

GQ SPORT

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The 60 Million Dollar Man

Meet Luol Deng, the British basketball player on the brink of US superstardom
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When the drugs do work...

How medical science is creating a new breed of super-athlete
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When the cheering stops...

Special report: Henry Winter on the perils and pitfalls of life after the Premiership. Featuring exclusive interviews with Jamie Redknapp, Tony Adams, Stan Collymore, Lee Sharpe and Paul Gascoigne

PLUS!

Andy Murray wins Wimbledon and Djibril Cissé drinks milk!

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A pair of worn, dark-colored football boots with white studs on the soles are hanging from a chrome shower head. The shower head is mounted on a wall of white tiles with a decorative border of red and blue tiles. The scene is lit from the side, creating strong shadows.

THEY THINK IT'S ALL OVER...

*How does a footballer cope when the whistle is blown on his career? **Henry Winter** assesses the perils of a life suddenly shorn of adulation, and in a series of exclusives, *GQ Sport* asks **Jamie Redknapp**, **Tony Adams**, **Lee Sharpe**, **Stan Collymore** and **Paul Gascoigne** what it's been like to hang up their boots*

It's painful being pushed off a pedestal. The mad, monied world of the Premiership sees many footballers up for life, but screws others up for life as well. A vault full of Sky lucre, a cellar full of Cristal, and Bentleys bumper-to-bumper on the gravelled drive cannot fill the silence when the cheering dies. After reaching for the stars many players are left touching the void.

Significant second careers beckon for the talented few, such as Mark Hughes (management), Vinnie Jones (acting) and Gary Lineker (broadcasting), but such adventures must feel like nipping up Ben Nevis after ten years scaling the Himalayas. Nothing replaces the adrenaline rush and acclaim of match day. Nothing.



THE PREMIERSHIP'S MASSIVE BOX-OFFICE APPEAL CAN MAKE THE FINAL CURTAIN FEEL LIKE A GUILLOTINE

Footballers have always found it hard leaving stages like White Hart Lane for civvy street, but the Premiership's massive box-office appeal makes the final curtain feel like a guillotine.

Pampered by clubs, kept in a state of suspended adolescence by dressing-room banter, most players can look after themselves on the pitch, but not off it. Released from Shangri-la, they suddenly have to organise family holidays, call plumbers, renew passports while Sky Sports News plays in the background as a rolling reminder of the life they miss so badly. When Father Time or Mother Injury drags a player screaming into retirement, he still has decades of existence left to negotiate. The clock, finest Swiss of course, ticks slowly.

Public sympathy for 35-year-old ex-footballers with time and money on their hands is understandably minimal. Most of those who have ridden the Orient Express of gravy-trains are financially secure and can withstand life's little tempests. Sky's largesse and the liberation of Bosman – paving the way for players to become free agents – has turned dressing rooms into millionaires' clubs. Premiership car parks now resemble Park Lane showrooms.

Was never thus. Bobby Charlton's ambition when he started out was to put aside £100 a year, play for 20 years and save up enough to buy a greengrocer like his cousin's back in Ashington. Tom Finney weaved his magic for 20 years and raked in £30,000 tops, a sum Thierry Henry, Frank Lampard and Michael Owen earn every few days.

Each of England's World Cup heroes of 1966 was presented with a cheque for £2,000 by a slightly grudging FA. Multiply that figure by 100 for Becks and co for a similar achievement in Germany this year, plus even more in book



A select few footballers remain in the limelight post-retirement, such as Radio Times cover star and BBC pundit Gary Lineker (top right) with Alan Hansen and Mark Lawrenson, May 2002; top left, May 1986) and actor Vinnie Jones, above in 1998's *Lock, Stock...*

deals, boot deals and assorted other sponsorships. Being a gifted Premiership professional like Lampard, Steven Gerrard or Rio Ferdinand is akin to standing at a Las Vegas fruit machine with three cherries stuck on hold.

Millions more are generated through canny outlays, often in property, which has boomed along with the Premiership. "We all live in a Robbie Fowler home," chant fans at the lord of all footballing landlords. "Robbie's got properties [more than 70] and has done really well," observes Gordon Taylor, the chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association, who spends much of his week ensuring his members are well-equipped financially and emotionally for retirement. "A lot of the investments made for players are good. But football's in the blood. Do they want to sit in the sun in Dubai? The majority of their life is still in front of them.

"Players' characters are tested during their playing career, with injuries or loss of form, but the biggest problem is coping with finishing the game. A lot of former players get into

trouble. It must be like film stars when suddenly they move down from top of the bill. They are no longer the centre of attention.

