

SPORT

'I played my football like I gamble, drink, everything'

Football

The glory days of former Arsenal and England star Paul Merson are a sobering lesson in the dangers of addiction. **Paul Lees** reports

FOR a player who offered so much creativity and individuality, one of Paul Merson's most surprising admissions was that he suffered from a deep anxiety and nervousness before taking to the pitch.

Merson was one of the last great mavericks in the English game before things got a little more serious. A two-time league winner with George Graham's Arsenal and one of the few England players to feature at a World Cup when not playing in the top division (Middlesbrough), Merson had a career that would be the envy of most.

But there were also troubled times for the playmaker who became addicted to alcohol, cocaine and gambling.

Merson, who recently featured in a BBC documentary laying bare his own fight against addiction, was in the Island as a guest of the Jersey Gambling Commission this week to give a further insight into his battles.

There were no funny anecdotes of drunken escapades with the likes of Tony Adams, Ray Parlour and Perry Groves, or happy memories of title celebrations and wonder goals to be heard. Instead, Merson spoke frankly and, at times, emotionally of the addiction that consumes him on a daily basis.

'I would be shy and scared before a game and after I would get these heart palpitations,' he said. 'I didn't have the confidence I should have had ... I always wanted to be someone else ... only now at 53 am I comfortable in my own skin.'

He is a player who befits a bygone era and also one who may have thrived in today's technical game on the pitch and professional culture that may have protected him against his addictions off it. But he doesn't see it that way.

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Paul Merson was a maverick as a player but at 53 offers insight into a life beset by gambling and alcohol Picture: JON GUEGAN (32113611)

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Speaking to the JEP before his public appearance at the Grand Hotel, he revealed that the happiest point in his career was not during the glory years at Arsenal, which included two league titles, in 1989 and 1991, a PFA Young Player of the Year award, an FA Cup and League Cup double and a European Cup Winners Cup title.

'Aston Villa was where I played some of my best football and I loved the season at Portsmouth [when they won promotion to the Premier League in 2003],' he explained. 'At Arsenal I was living my life off the pitch as much as I was living it on it. Like anything in life, you appreciate things a lot more later on.'

'I never really played in the moment until the end of my career. I was always worried about what I was going to do next, like "would there be enough booze on the coach for the journey home". It saddens me when I look back at it. It was always just "go out and play" but my mind was on other things. I get more enjoyment out of playing now because I'm aware of what's around me. What disappointments me more than anything

with these addictions is it takes away these moments.

'My best mate, Perry Groves, could sit here and he can tell you everything that happened in a game like it was yesterday and I wouldn't have a clue and that's where I think my brain is different from other people's brains.'

Merson admits to being a 'functional addict' and his personality traits off the pitch would be reflected in his style on it, too.

'I played my football like I gamble and drink and everything else. My team-mates would always say "stop trying to hit the glory balls, stop trying to get the ball through the eye of a needle", but that's what gave me the buzz. I could do things out of the ordinary but at the same time, the addiction might have helped. You could say "it's a miracle that you won all that". I'm sitting in crack houses and I'm playing for England. People don't ever get to play for their country at football.'

It's not your natural conclusion to think that an addiction to booze, drugs and betting would be an aid to performance but then Merson has always been a bit different. Addictions, dyslexia, insecurities and a distracted mind all come as part of the same mental package. He admitted he may also have ADHD, which came as a shock when it was first put to him after he conducted clinical trials as part of the documentary. Others find validation in such diagnoses later in life but Merson is uncertain.

'It's worrying to hear that at 53, to be diagnosed with something that for me is pretty big. I think "why has no one else seen this along the way?"

'I know I'm an ill person and every day I've got to arrest that illness. I always used to think I was a bad person who was striving to be good every week. But I wasn't a bad person. It's my illness.'

Gambling laws in the UK were significantly deregulated in 2005 while in Jersey gambling remains a problem for far too many whose voices go unheard. Cyril Whelan, of the Jersey Gambling Commission, invited two ministers to attend the talk to raise awareness of the current issues, but they declined.

There are over 20 high street bookmakers in Jersey, over half of which can be found in St Helier. It is a worldwide industry worth billions of pounds and has the power to lobby and significantly influence policy and the politicians. But also, much has changed since 2005 with access to gambling apps on phones making placing a bet all too easy, with the lure of free bets by the company, advertisements are force fed to all through the television.

'That on your lap now is a casino in your pocket that is open 24 hours a day,' says Merson, pointing to a phone. 'They weren't about in 2005 and the laws have got to be changing with technology, just to make sure people don't get in trouble.'

'People can bet normally like people can drink normally. But the bookies have got to put a limit on it to deter compulsive gamblers, those people with a gambling disorder.'

'The problem is 5% of the punters are compulsive gamblers but they provide 60% of their profit - and they know that.'

'They want problem gamblers because problem gamblers don't win. People who are winning get closed down and they won't take their bets any more. It's mind blowing how they can do what they can do.'



In 1995, the Football Association announced that Merson could return to his club for training, after spending six weeks at a clinic following revelations he was a gambler, an alcoholic and a drugs user



Merson's fondest memories were of his time with Portsmouth and Aston Villa