

CHARLES, WILLIAM JOHN (1931 - 2004), footballer

Name: William John Charles
Date of birth: 1931
Date of death: 2004
Gender: Male
Occupation: footballer
Area of activity: Sports and Leisure Pursuits
Author: Geraint H. Jenkins

John Charles was born at 19 Alice Street, Cwmbwrla, Swansea, on 27 December 1931, the first of the three sons and two daughters of Edward Charles (1898-1972), a steel construction worker, and his wife Lily (née Burrige, 1902-1984). John Charles was a remarkable footballer and the first Welshman to win fame in the international arena. He was undoubtedly the finest player raised in Wales in the twentieth century.

He was educated at Cwm-du Primary School and Manselton Secondary School. His teachers soon realized that he did not have the makings of a scholar. Football was his only passion and he would often spend time in class daydreaming about his future in that field. 'Wake up Charles!', cried an angry teacher, 'You will never earn a living playing football!' It was with a sigh of relief that John bade farewell to school at the age of fourteen to join other promising apprentices on the staff of Swansea football club. As well as training at the Vetch Field, he was expected to paint, weed and tidy the terraces, and to look after the club stars' kit and boots. For some reason, although the club appreciated the young footballer's skills, he never got to wear the white jersey of the Swansea first team. Through sheer negligence, a player who was to become a brilliant international star was allowed to slip away from the club. At the age of 17, he was snatched under the noses of managers by Alf Pickard, one of the Leeds United scouts, into the hands of the club's famous manager, Major Frank Buckley. Before long he was starring as centre half in the Leeds first team. He did two years military service with the Royal Lancers and when he returned, physically stronger and more streetwise, Buckley decided to move him to the position of centre forward. This was an important turning point in his career, and from then on he scored countless goals. In 297 games for Leeds, he scored 150 goals. His talent in front of goal was the primary reason for Leeds's promotion to the First Division in 1956. His influence was so great that some commentators referred to the Leeds team as 'John Charles United'.

As far as his personal life was concerned, the day of his wedding was equally important. On 16 March 1953 he married Margaret Elsie (Peggy) White, the daughter of a train driver, who was a bank clerk in Leeds. At 21, Peggy was a year younger than her husband. They had four sons (Terry, Melvyn, Peter and David), who transformed their family life. But this household of boys were not to be brought up in Yorkshire. For some years the best clubs in Europe had been eyeing John, and the first to strike was Juventus, a wealthy club in Turin which was keen to win prestigious trophies. They had a pretty weak team at the time and their negative style of play (catenaccio) was tedious to watch. The club's managers decided that John Charles would be their saviour. In August 1957 Leeds received £65,000 for the services of the Welshman, a fee which was a record at the time. Signing John Charles transformed the prospects of La Vecchia Signora (the Old Lady), as Juventus was known.

John Charles was a resounding success in Italy. Forming a productive partnership with Omar Sivori, a nimble wizard of an inside forward from Argentina, he scored 28 goals in his first season. Juventus won the championship in 1958 and John was voted player of the year in Italy. The club went from strength to strength, winning the Italian Cup in 1959 and 1960, and the championship in 1960 and 1961. Over five seasons John scored 93 goals in 155 games, and Il Re John (King John) became a national idol.

Unlike many other British footballers who ventured into the Italian lions den, John Charles did his best to integrate by learning to speak the language and to appreciate Italian customs and traditions. He enjoyed the fierce Mediterranean heat, as well as the fine local food. As the team's main star, his services were much in demand off the football pitch. Having an excellent bass singing voice, he had the opportunity to record popular songs such as 'Sixteen Tons' and 'Love in Portofino' and to take part in a documentary film about himself and his partner Omar Sivori.

The high life lasted for five years. Because his wife Peggy was homesick, John decided to go back to his old club in Leeds in 1962. By then aged 31 and with his best days behind him, he was unable to adapt to the training methods of the manager Don Revie and to the pace of the game in England. Within three months he had joined Roma, but that too was a mistake. Having played only ten games, he returned to Wales and joined Cardiff for the substantial sum of £20,000, spending the next three years propping up the club's back line. It was a feather in the cap of Hereford to acquire his services as player-manager from 1966 to 1971, before he took on the same role at Merthyr Tydfil in 1972-4. He finished his career in Wales in 1976 after managing the Swansea City youth team for two years.

Unfortunately, John Charles had no head for business. He lost a good deal of money on a restaurant venture in Turin, and also in Cardiff when his sports shop in Rhiwbeina failed. His divorce in 1982 was also a costly blow. He had met his future second wife, Glenda Verro, the daughter of an engineer, in 1978, and spent three unsuccessful years as landlord of the Gomersal Park Hotel, near Batley. Much to Glenda's distress, John was sent to prison by three JPs in Huddersfield for failing to pay £943 in tax. At Glenda's request, the debt was paid at once by Leslie Silver, chairman of Leeds United. But when John and Glenda married on 23 April 1988, 'King John' was penniless.

