drew praise from Ronnie Moran, which even first-team players would tell you is rare, but three days later after a game at Stoke City's Britannia Stadium he brought me back down to earth with a bollocking that far outweighed the positive comments earlier in the week.

That was just his way and he would never let anyone get carried away with performances, whether they were a first-team player or a youngster. They could always do better. He kept everyone grounded in true Liverpool style and that is what made him such a legend throughout all his years at the club.

My contract was up at the end of the season, though, and deep down I didn't think I had done enough to be offered another one so I was preparing myself for the worst.

Roy Evans was the manager and ultimately the decision was his. As young professionals we trained separately from the first-team squad with coach Sammy Lee, and the manager would be guided by him. My only problem was that I didn't think Sammy was having me as a player either.

I knew Roy was going to be speaking to a few of us after training one particular day, and I happened to bump into Steve Heighway along the corridor at Melwood half an hour before

I was due to see the manager. I mentioned to Steve that it was decision day. He went into Roy's office to see which of us formerly under his control were to be kept on or released. Steve had worked with us all for the last eight or nine years and knew us better than anyone else at the club.

The message from the manager when I had my meeting was, 'You've done all right, we need to see more, but you've got another year.' That was it, short and sweet.

The message from Steve the following day was, 'They were thinking of releasing you. I told them to be patient and give you time.' I knew Steve had probably saved me and I also knew if I wanted to survive I had to do better. This was Liverpool and whether I had been there ten years or not there was no sentiment: you were either good enough or you weren't.

I agreed another year's contract on £350 a week and the same signing-on fee. There was to be no breaking of the bank to secure my signature for another year.

During the summer there was a major change as for the first time Liverpool appointed joint managers, with Frenchman Gérard Houllier coming in to work alongside Roy Evans. There were massive changes within the youth system as well as Liverpool becoming the first club to open a football academy, a brand-new facility just outside the City in Kirkby. The only immediate issue was that it wouldn't be ready to be used until October.

The big problem for me was that Liverpool had made a lot of new signings that summer and there was now a big squad at Melwood and, rightly or wrongly, the new management had decided that the three young pros who had been kept on from the previous year (me, Tommy Culshaw and Danny Williams) were not to train at Melwood and would instead be training with the new first-year pros and the YTS lads.

It wasn't a great welcome back for pre-season, but at least I knew I would be working with H, Steve and Dave again who all rated me as a player. With the new academy facility

in Kirkby not yet ready, we were to train at Liverpool Hope University in Aigburth for the first few months of the season and it was heart-breaking to drive past Melwood every morning to get there.

Pre-season went as well as could be expected and the three of us were invited to Melwood occasionally to train with the first-team.

However, once the season began, we were in a bizarre situation. The traditional A and B team leagues had been scrapped and replaced with new under-17 and under-19 leagues, which meant that at 19 we were all too old to play for these teams and at Melwood Gérard Houllier had decided that the first-team players who weren't starting would all play for the reserves, so none of us even made it on to the bench there.

For six weeks we trained all week and had no match to look forward to. It was a crazy situation for any player, but particularly young players trying to make their way in the game.

At the time I had most Sundays off, and I would go and watch my brother play for his Sunday side – the Liverpool Supporters' Club team. After six weeks of not having a game and being totally fed up with my situation, I convinced the manager Les Lawson to throw me on when one of the lads picked up an injury.

Looking back, it was absolute madness. If I had got injured I would have been in serious trouble and I certainly had to hurdle a few tackles, but at least I got my first game and goal of the season!

That week I was told to report to Melwood for a behind-closed-doors fixture against Blackburn. We had a strong squad made up of players who hadn't been starting and those coming back from injury, with Brad Friedel, Carra, Dom Matteo, David Thompson, Neil Ruddock and Øyvind Leonhardsen all playing.

Both the senior managers were there, and the game was taken by the new first-team coach Patrice Bergues, who I really liked.

I was on the left wing and despite having not played for so long, other than my 20-minute guest appearance for the supporters' club, I felt sharp and scored once in a 2-1 win.

The following week we played against Wrexham, who included a lot of their first-team players, and I scored twice and made two for the returning Robbie Fowler in an 8-1 win.

When I arrived at Liverpool Hope University for training the following day Dave Shannon asked me how the game had gone.

'Yeah, good,' I replied. 'I did well, scored a couple and felt sharp.'

'Well, we were speaking to the first-team staff at Anfield last night and both Patrice and Gérard Houllier said you were the best player on the pitch,' Dave said to me.

I was delighted to hear that; it gave my confidence a massive boost and I felt that all my hard work in the summer was beginning to pay off – or maybe Gérard Houllier had been on a recent scouting mission to Botanic Park near Wavertree to watch the supporters' club on a Sunday morning.

