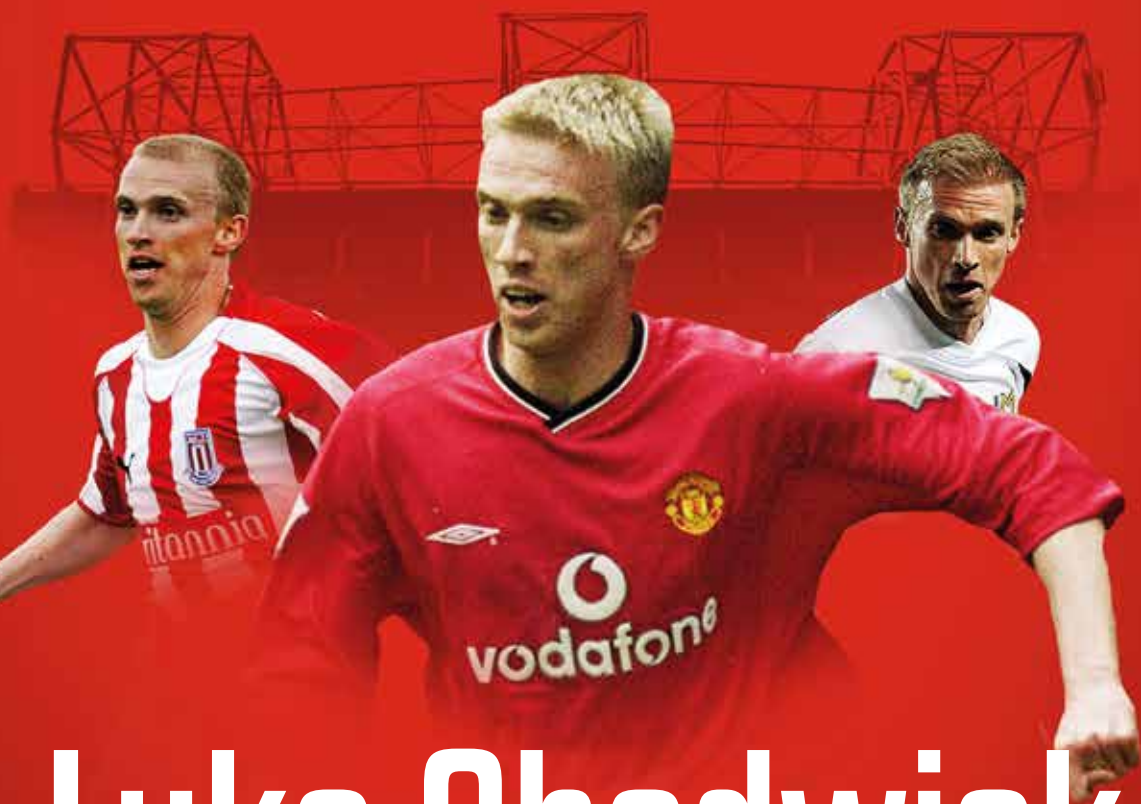


MATHEW MANN

Not Just a Pretty Face

Football, Fun and Despair



Luke Chadwick

Foreword by Dion Dublin

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Contents

Foreword by Dion Dublin	7
1. Falling in Love	9
2. From Boy to Man (United)	25
3. Fun and Games	37
4. Bambi on Ice	49
5. My Hero and the Villans.	56
6. A Royal Adventure.	64
7. Who's Luke Chadwick?	73
8. We Are the Champions	84
9. They Think It's All Over – I Wish It Was.	97
10. Big-Time Chadwick	105
11. The Three Lions	121
12. Not the Same Player	129
13. You See What Happens	137
14. Fish and Chips and WKD.	151
15. Next Stop – Hammer Time	162
16. Don't Mess with Bywater	176
17. The Dutch Experiment	181
18. Happily Ever After.	194
19. In the Wars.	197
20. Dream to Despair	207
21. The Nightmare Continues	216
22. More Painful than Childbirth	225
23. Smashing the Guvnor	236
24. Here's to You, Mr Robinson	244
25. Heartbreak Again	253
26. End of an Era	261
27. Coming Home	270
28. What Next?	284
29. Putting the Fun Back into Football	293
Acknowledgements	298
Career Stats	300
Honours	301

Chapter 1

Falling in Love

I WAS six years old when I fell in love for the first time. Not with a girl; at such a tender age I was yet to develop an interest in the fairer sex. No, my love affair was with the game of football, and it has lasted a lifetime.