Yet they are at an age when their contemporaries are halfway up or at the top of the ladder of their careers. It's like snakes and ladders and you have fallen all the way down."

A useful, silk-lined parachute is provided by the Premiership's average annual wage of £400,000. When a player's number is held up for the final time, the problem is more mental than fiscal. Being cut away from the camaraderie of a dressing room is like leaving a family, even for intelligent,

well-balanced souls like Alan Smith, the former Arsenal star now building a media career with Sky and in newspapers. "The change in lifestyle really hit me," says Smith. "I had 20 close friends at a football club. I saw them every morning, had a laugh, went training, had a laugh, had lunch, had a laugh and then went home to the family. It was a great existence."

Amid the endless banter of the Arsenal dressing room, medals kept arriving. Championships. A European Cup-Winners' Cup. FA Cup. League Cup. Great days. But then injury, that serial stalker of sporting talent, struck and Smith was forced to retire. "I woke up one morning and I'd lost a lot of those mates," he adds. "The moment you are not contracted to a club any more, you become an outsider. The players try to make you feel welcome but you are an outsider. I went to say goodbye to the lads at Arsenal and it was hard, really awkward. I just wanted to get out and get away. Alan Hansen said that he didn't go back to Liverpool's training ground for ten years."

Stepping through the gates of Melwood for Hansen or London Colney for Smith would immediately bring all the memories flooding back. Some cannot cope with the glory ending so early. "Lads do go off the rails," says Smith. "Players miss the adulation. There is nothing better than scoring in front of 40,000 fans."

When the cheering stops, the doubts begin for many. "Most ex-players are athletic Peter Pans who don't want to grow up," says Helen Slingsby, a Berkshire-based career coach whose thesis, "The Ecstasy, The Agony And The Ordinary – Retirement Experiences Of Professional Footballers", has just been published by Birkbeck College.

"Some players go into denial that their career is over, then they experience feelings of worthlessness and depression," continues Slingsby. "I interviewed nine players in one day and I was emotionally exhausted. They felt their lives had been lived and nothing mattered again. One of them said about his retirement, 'It was like someone had killed me.'

"Another had a physical and mental breakdown. He was still playing and went to ▶

► see a specialist who told him his brain was telling his body to shut down because his career was coming to an end. For eight months he was a wreck. His marriage broke up.

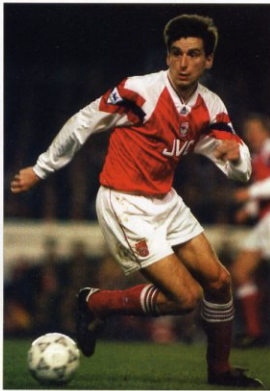
"One ex-player was incapable of leaving the house. He stayed in bed all day. Some of the ex-players have mood changes. They are physical people and after retirement they channel the aggression inwardly and towards their family. One became an alcoholic. Another admitted that he 'was not the best person to live with.'" Divorce, a heightened reality with ex-players struggling to handle their drop in status, drains the money accrued during the good times.

Violence, drink and depression plague some of those who cannot believe their days in the limelight are over. They plunge into the heart of darkness. "While there are better-known clinics like the Priory, we have a good relationship with the Sporting Chance clinic because of Tony Adams [the former Arsenal skipper set up Sporting Chance in 2000]," says Taylor. "Players are keener to go there. They feel more comfortable. It doesn't have such celebrity status. We've had a number of success stories there, players who couldn't come to terms with being out of the game and had addictive problems. The strength of being a competitor and having this will to win is also a weakness. They can't cope when life doesn't seem to be letting them win."

The dying of the light means many continue football in any capacity. "I can remember pulling my hamstring on a beach in Wales, aged 45, running against my youngsters," laughs Taylor. "I still want to win." Players love football and cannot leave it behind. One press match with



PFA chief Gordon Taylor (left top) recommends former pros with addiction problems attend Sporting Chance (top right), a clinic set up by Tony Adams. Below: Adams' former Arsenal teammate, Alan Smith, has forged a career in media since he retired



and went golfing, but I really missed football.' No matter how much you like golf, walking the dog, DIY or gardening, football really is in your blood. It is really encouraging to see that players like Roy Keane, Gary Neville, Ryan Giggs, Phil Neville, Alan Shearer, and Gary Speed are all interested in getting into management.

"Alan Shearer has his media work," says Taylor, "and I told him: That's a good string to your bow but don't forget you might just miss the game. There's nothing wrong in doing media, because you can never be sacked for losing a game! But you are one step removed. You might just miss it and fancy leading England out and winning the World Cup one day."