After the games against Blackburn and Wrexham I was invited to Melwood quite often to train along with two other younger players, Stephen Wright and Steven Gerrard. Stevie G in particular was causing quite a stir among the first-team group every time he trained with them.

In the November of that season Houllier was left in sole charge as Roy Evans had left. I wasn't at Melwood enough to know everything but when I was it was a bit awkward with Roy called 'Gaffer' and Gérard called 'Boss'. I never really knew who to speak to when I wanted to talk to the manager and there was no way that the two men, with the distinguished coaching careers they'd had, were ever going to take a back seat to the other.

With the first-team struggling on the pitch there was only ever going to be one fall guy and unfortunately it was Roy, who only a couple of seasons earlier had come close to managing Liverpool to the Premier League title.

I WANT TO PLAY FOR LIVERPOOL

I started to become a regular in the reserves leading up to Christmas and I was in good form and training with the first-team a couple of days a week.

I enjoyed the training, with Houllier leading the tactical side and Patrice and Sammy Lee taking the other part of the sessions.

Phil Thompson had also come in as assistant manager, but if Patrice was good cop among the players then Thommo was most definitely bad cop. He would roar at the players and was certainly the motivator. He was exactly what you see on the television these days. At times he wasn't the most popular member of staff, but he wouldn't have cared. He was Liverpool through and through and didn't care who he upset.

His only concern was trying to take Liverpool back to the top, where they had been in his playing days. He wore his heart on his sleeve and played a big part in helping the club challenge for honours again; his passion was evident.

I was playing with a lot of confidence in games, and it was one of those spells where I felt I could play against anyone.

In early January we had a reserve team game at home to Leicester City which we won 2-1. I scored a late winner, and the manager was full of praise for me and told me to report to Melwood instead of the university in the morning and to go to his office for a chat when I got there. Although I was someone who always thought the glass was half empty, even I thought this had to be good news. And it was.

He told me he had been really impressed with me over the last few months and that he felt I was ready to train with the first-team permanently and be part of the squad. On top of that he wanted to offer me a new contract, another two years on top of the half a season I had left. I was buzzing. It was a massive boost for the manager to show how much he rated me.

I had no agent in those days; I hardly needed one on £350 a week did I? I had a meeting with chief executive Peter Robinson at Anfield a few days later and signed a new two-year contract,

doubling my wages, with increases in the following two seasons, and also received a £30,000 signing-on fee split over three payments over the length of the contract.

I finally felt like a Liverpool player when moving into the first-team dressing room for the first time. My peg in the changing room was in between David James and Stéphane Henchoz. You could not get two more different characters. Steph was like me, very quiet and he would say a polite hello to everyone when he came in in the morning, whereas Jamo would come bouncing in larger than life telling us he had seen aliens landing in his garden the night before.

It was around this time that the manager signed a fellow Frenchman, Jean-Michel Ferri. It was an odd transfer. He was a midfielder in his early 30s and was never going to play ahead of any of those already in the squad and, with Steven Gerrard about to make his breakthrough, it just didn't add up.

He was very professional, played with us in the reserves and always gave his all, but he gave the impression of being the eyes and ears in the dressing room that Houllier wanted.

He also spoke very good English and any plans that some of the players may have occasionally made for a night out always seemed to get back to the manager that particular season. It was very clever of Houllier, who I'm sure in his first season wanted to know the ins and outs of all the players. However he had probably underestimated how streetwise the players in that dressing room were, especially the Scouse lads, and there were a few wild goose chases spoken about within earshot of Ferri as the players quickly worked him out.

The rest of the season for me went really well as I scored regularly for the reserves. I was in good form and the manager kept hinting to me privately that I might be involved in the first-team squad before the season ended, but it just didn't happen. I was a bit disappointed by that.

I knew that, while I was playing with this level of confidence, I would have relished the chance of 20 minutes in an end-of-

season game. I didn't understand the logic of the likes of Sean Dundee being on the bench when it was clear he had no future at the club.

'Croc', as he was known, was a lovely fella but he simply did not help himself from the minute he arrived that summer. He was miles off the pace, both in training and games, and looked overweight, and his yellow Porsche didn't half stand out in the McDonald's drive-thru on Edge Lane!

At that time I was the next forward in line behind him and the way I was playing in the reserves I deserved a place on the bench more than he did in the final few games of that season, especially when he had no future, but with the club looking to recoup a few million quid for him in the summer he was kept in the first-team picture.