I grew up in Meldreth, a sleepy village in south Cambridgeshire. The most exciting event of the year, the one that all the villagers looked forward to, was the annual fete, which took place each summer at the Holy Trinity Church, just around the corner from the council house that I lived in with my mum, dad and older brother, Carl.

We were fortunate enough to have quite a large garden with lots of space to run around and play in. My earliest memory is of playing football in that garden with Dad and Carl. Most of my childhood memories involve football.

I vividly remember the 1987 FA Cup Final; Coventry City beat Tottenham Hotspur to win their first FA Cup. Cup final day was a big thing back then, with the build-up to the match shown all day live on the BBC. My eyes were glued to the television most of the day, but at one point I went outside to the garden and watched Dad and Carl heading the ball to each

other. I tried to join in, but I couldn't do it, so Mum came out, picked the ball up and tapped it between my head and hers, pretending that I was heading the ball.

My parents separated later that year. A few years after, Dad remarried and his new wife, Joy, became a part of the family until she sadly passed away after a long battle with cancer.

Even though my parents divorced, Carl and I still saw a lot of Dad. On one of our days out, Dad took me to watch my first-ever live football game, and my life was changed forever.

Cambridge United was our nearest professional club and my maiden voyage to the Abbey Stadium absolutely blew my mind. I don't remember the opponents from that day, but I'll never forget the emotions that I experienced being so close to the action; the smell of the turf, the sound of the crowd, the feel of the atmosphere – that was the moment when I fell in love with football. From that moment on, everything in my life revolved around football.

Not long after that match, Dad bought me my first Cambridge kit. It was all yellow with a black V-neck collar, black stripes down the sides, and 'LYNFOX' (the club sponsors) emblazoned in red across the middle. I wore that shirt at every opportunity and wouldn't take it off if I could help it.

Not long after I visited the Abbey Stadium, my grandma took me on another exciting trip – to Cambridge city centre to buy my first pair of football boots. It was such a momentous occasion and, after much deliberation, I chose a pair of Mitre Pulsa boots, the latest release with different types of studs. They were black (*all* football boots were black in those days) with the white sideways V logo on the side and Mitre written in white on the tongue.

The following week I turned up, shiny boots in hand, at Meldreth Primary School for the Saturday Morning Club. This was my first experience of organised football and, by the end of the session, my obsession with the beautiful game had begun.

* * *

I was an incredibly shy child. I don't remember this, but my mum has told me that I never wanted to go to nursery. As soon as we arrived, I begged her to take me home. I was a real mummy's boy and didn't want to go anywhere without her.

For the first two years of primary school, I cried my eyes out every morning when I was dropped off. Mum would always tell me to go in, but when my grandma took me, I knew that if I kicked up enough of a fuss, she'd take me back to her house and I'd miss school. They were the best days. I missed so many days of school that it got to the stage where my teacher created a reward chart, and I was given a star to stick on it every time I attended.

It wasn't that I disliked school as such, I just felt very uncomfortable when I wasn't with my parents, grandparents or Carl. I eventually came out of my shell and became quite popular at school – probably because I was good at sports – but it was a real challenge during those early days.

It didn't help that I had a speech impediment, which meant I struggled to get my words out and often said the wrong thing. I became very self-conscious, and my shyness intensified. Eventually, I saw a speech therapist who was a huge help and helped me to improve the way I spoke. I quite liked those visits because the sessions were held during the day, so I got to leave school early. Any excuse!

I longed for the summer holidays when we'd go up to Kirkham, Lancashire, to visit my dad's parents, my nana (Mavis) and grandpa (Harry). They owned a butcher's shop, and we stayed with them in the flat above. My middle name is Harry after my grandpa.

Like most kids that age, I didn't have any career aspirations. My grandad on my mother's side (Derek) and uncles all worked in the train industry, and I quite liked the idea of following in their footsteps. I was interested in trains as a young child. My maternal grandparents' house was attached to Meldreth railway station. I remember being incredibly excited when my grandad arranged for me to ride in the front of a train one day. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and Auntie Diane, who lived with them. My grandad sometimes took me to school in his three-wheeled van, which was an adventure.