Shearer has done some coaching work. Others too. The PFA dispatches coaches into training grounds like Manchester United's Carrington to help Ryan Giggs and Gary Neville acquire their coaching badges. Neville, from reports, has all the makings of an outstanding manager. On retirement, others attend the League Managers' Association's Certificate in Applied Management course at Warwick Business School. Recent alumni include Stuart Pearce, Mark Hughes, Keith Curle, Kevin Blackwell and Tony Adams.

Planning for the dreaded retirement day is vital. "Only one of the players I interviewed quit of his own volition," says Slingsby, outlining the case of one international who simply lost his hunger. He told Slingsby, "I was driving down the M6, going into training and I had everything going for me: a great family, a good career. But I knew that day I had to stop. So I rang the club on my mobile and told them I had a cold. I retired. You needed to kill to be at the top. I wouldn't think twice about breaking your leg." Not any more. His fire had gone out.

He had no regrets, as he bullishly informed Slingsby. "I played for England in a World Cup. I've got the T-shirt and that means 'fuck you'. I've been to the pinnacle. You don't get higher." He took control of his destiny and exited stage left before the applause subsided. Most cannot dictate their departure date from a Premiership world that is their profession and passion.

The main problem players have in making a happy transition is that footballers are really mollycoddled," says Slingsby. "Everything is done for them. They never fully grow up when they are playing football. It's then a shock to look after themselves. I talked to these ex-players and got the impression that some of them were stuck in adolescence. One of them told me, 'We are all big babies at heart.'"

Even when embarking on new jobs, former players will always be defined by their playing careers, as Slingsby discovered. "I interviewed one guy who got injured, retired, went into a depression and eventually got a job selling insurance. He went to see a business, didn't sell anything and as he was walking out, he heard someone say, 'That used to be so-and-so.'" ►



'THE MOMENT YOU'RE NOT CONTRACTED TO A CLUB ANY MORE YOU BECOME AN OUTSIDER' – ALAN SMITH

the Welsh saw the England team of hacks, this observer included, lining up in the tunnel for a fundraiser in Cardiff wondering how the Welsh could possibly rustle up an XI. Then the door to the Welsh dressing-room opened and out sprinted Neville Southall, Ian Rush, Kevin Ratcliffe and Mark Hughes. OK, Southall didn't sprint, but he treated the game with the seriousness of a cup final.

During his days managing Blackburn Rovers, Graeme Souness was so competitive in training, challenging for every ball as if in his Liverpool pomp, that eventually he had to stop himself joining in the five-a-sides. A player cannot turn off a competitive streak when handed a P45.

When Terry Butcher graced the England media XI, he bawled out any team-mate who looked slovenly or had a shirt hanging out. "Shirt in – you're playing for England!" Butch would scream. Heavens, it was only a kickabout against pasty-faced Moldovans in trainers, but for Butch it was a World Cup Final. One tackle

on a Moldovan forward launched the poor man into space. Even when the legs of the old pros slow, the heart and mind keep pumping with determination. A lion like Butcher does not lose his hunger overnight.

As well as his popular punditry for Radio Five Live, Butcher manages Motherwell. The desire to stay connected with the dressing room, training ground and match day means many ex-players flock to the dugout. "The next best thing to playing is coaching or being a manager," says Taylor. "It's the banter in the dressing-room. There is nothing better than being on the training ground, a beautiful morning in summer or a cold, damp, icy morning in winter. They are getting paid for something they love doing. The feeling of fitness is never equalled, to be at the absolute peak of ability.

"When Kevin Keegan was managing England I once saw him in the team hotel and asked him why he came back. Kevin said, 'I thought retirement would be good. I got away from it all,

► He turned around and said: 'I'm still so-and-so. I just don't play football any more.'

Even in a country with a distinct *Schadenfreude* streak, shock is still evinced at seeing the mighty fallen. A string of former Chelsea players now drive cabs. Neil Webb was a creative force for Nottingham Forest, moved to Manchester United for £1.5m and represented England 26 times before becoming a postman. Poster-boys of the past look strange in mortal occupations, but they have to make ends meet when they meet the end of their career.

Many talkative characters like Smith, Garth Crooks, Mark Bright, Jamie Redknapp, John Barnes and Ian Wright forge careers in broadcasting. "A lot of former players are attracted to journalism, TV or radio," says Taylor. "We have a whole network of players for the Press Association, who are out and about on Saturday, recording statistics. The former players have loved that because it keeps them involved in the game. They don't do it for the money. They do it to stay involved and make contacts."