My first full season in the first-team squad was 1999/2000. The club had backed the manager and he had made some big signings, bringing in Sami Hyypiä, Titi Camara, Erik Meijer, Vladimír Šmicer and Sander Westerveld. Of those, Camara and big Erik were out-and-out strikers, Šmicer could play up there too if necessary and the club already had Karl-Heinz Riedle, a German World Cup winner, and Patrik Berger.

Add those to the goalscoring masterclasses of Robbie Fowler and Michael Owen and it was clear it would be a tough squad to break in to.

That pre-season we went to Switzerland for ten days, which was different to what the players were used to. We were in the Swiss mountains in the middle of nowhere and we would train three times a day.

At 7am we would go to the training pitches for the long-distance running and then it would be back to the hotel for breakfast and a rest. At 11am we would be in the gym doing individual weights programmes, then it was more food and a sleep in the afternoon, and then at 5pm we would train with the football with a lot of high intensity work.

By the end of the ten days I felt as fit as I had ever done. With the new signings the club was on the way up and we were strengthened further as Didi Hamann arrived on the last day of the trip as another high-profile transfer.

The season started as the previous one ended with me full of confidence and playing well. The manager again insisted that those first-team players not starting in the Premier League would play in the reserves and that suited me. It meant I was playing with quality every game and that could only improve me.

I formed a great partnership with Erik Meijer. He was a real character, never quiet, always had an opinion, loved working hard and was a big help passing on advice to the younger players.

He only played a handful of first-team games, but the Kop loved him. You couldn't help but like big Erik off the pitch either, he had no filter and said whatever was on his mind, not really bothered if he upset someone. He always kept us entertained and was great to have in the dressing room.

He was the type of striker I loved to play alongside. He was a giant of a man with a real presence. He held the ball up, won headers, took the hits and I would make my runs off him and we complimented each other really well, making goals for one another.

My continued good form for the reserves made me believe I had a chance to play for the first-team in some of the cup competitions and I was rewarded by being named in the squad for the second leg of the League Cup game against Hull City at Anfield.

We were leading 5-1 from the first leg and when Phil Thompson came around on the Monday asking what I wanted as my pre-match meal the following day I knew I was in. The kit man Graham gave me a shout after training to show me my first-team shirt. NEWBY with the number 32 on the back. I was hoping the following day I would be making my debut for Liverpool.

I WANT TO PLAY FOR LIVERPOOL

I was named as one of the subs in the team meeting on the Tuesday afternoon, with the line-up being strong despite a lot of players being rested.

Brad Friedel, Stéphane Henchoz, Rigobert Song, Steve Staunton, Danny Murphy, David Thompson, Patrik Berger and Karl Heinz-Riedle all started. I got the call to warm up midway through the second half and with 25 minutes to go I got the nod from the manager to make my debut for Liverpool.

I was to replace Henchoz and with a slight reorganisation of the team I went to the right-hand side of midfield. It was 2-2 at the time with fellow young debutant Layton Maxwell having scored our second goal.

Riedle put us back in front shortly after I went on and with us having most of the ball, I got plenty of touches and grew in confidence.

In the last minute I received a pass from David Thompson on the touchline about 20 yards out and had space to run at the full-back. I dropped my shoulder and skipped past him getting to the byline at the Kop end and stood up a perfect cross to the back post which Riedle headed home for his farewell goal for the club.

I was really pleased with how my debut had gone. We had won 4-2 and I had made a goal.

I remember Danny Murphy and 'Stan' Staunton congratulating me in the dressing room on making my debut and creating a goal. It was the start of a couple of months of being in the first-team matchday squad most weeks. I would often be 17th man with only five subs allowed those days, but at least it showed I was impressing the manager enough to be in his thoughts.

My next taste of being on the bench was in early December in the FA Cup away at Huddersfield Town. It was a game live on the television. Huddersfield were flying high in the league below and hoping for an upset.

The match went to plan for us with Titi Camara giving us a first-half lead and our second goal coming from Dom Matteo in

a 2-0 win. I made my second appearance from the bench in the final ten minutes and replaced Steven Gerrard, again on the right of midfield.

I was next in the squad for the Boxing Day fixture away at Newcastle United. We trained at Melwood on Christmas Day morning and then were allowed home to see the family for a few hours before leaving from Anfield late afternoon for the north-east.

I was rooming with Frenchman Djimi Traore who had only signed a few months previously. The manager had banned the French players from speaking their own language around the training ground to help them improve their English, but so far Djimi only knew a few words of and most of them were swear words so I don't think he had been turning up to his English lessons after training.

Christmas night spent in a hotel with Djimi was a bit different to what I was used to, but I took charge of the television remote and treated my roomie to the *Royle Family* Christmas special. Djimi's quizzical looks towards me as he listened to Ricky Tomlinson moan at his mother-in-law for the next hour made me realise that Jim Royle and Nana clearly weren't popular television characters back in Paris!