Dad was a delivery driver, driving vans and lorries all over the UK, and Mum worked at a place called Intascreen, an industrial printer. Back then the company was located in Meldreth, which was great as she could walk to work, but they've since moved four miles up the road to Royston – and she still works there now! She must have been with them for over 40 years.

So, although I didn't have any idea of what I wanted to do when I grew up, as soon as I started playing football, I knew that I wanted to play it as often as I could. It was so much fun.

I endured the various subjects my teachers were trying to teach me because being at school meant that I got to play football at breaktime and lunchtime – the green grass of the playing field when it was dry and the gravel on the playground if it rained. After school I'd hone my skills in the back garden, nothing

technical, just having fun pretending to score the winning goal in a cup final.

During the school holidays, Carl and I would ride our bikes to the park to meet up with Robbie and Peter Askham, friends of ours who lived in the same village, and play football and cricket all day. When we felt hungry, we'd cycle to my grandparents' house, where my grandma (Lorna) would make us sandwiches and a drink. After we'd refuelled, it was back to the park to play various football games, like headers and volleys.

Carl was a talented footballer who did really well at grassroots level. He signed for Eternit Colts, a local junior team, and I stood on the side of the pitch and watched him play, desperate to be there out on the pitch myself, playing in a proper game. My time came when I was eight and I followed in Carl's footsteps by signing for Eternit Colts' feeder team, the Melbourn Tigers, coached by Colin Barnard and Martin Winter.

In August 1989, I put on the yellow-and-green Tigers strip for the first time and made my footballing debut in a friendly match against St Thomas Colts. We drew the game 1-1 and I scored our goal. I received the ball from midfield, took it around the goalkeeper and slotted the ball into the back of the net. This was the first goal I ever scored in an actual net. It was the first of many.

Grassroots football was very different then to how it is now. Perhaps the biggest difference is that we played on 11-a-side pitches with full-sized goals, which was absolutely crazy considering the size of us.

We were really successful during my first season. I was freakishly fast, much quicker than anyone else at my school, so I was put up front and I scored a ridiculous number of goals. My

team-mates soon devised a system that fully utilised my pace; they'd smash the ball over the opposition's defence for me to chase after. Sometimes our keeper would launch the ball, which would often bounce over the defenders' heads for me to run on to, take it up to the tiny goalkeeper standing between the huge goalposts, and I'd knock the ball past him into the net.

There was one game when we beat Hitchin Rangers 29-0, with yours truly bagging 13! It was a complete mismatch and probably wasn't great for anyone's development, but that didn't stop us from scoring goal after goal.

After that match, everyone at school knew my name, which was a bit strange. I didn't court the spotlight and I was still really uncomfortable in most social situations. Once I'd got to know people, I was absolutely fine; it was just hard at the start because I was so timid. The football pitch was the one place where I felt truly free; somewhere I could express myself. The game gave me an opportunity to display my personality and I had to learn to accept the attention that inevitably came my way.

My goalscoring exploits garnered interest from the local newspaper, the *Royston Crow*. It gave me a real buzz to see my name in the headlines, and after my 13-goal haul against Hitchin when I won the Pro Hot Shot award, which was a bag of football-related goodies, given out weekly to local kids who'd achieved something special in junior football. Mum took me to the *Royston Crow* offices to receive my award. There was a photographer there to capture the moment when I was presented with my bag, and I felt so awkward. I loved reading about myself in the newspaper, but I certainly didn't enjoy having to pose for a photograph that I knew would be in the paper.

By the end of the season, I'd scored an incredible 104 goals! Unsurprisingly, I received the top-scorer award at our end-of-season presentation evening.

The only disappointment during my inaugural football season was the cup final against Radburn Rangers, which was held at Garden Walk, the home of our local semi-pro side Royston Town. At the time it was the best ground I'd ever played at; there was a stand along the touchline and even floodlights. But rather than savouring the excitement of the occasion, like all my team-mates, nerves got the better of me. There was an enormous amount of pressure on my young shoulders; I was the one who scored the goals, I was the match-winner. Everyone expected me to do well.

Radford were a very good team, and I wasn't having as much joy as I usually did during the match. I struggled to make an impact and I came off injured with the scores level. I can't recall if I was genuinely injured or if I'd just told the coaches that I was, to get out of the game, but what I do remember is that the game felt too important. I crumbled in what to me felt like a high-pressure situation. We lost the game in a penalty shoot-out. I was devastated.

