

The bends keep Ryan Giggs in the game

The Manchester United football star tells that regular yoga is the secret of his long, record-breaking career – even if his mates have a field day with it



by Jeremy Taylor, November 30, 2008

Ryan Giggs is something of a footballing freak. Despite playing for Manchester United – the club that opposition fans love to hate – you will be hard pushed to find anyone who doesn't offer him grudging respect. Unlike Cristiano Ronaldo, his current teammate, or David Beckham, with whom he learnt his trade as one of United's young starlets in the 1990s, Giggsey, as he is universally known, does not attract vitriolic hatred from the stands. He is that rare thing in football parlance, a "good lad".

Partly this can be put down to his record: he is the most decorated British footballer of his generation, with four FA Cup medals, 10 league titles and two Champions League medals. He holds the record for the most club appearances – 772 – beating Bobby Charlton's long-standing record of 758, and, equally remarkably, has never been shown the red card during his games for Manchester United.

Last year he was elected to the Professional Footballers' Association team of the century and at 35 (he celebrated his birthday yesterday) he shows no sign of slowing down.

How does he account for his sporting longevity? "Yoga," he says, a little surprisingly. "It tests parts of your body that you just don't use in football. The first time I did it, about five years ago, I was completely knackered. I went home from the training ground and slept for three hours in the afternoon.

"I actually dreaded yoga for the first year because it made muscles I didn't know I had ache, although I know some of the lads think it's really a bit soft."

Yoga may not be very football but then Giggs is hardly the clichéd Premier League player, awash with cash, bad suits and gaudy jewelry. He prefers to keep out of the limelight and finds the massive sums paid to players embarrassing, suggesting some of the money ought to be diverted to support the game at grassroots level.

“A lot of average players are asking for a lot of money, which shouldn’t be the case,” he says. “It’s fine to offer top dollar to a guy who pays the club back with good performances, but when they move from club to club, that’s not honoring a contract.”

Loyalty is something Giggs knows all about. Born in Wales – much to the frustration of many an England coach, who could have benefited from his left-footed talent – he moved to Manchester with his family as a young boy, and was offered a trial for United in 1986, when he was 13.

A year later, Alex Ferguson, United’s manager, turned up at Giggs’s family home with forms. The boy was signed up. He turned professional on his 17th birthday, 18 years ago, and has never played for another club.

“It’s very important to be spotted at a young age,” he says. “You need to have a mentor who knows football and can give you the right advice. As a teenager you have no idea what it takes to be successful and get the most out of your ability. That’s why I try to put out the message that you need to train hard.

“Top-flight football isn’t easy. You need to be prepared to sacrifice things, listen to your coach and keep that desire and hunger alive.”

Although he has recently moved from his favored left-wing position to the midfield because of the loss of a yard of pace as he hits early middle age, he says his training regime is just as tough now as it ever was.

“A football player has to look after himself, keep an eye on the diet, train with lots of weights and concentrate on strengthening the muscles that are relevant to the game,” Giggs says.

“Stretching to prevent knee and ligament damage is also crucial. The longest I have ever been out with an injury is eight weeks, when I broke a metatarsal bone in my foot. I fractured my cheekbone once too but I’ve never been out for months on end. That would drive me mad. I think the way I’m built helps – being light on my feet and not too heavy.”

Tipping the scales at 160 lbs, Giggs says he has little trouble keeping his weight in check despite having a sweet tooth. “I love apple crumble and jam roly-poly pudding,” he says. “My secret vice is chocolate. I go through stages when I don’t eat any for a month, then have a couple of bars a day.

It’s not posh stuff – just Dairy Milk and chunky Kit-Kats. You can’t beat them.”

THE REGIME

7amGiggs is an early riser at his mansion in Worsley, outside Manchester. He has a gym and pool at home but prefers to exercise at the training ground. Breakfast is toast and jam, orange juice and a banana. “Most of the lads are in by 10am but I can concentrate harder when I’m there on my own,” he says.

10.30amGiggs’s session begins with warm-up exercises, followed by weight training. Team training starts with “quick feet”, which involves changing direction at speed while running between cones, and includes passing practice. The session concludes with a game and some goal-shooting practice.

1pmLunch is a carbohydrate-heavy meal of pasta and salad. Giggs drinks lots of water to keep his body hydrated. His weakness is Kit-Kats.

2pmPlayers focus on individual exercises. This is when Giggs unrolls his yoga mat and has a one-to-one session with his teacher.

6pm His evening meal is usually meat and vegetables followed by fruit, although he is partial to the occasional pudding. “I’m an M&S man,” he says.

RYAN’S PERFECT PENALTY KICK

Giggs isn’t known for taking spot kicks, but this year he scored one of the most important penalties in Manchester United’s history. In the Champions League final against Chelsea in May, he came onto the pitch only in the 87th minute, as a substitute for Paul Scholes. The game, in Moscow, went to a penalty shootout and Giggs converted what became the winning penalty, clinching victory for United in the 50th anniversary year of the Munich air disaster. Here’s how he did it.

PICK YOUR SPOT

Before the Moscow final, Giggs practiced his penalty shots by aiming at the same spot time and again. “Every time we trained I kept going for the same part of the goal. It could have been hundreds of times but the target was always the same.”

CHECK THE TURF

“It’s important to take time to check that the ground is solid where your supporting leg will stand,” says Giggs. Four years ago uneven turf sent David Beckham’s penalty kick skywards and England crashing out of Euro 2004.

HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES

Giggs takes a run-up of about eight paces. “I don’t try to trick the goalkeeper by looking at the wrong side of the goal; I’m focused totally on the ball. I focus on hitting the ball properly, keeping my head down and, hopefully, hearing a roar from the fans.”

KIT BAG

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Modern shin guards have elasticized padding that encloses the whole ankle, along with a more traditional shin pad. This new Adidas guard is resilient and comfortable.

REEBOK SPRINTFIT PRO II RS BOOTS £100 www.reebok.com

This pair of boots, endorsed by Giggs and Thierry Henry, claims to deliver a snug fit thanks to stretchable panels that bend and twist to match the natural movement of your foot.

YOGAMAD EVOLUTION YOGA MAT £27.50 www.yogamad.com

Giggs says much of the credit for overcoming injuries in his case goes to yoga. This eco-friendly mat is stickier than most and provides excellent grip for your downward-facing dog, yet it weighs only 2lb 3oz.