Although he spent most of life outside his native land, John Charles was a passionate Welshman. He retained his Welsh accent throughout his life, and he considered it an honour to wear the red shirt of his country. Between 1950 and 1965 he won 38 caps for Wales, leading the team five times and scoring 15 goals. He gained his first cap at the age of eighteen against Northern Ireland in 1950 and his last against Russia in 1965. He would have gained many more had Juventus released him more often. Jimmy Murphy, the Wales manager, used to say that seeing John arrive for an international game was as exciting as if the Messiah himself had come among them. He led by example, always setting high standards. None of his fellow-players could fail to admire the hat-trick he scored against Northern Ireland in Belfast in April 1955. Expectations were high, therefore, when Wales reached the final rounds of the World Cup, for the first time in their history, in Sweden in the summer of 1958. Wales were drawn in the same group as Hungary, Mexico and Sweden, a tough challenge for such a small country. Hardly anyone expected the team to go further but, under the inspirational leadership of their manager Jimmy Murphy, they managed to draw all three games. In order to progress to the quarter-finals Wales had to play again against Hungary. The Welsh fought bravely and fully deserved their victory by two goals to one. But throughout the game John Charles was tackled and kicked so viciously that his body was covered in cuts and bruises by the final whistle, and he was hardly able to walk off the field. He had to be left out of the team to face Brazil, the tournament favourites, and

no one was more devastated than John when a youngster by the name of Pelé scored the only goal of the game. According to the Welsh players and many experienced commentators, Wales would have won had John Charles been fit enough to lead their attack. Aged 27 at the time, he was reckoned to be one of the best in the world.

During his retirement John depended heavily on his wife Glenda, especially as his health declined. A lifelong smoker, it is no surprise that he suffered a heart attack in 1993 and cancer of the bladder in 1997. Moreover, Alzheimers took hold in his last years, though he never became embittered. He continued to follow Leeds United, Juventus and Wales, and when he travelled to Turin to watch games he was always given a princely welcome. In January 2004 John and Glenda went to Milan to take part in a television programme. Just before the beginning of the programme, John collapsed and was rushed to San Carlo Borromeo Hospital. As his condition worsened, his right foot had to be amputated, the foot which had scored so many thrilling goals. He was brought home in Juventus's private aeroplane, and he died, aged 72, in Pinderfields Hospital, Wakefield, on 21 February 2004. His funeral was held in Leeds parish church on St David's Day and a passage from the scripture was read in Welsh during the service. A memorial service was held at the Elland Road stadium on the same day, and another at the Brangwyn Hall, Swansea on 19 April. His body was cremated and his ashes were buried at the edge of the Liberty Stadium pitch in Swansea.

John Charles was a remarkably gifted footballer. He was blessed with an extremely powerful body, and in his prime he stood at 6' 2" and weighed 14 stone. The Juventus club doctor had never seen any player with such a body. Others likened him to a Greek god. His brother Mel (himself an extremely talented footballer) chose the fitting title *In the Shadow of a Giant* for his own autobiography. John had absolute mastery of all the skills of the game. He could kick a ball powerfully and accurately with both feet, dribble nimbly, leap like a salmon and tackle forcefully. He was the best player in two positions - centre half and centre forward - in his time if not ever in Britain. Moreover, he was known by everyone as 'The Gentle Giant' (Il Buon Gigante). He never lost his temper or deliberately fouled anyone on the football pitch. Throughout his career no referee ever had cause to caution him, let alone send him off. He had deep respect for the rules of the game and for his fellow players, and he too was respected for his courtesy and good nature. According to the former referee Clive Thomas: 'If you had 22 players like John, there would be no need for referees - only time-keepers.' 'He brought great honour to the name of Wales', claimed the famous scout Gigi Peronace, 'through his noble behaviour.' No one was surprised when it was revealed that this modest man had given his international caps and shirts to various charities.

John Charles himself gave a vivid account of his career in the three autobiographies which he published in 1957, 1962 and 2003, and he was honoured by various institutions. He was awarded the degree of MA by the University of Wales in 1999 and an honorary doctorate by Leeds Metropolitan University a year later. He was inducted into the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame in 1993, into that of International Footballers in 1998 and that of Italian Footballers in 2001. He received the freedom of the City and County of Swansea in 2002 and his name is commemorated in the John Charles Stand at Elland Road. Although he was awarded the CBE in 2001, the refusal of the establishment to give him a knighthood was a great disappointment to his fans. If the journalist and presenter Michael Parkinson had his way, there would be a memorial to John Charles outside every football stadium in Britain to inspire young players. If any Welshman was ever a complete footballer, it was John Charles.

Author

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