Despite that setback, football had consumed me and there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to become a professional footballer. My dream was to play for Cambridge United, the club that I'd fallen head over heels in love with ever since my first visit to the Abbey Stadium. My passion for Cambridge coincided with the best period in the club's history.

Cambridge United didn't become a Football League club until 1970, eventually reaching the dizzying heights of the old Second Division (now Championship), before plummeting back

down to the Fourth, where it languished until 1990. That was when former player John Beck was appointed as manager.

During his first season at the helm, Beck led Cambridge to the quarter-final of the FA Cup and won promotion to the Third Division. Twelve months later, the Us reached the quarter-final of the cup again and also claimed the Third Division title. The following year, Beck was on the brink of achieving a third successive promotion, but a play-off semi-final defeat to Leicester City ended Cambridge's dream of reaching the inaugural Premier League. It was a magical time to be a supporter.

I knew each member of the team off by heart and can still reel off the names of all the players because I watched them intensely each week. Everyone who donned the gold shirt was a hero to me. Dion Dublin and John Taylor, the two main strikers, stood out because I played in the same position, but others like Chris Leadbitter, Lee Philpott, Colin Bailie and Phil Chapple were also held in high regard. Gary Clayton, a midfielder, was the player I used to look up to. I don't know why because he didn't always start the games, but he had a knack for coming off the bench and grabbing a goal. I've actually got a photo of Gary on the wall behind the desk that I work at.

Phil Chapple presented me with an award at one of my junior club presentation evenings and that was amazing for me as a young supporter. I couldn't believe that I was shaking hands with someone who actually played for Cambridge. I was star-struck.

Cambridge got a bit of stick from the purists because of the particular brand of football that John Beck set them up to play. It was very direct, but at the same time very entertaining.

The aim was to ping the ball out wide for the wingers to get it into the box. The ground staff would let the grass grow long in the corners to stop the ball from running out of play when the defenders launched it down the flanks. This style of play created so many chances for Dublin and Taylor and I always found the games exhilarating.

The most exciting match that I ever attended was in January 1989 when Chris Turner was the manager and John Beck was still a player. I'd written a letter to the club asking if I could be a ball boy at one of their home games. I couldn't believe it when I received a reply inviting me to be a ball boy for the match against Tranmere Rovers. I was only eight years old at the time and felt so nervous standing on the side of the pitch. My spot was directly in front of the away fans, and they were shouting and swearing all game – I'd never heard language like it before and I stood there like a statue, feeling terrified!

In the second half, I was moved to a different area, in front of the home fans, who were a bit better behaved. One of the kids in the stand dropped their yellow balloon and it blew onto the sideline. The child's dad asked me to pass it back to him, but I didn't know if I was allowed to even look at, let alone speak to, anyone in the stand, so I completely ignored them, and the balloon flew off into the sky!

It was such a great day for me, that feeling of being so close to the pitch and to my heroes. It was surreal when the ball came to me, and I had to pick it up and throw it to one of the players. The whole day felt like a dream come true.

That was the only time I was lucky enough to be a ball boy, so for the rest of the matches I had to be content to watch the game from my seat in the Main Stand or, when that was sold

out, I stood in the Habbin Stand with Dad and Carl. When I got older, I'd go with my school friends or the lads I played football with and stand in the Newmarket Road End, behind the goal. That was my favourite.

Dad was from Bury and was actually a Bury fan, but he took a keen interest in his local club. Carl was a Cambridge fan, but I was a fanatic. I loved everything about the club and was desperate to go and watch them every week. I used to check the fixture list on Teletext and then pester my parents to take me.

Teletext was my go-to source for all the latest football information in those pre-internet days. It's where I developed my extensive knowledge of football. Every day after school I'd head into the lounge, pick up the remote control, and key in the magic number 302. Within seconds I was presented with an Aladdin's cave of football news. I devoured everything I read and eventually learned the names of almost every player who played in the top four divisions of English football.

Mum did the pools each week and received the latest card on a Monday for the matches taking place the following Saturday. I studied each and every game and then went and played them out in the back garden, doing the commentary in my head (sometimes out loud if I was on my own) and pretending to be players from both teams. There wasn't a great deal of football on TV in those days, so although I knew the name and position of each player, I had no idea what most looked like – or even how good they were!