Football remains an addiction requiring feeding. Smith was bright at school, and destined for university until Leicester City swooped, but most footballers do not have academic skills to fall back on. "Many youngsters are attracted to clubs from the age of nine, and their parents think they are going to be the next David Beckham," warns Taylor. "They can't focus on their schoolwork to the same extent, because they have stars in their eyes. Homework goes out of the window when scouts from Manchester United come calling." Smith turned down United's overtures and eventually played with distinction for Arsenal.



Above: ex-England midfielder Neil Webb on his post-Premiership rounds in 2004, and (below) delivering for Nottingham Forest, scoring in the 1989 League Cup Final at Wembley Stadium



NEIL WEBB PLAYED FOR NOTTS FOREST, MANCHESTER UNITED AND ENGLAND BEFORE BECOMING A POSTMAN

After gracing Premiership penalty boxes, the former England forward is now a familiar figure in the nation's press boxes. "I got on with building up another career. I had a limited number of options. Some lads have always been natural businessmen. Lee [Dixon] has done well with his restaurants. Andy Townsend is involved in an alarm company that does security for homes." Townsend also draws on his natural wit and knowledge of football all over the country to entertain followers of ITV and talkSPORT. Dixon is settling in promisingly at the BBC.

Brian Marwood, an old Arsenal colleague of Smith and Dixon, is a big noise at Nike. Warren Barton, once of Wimbledon and Newcastle United, has a travel business. Gudni Bergsson, the popular former Spurs and Bolton defender, is a successful lawyer in Reykjavik. David Ginola models. Eric Cantona acts. George Weah, briefly of Chelsea, has just lost the Liberian presidential election. Gary Mabbutt helped South Africa

earn the hosting rights for the 2010 World Cup (his wife is South African). Arjan de Zeeuw will return to his medical studies in Holland when his Wigan career ends.

"But the majority of players don't make plans," says Smith. "They just put it off, saying: 'I'll play till I'm 35 and then think of what to do.' I finished unexpectedly at 32 and then suddenly had to put my mind to what to do next. For me, it was either coaching or the media. I went into writing where there is not much competition from other players." In a world where most players, past and present, have their columns ghosted by hacks, Smith's eloquent admirers of the modern game have earned him approval.

Determined to provide a safety net for players tumbling from pedestals, the PFA offers all manner of options. "We have physiotherapy courses, which have been successful in getting former players linked into clubs," enthuses Taylor. "The finest example is one of the best

physios in the country, Gary Lewin. We paid for him to go through." Lewin, who failed to make the goalkeeping grade at Highbury, is now a trusted physio for Arsenal and England.

Other vicarious involvement for former players who cannot shake the football bug is provided by work at club Academies, centres of excellence, and Football In The Community schemes. The latter setup attracts many, particularly those former players of the pre-Premiership era. Taylor will never forget one particular conversation. "I took a call from a fantastic player, an England international," recalls Taylor. "He was very open, he had come to the end, didn't know where to turn, could I help him? His marriage had broken down, he said he was drinking too much, and had lost most of his money.

"This was a lad who, a few short years before, had been top of the tree. He is now one of the leading officers in the Football In The Community scheme. We also fixed up the lad from Coventry City, David Busst, who had that bad leg break and never played again. We took him on board. He's at Coventry on the community programme and doing a good job."

The identikit image of a player retiring from the Premiership is of a thirtysomething with a lucky knee and an overflowing wallet. He is the dodgy one. The majority of the playing staff at a Premiership club will be bombed out before the riches arrive. "Of 600 boys who join full-time at 16, 500 of those will be out of the game by the time they are 21," says Taylor. "That's an even bigger blow for a young lad, to have so much confidence when you are young and then have to experience that feeling of rejection."

Rejection has always been a persistent threat to footballers of all eras, even for those nervous freshers who eventually graduate towards greatness. The players who react best to adversity, who see failure not as the act of falling down but the unwillingness to get back up again, earn the deep admiration of the players' union chief.

"Alan Ball got a free transfer from Bolton, who said he was too small ever to become a footballer, and that he should become a jockey," smiles Taylor. "Martin Dobson got a free [at Bolton Wanderers]. So did David Platt at Manchester United."

Like Platt, Robbie Savage was shown the door by United, crashed his car driving home to Wrexham, woke up in hospital and had to explain to his parents that his Premiership ambitions were in as bad a shape as his car. Savage fought back. "A few have got the resolve to recover," says Taylor.

Reaching the Premiership requires resolve in abundance. Prospering after the Premiership demands immense willpower. For all the fame and fortune, only the mentally strong survive in the outside world. Even they may reflect the best years of their life have gone. **CB**

Career coach Helen Slingsby can be contacted at www.careerbreakthrough.co.uk