I didn't make the bench the following day as Houllier went with an extra defender with the game being away from home and we drew 2-2, with Michael Owen scoring both at a ground where he always seemed to net.

I made my third substitute appearance as we were knocked out of the FA Cup at home to Blackburn and we then used the free weekend, when the next round was played, to fly to Malta for four days of training in some warmer weather.

The only problem was that when we got off the plane and headed straight to the national stadium that evening, all the pitches were waterlogged due to the amount of rain that had fallen over the previous few days.

The rule while in Malta was no drinking at all, but a few of the lads thought it would be a disappointment if they went home without sampling the local nightlife and, having been to Malta a few times on holiday myself, I told them that there were a few good clubs in St Julian's which was very close to our hotel.

So on the last night four or five of the lads sneaked out despite us needing to be on the team coach to leave for the airport at 5.30am the following day. At about five o'clock Stig Bjørnebye, who I was rooming with, was waking me up telling me to come out to the balcony. As we looked down at the pool we could see a few of the lads jumping over sun loungers trying to get back into the hotel without being seen.

The worse for wear on the local Maltese lager, they were pretending to be in the army using their fingers as guns crouching behind the sun beds, giving each other the 'all clear, let's go' hand signals in a bid to make it home. They had to be quick because we were leaving for our flight back to Manchester half an hour later.

The players in question, though, were regretting their decision to go out when our flight home hit turbulence on the way back into Manchester. It was so bad that it made the papers the next day, and there were a few green faces as we came in to land.

On returning from Malta I was in the squad for the away trip to Watford, which we won 3-2, and the following week we faced Middlesbrough at Anfield in the Premier League and I was named as a sub for the first time in the Premier League.

Michael Owen picked up an injury in the first half and was replaced by Erik Meijer, so I was the only forward player left on the bench, and with 25 minutes left I got the call to replace Vladimír Šmicer on the right-hand side of midfield. I desperately wanted to play up front, which was more natural to me, but I was about to play in the Premier League for Liverpool, the team I had supported all my life.

I looked up at the Kop as I waited with the linesman knowing that my dad and my brother were watching from our season

tickets in block 206. It was an amazing feeling hearing the roar of encouragement from the Anfield crowd of over 44,000 as I ran on to take my place near the Centenary Stand.

Curtis Fleming was playing at left-back for the visitors and I knew he was fast, so I had to move the ball quickly. As soon as I went on Sami Hyypiä played a pass in to me and I took a touch and played it inside to Didi Hamann. The first thing I had done had been positive and I wanted to try and make an impact. I got it back off Didi and Paul Ince, who had been at Liverpool until earlier that season, smashed into me with a late tackle – and the crowd roared their disapproval. Ince grinned at me as he half-picked me up as if to say, ‘Welcome to the game.’

In the end the game finished 0-0 and I hadn’t had as much of the ball as I’d wanted. We started playing longer, looking to feed off big Erik, but they had Gary Pallister at the back and he dealt with it comfortably.

Still, I had made my debut in the Premier League at Anfield against the likes of Pallister, Ince and Juninho. It was a dream come true and something I look back on with great pride. It wasn’t the highlight of my career but is something that I’m very proud of. I wanted more than one Premier League appearance with Liverpool, though, but that never happened.

The following week I was again on the bench for the home game against Leeds, who were challenging for the title that season. The atmosphere was absolutely electric with it being 1-1 going into the last 20 minutes. I would have loved to have got on against such opposition but I don’t think the manager had the confidence to throw me on in such a big game.

Patrik Berger and Danny Murphy both scored screamers at the Kop end late on to give us a 3-1 win and the dressing room was absolutely bouncing.

Little did I know then, however, that the Leeds game would be the last time I would be in the first-team matchday squad for Liverpool.

I WANT TO PLAY FOR LIVERPOOL

Players like Fowler, Owen and Camara were all returning from injury and the club had just spent £11m on Emile Heskey, who was a perfect fit in the dressing room and was a massively underrated player for us.

I kept playing well and scoring for the reserves which was all I could do. I got two at home to Blackburn in a 3-3 draw, where I partnered Robbie Fowler up front, another two in a 6-2 win at Barnsley and a last-minute goal at home to Aston Villa in another victory.

It was in this game against Villa that Dario Gradi saw me play and the next day Gérard Houllier called me in to his office to tell me that Championship side Crewe Alexandra wanted to take me on loan for a month and he felt it would benefit me to go and play regular first-team games at that level.

I agreed and was to join one of my Liverpool team-mates, Stephen Wright, who was already on loan at Gresty Road. So for the next month I was to get my first taste of football away from what I had always known.