I recognised the top-flight players, of course, because their images appeared in the *Shoot* and *Match* magazines that I used to read whenever I could get my hands on a copy. I also collected Panini stickers, mainly during the international tournaments,

but my biggest passion was VHS tapes. Whenever anyone asked me what I'd like for my birthday or when I compiled my annual list for Santa, I always requested a football video tape. If I had any money, I'd go to Woolworths (sadly, like Teletext, no longer here) and peruse the tapes sitting on the shelves before finally selecting the latest addition to my growing collection. *101 Great Goals, Goals Galore, Best of the Eighties*. I watched them all, over and over again.

By the time I'd turned nine, football had taken over my life – and I couldn't have been happier.

After my successful debut season, I left the Melbourn Tigers and joined Eternit Colts. Eternit was a local company that produced fibre cement, and they sponsored the team. I settled in well at my new club and continued to score goals at will, which made me feel more comfortable. Whether it was the coaches or my peers, I always felt better when people told me that I was good. It wasn't long before my form attracted the attention of the county team, and I played a few games for the Cambridge League's representatives.

Then I received the best news ever – Cambridge United wanted me to attend a trial at their School of Excellence. I was absolutely buzzing, especially as my team-mate Michael Wagstaff, Waggy as he was known, was also invited.

For three weeks, on a Monday night, we travelled to Bottisham College for an indoor session. It was about half an hour away from home, and one of our coaches used to drive us there and back. Unfortunately, the training was absolute chaos. There were so many kids in the sports hall – health and safety wouldn't allow it now – and it was impossible for anyone to give the best account of themselves.

At the end of the three-week trial, I was told that I wouldn't be invited back. Waggy didn't make it either. To say I was heartbroken is an understatement. That was the first time I'd ever experienced rejection in football.

I went straight from my final session with training to Cubs. I was still wearing my kit and shin pads when I arrived, and the Akela asked me how the session had gone. Tears welled up in my eyes as I explained to her what had happened. I'm not making excuses, but the way the sessions were run meant I hadn't been given the opportunity to show the coaches what I could do. Not that I'm still bitter!

I was upset, obviously, but I was also resilient, and it didn't really prey on my mind once I'd got over the initial disappointment. It helped that I was still scoring goals for fun when I played for Eternit Colts and Cambridgeshire Schools, and that gave me a huge amount of inner confidence. A massive reason that I enjoyed a lengthy career in football was the success that I enjoyed during my formative years. I honestly believe that things would have been very different for me if I'd grown up somewhere else, somewhere with a hotbed of footballing talent. I grew up playing against little village teams in Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire and my pace and ability at that age ensured I stood out.

One day, I received a letter, completely out of the blue, asking if I'd like to play for a team called East Anglia Boys. They were a big club, ran by Martin Lacey, that went on tours overseas and I'd still be allowed to continue playing with my mates for Eternit Colts.

My first tour with East Anglia was over in the Netherlands, and I found it very tough. Mum and Carl came with me and

the team on the coach and I was the only one there who had a family member with them. I wasn't able to mix with the other children particularly well because of my shyness and, as a result, I didn't do very well during the tournament. I was a substitute most of the time, which was something that I wasn't used to. East Anglia Boys was a very strong side and we beat most teams by a margin of seven or eight goals and inevitably reached the final.

During the final of the tournament, our goalkeeper suffered an injury, and I was brought on to replace him between the sticks. We already had a solid lead, and the opposition didn't have enough of the ball to trouble me. We won the match convincingly. At the full-time whistle, I burst into tears. It was the first time I'd ever cried after a game. I don't know if it was because we'd won the tournament or because I'd struggled to bond and felt completely out of my comfort zone for the entire five-day trip. All I know is that I felt overcome with emotion and that memory has stuck with me.

I eventually settled in, made friends, rediscovered my form and I went on further tours with East Anglia Boys, to Belgium, Denmark and even out to America.

The second time that I cried on the pitch was at the end of one season when Eternit Colts were playing in a title decider. We should have won that match but didn't and I felt so guilty because I'd missed a penalty (not the last one I'd miss either!). I was distraught and, as I trudged off the pitch, Mum came over to me and said, 'You play football because you love it, Luke. Don't ever let it make you cry.'

I'm eternally grateful to her for giving me that advice and I called on her words throughout my career whenever things

weren't going well for me. Every time I encountered a challenge, I took myself back to those early days of playing football.

Football is one of the things that makes you happy. That's why you do it became my mantra.

I tried to keep that childhood innocence when the game was all about fun and enjoyment. Obviously, it changes slightly when it becomes a job, but I constantly reminded myself of how lucky I was to be doing something that I loved.

I didn't have a lot of natural technical ability, I developed technique later on, but what did come naturally was my speed, and that allowed me to score goals. I spent hours and hours on my own playing football in our back garden or at the park with my friends. We had a cow field next to our garden, with a fence in between to stop the cows from coming too close. Concrete pillars separated the fence panels, and I used them to play one-tvos. When I finished my career, I realised that one-tvos were one of my biggest strengths.

It's a totally different structure for kids now, with fantastic coaches who hold the relevant badges to help children improve their technique. I don't think I'd have enjoyed that, though. I was lucky to be given total freedom to play football and that's what kept my enjoyment going. In my opinion, there's no greater teacher than actually playing in a game. When you spend that much time doing something, you're bound to get better.

I was starting to think that I was going to become a professional footballer. In fact, I *knew* that I was going to become a professional footballer. I wasn't being arrogant; I just couldn't envisage a future that didn't involve me making a living playing the beautiful game. My life was centred around football. Anything else was just an inconvenience.

To achieve my dream, I knew that I had to move to bigger and better teams. I couldn't just continue to play with my mates, or I wouldn't get noticed.

When I was 11, I joined a club based in Newport Pagnell, near Milton Keynes. Roy Ferguson was the manager, and he was building a top team with the best local talent. It wouldn't be the last time I was managed by a Mr Ferguson!

The quality of players – both team-mates and opponents – was a big step up from the Colts, but that didn't faze me at all. I was one of the top performers for East Anglia Boys, and they were a team full of lads who were playing schoolboy football for pro clubs.

From there I had trials at Ipswich Town and then Norwich City. I went on a trip to Wales with Norwich, but the lack of public transport meant that I couldn't sign for either of them.

I didn't do very well at school because I just wasn't interested. I probably performed worse when I started to have trials with professional clubs because in my mind I didn't need to worry about school or concentrate. What was the point?

In 1993, at the age of 12, I was presented with a fantastic opportunity – I became a School of Excellence player for Premier League giants Arsenal. Although it was around 50 miles from my house in Meldreth to London, it was fairly easy for me to get there because I could catch the train from my grandparents' house to Finsbury Park. From there it was a short walk to the famous marble halls of Highbury.

I did feel a bit more pressure when I stepped up to play for the Gunners, but the pressure was more about the social aspect than the football side of things. The second that I stepped onto the football pitch I felt at home and all my shyness evaporated. As soon as I started scoring goals, I gained the respect of my

peers and that helped me to build relationships and make friends. Obviously, the games were more challenging than those at a grassroots level, but I never felt that I was out of my depth. The biggest change for me was that I had to get used to not scoring ten goals a game!

Two players that I played with at Arsenal stood out: Stuart Taylor and Ashley Cole. Stuart was a fantastic goalkeeper who excelled at that age and went on to have a fantastic career with Arsenal, Aston Villa and Leicester City, among others. Ashley was an unbelievable player who played as a left-winger then, before becoming one of the best left-backs in the world, winning every trophy going and playing over a hundred times for England.

The only downside was that I wasn't allowed to play for Eternit Colts or East Anglia Boys anymore, although I was still able to represent Cambridgeshire Schools on a Saturday, before playing for Arsenal on the Sunday. I was churning out games without thinking too much about it. I loved playing in matches, but I didn't particularly enjoy the training that came with signing for Arsenal.

Training took place in the indoor hall at Highbury on a Wednesday evening but, more often than not, I'd make up a tummy ache and ask Mum to let them know that I wouldn't be going. That's no reflection on my coaches, they were fantastic; I just didn't like the structure that surrounded the sessions. I was a playground player; I wanted the ball to myself so I could dribble and score, and I found training to be a real chore.

It was a huge boost to my ego when I told my school friends that I was playing for Arsenal. Everything was going to plan, and I was loving life. I didn't think things could get better. But then the biggest club in the world came calling – Manchester United.