



PHOTOGRAPHY: JESPER MOILROY

# Striking Out on His Owen

As a renowned player for England, Liverpool and Real Madrid, **MICHAEL OWEN** lit up the footballing world. Now retired and in Hong Kong as brand ambassador for Kent & Curwen, he tells **PAUL KAY** why the future is looking even brighter

**S**AINTE-ÉTIENNE. June 30, 1998. The eyes of football fans around the globe are locked upon this small city in eastern France as bitter adversaries England and Argentina square off in the second round of the World Cup. The Stade Geoffroy-Guichard may be small by World Cup standards, but it has surely never lived up to its nickname of Le Chaudron (“The Cauldron”) more than tonight, as 30,600 fans cram into its four stands to watch the latest chapter of a rivalry fuelled by the Falklands War and the “Hand of God” goal.

With 16 minutes on the clock, and the score finely balanced at 1–1, the 18-year-old Michael Owen receives a lofted pass from David Beckham in the centre circle before running at the Argentine defence. Displaying the blistering pace that was to become his trademark, Owen burns past seasoned internationals José Chamot and Roberto Ayala as if they were training cones, then guides the ball past the onrushing keeper into the top left corner of the goal. He turns to receive the adulation of the delirious fans in the stadium and millions more around the world. In those seven electrifying seconds, a legend was born.

Flash-forward 16 years, and a football career peppered with trophies, personal accolades and unfortunate injuries lies between Owen and that star-making moment. The former Liverpool, Real Madrid, Newcastle United and Manchester United striker called time on his career last summer at the relatively young age of 33 after a frustrating spell with Stoke City convinced him it was time to switch his focus to his burgeoning business interests. And

it’s one of those interests—his role as brand ambassador for British clothing label Kent & Curwen—that brings him to Hong Kong.

Despite his global fame and an estimated personal fortune of £40 million, Owen comes across as humble and down-to-earth when we meet for lunch in Wan Chai’s Madam Sixty Ate. It’s the final day of a whirlwind visit; he’s in town to promote the new Kent & Curwen spring/summer collection, and mixes business with pleasure at the Kent & Curwen Centenary Sprint Cup at Sha Tin Racecourse. Back in England, Owen owns six thoroughbreds and a 70-hectare racing stable that trains around 100 horses, with customers including fellow football stars such as Wayne Rooney. After family and football, he tells me, horse racing is the third-greatest passion of his life—one that started by placing 50-pence (HK\$6.50) bets with his father on the weekend races when he was a boy. By the age of 18, he was making enough money from football to buy a racehorse of his own.

“I came back from the World Cup and I was talking to a friend of mine, [former England captain] David Platt, who said ‘Why don’t you just buy a horse and have it trained if you like it that much’. So I bought a horse, called it Etienne Lady after the goal in Saint-Étienne, and from that minute on I was hooked.”

Aptly enough, it was his love of horse racing that led to his collaboration with Kent & Curwen, following a serendipitous meeting with brand managing director Sabrina Fung at Goodwood Races in August as Owen was watching his horse, Brown Panther, storm to victory in the Goodwood Cup.

Owen is no stranger to endorsements, having loaned his star power to brands such as Tissot, Jaguar, Nestlé, Umbro and Persil over the years. “It’s important to be quite selective,” he says, “because you build up your image over a long period of time. And if you go and chase the money, it’s not going to be productive.”

Best known for his exploits in a football shirt, Owen is now most often pictured smartly dressed, whether on TV during his work as a football pundit or cheering his horses on from the owners’ circle, making him a good fit for Kent & Curwen’s relaxed elegance. But it wasn’t always so. “When I was young, I didn’t bother about what I wore,” says Owen. “I used to just wear a tracksuit from my kit sponsor. I wasn’t bothered about my appearance. But the older you get, the more important it becomes.”

Life has changed for the better since his retirement, insists Owen, who says not being able to excel at the top level was “mental torture” for him. As well as being less stringent about his diet, he is looking forward to the opportunity to learn to ride—something he was contractually prohibited from doing while he was playing. It’s also afforded him the time to set up his own management

agency, alongside long-time friend and adviser Simon Marsh, who has accompanied him on his trip to Hong Kong. Through Michael Owen Management, Owen aims to groom young players for life at the top, and give them the benefit of his experience.

“Everyone thinks they know [what it’s like to be a professional footballer]: you get a fast car and a big house, and you don’t do much work—that’s the general perception. But there are so many things to think about, whether it’s media training, being aware of your responsibilities, social media... If you’re fortunate enough to be commercially viable, then there’s a whole host of other responsibilities,” says Owen. “I’d like to think I can pass on some of the things I’ve learned. I’ve seen most of the things that football can throw at you. Of course the main thing for young footballers is their performance on the pitch, and that’s what we want—we want them to be

*“I’d like to think I can pass on some of the things I’ve learned. I’ve seen most of the things that football can throw at you”*

great footballers first and foremost. But there’s a life outside of the four white lines as well.”

Outside business, Owen is a family man who credits his parents with keeping him focused on football during a period when most teenagers would let fame go to their head. He has four children of his own with childhood sweetheart Louise, and once famously bought a row of houses for his family in Ewloe, Wales, close to where he lived at the time.

He’s also an increasingly frequent visitor to Asia, and says that he wouldn’t rule out taking on an ambassadorial role similar to the one David Beckham recently undertook for Chinese football, should the opportunity arise.

In his football career there are, Owen says, no regrets—although he cites leaving his beloved Liverpool for Real Madrid in 2004 as the toughest decision he’s had to make. Unfortunately, injuries would blight the second half of his career, and after Madrid he would

only occasionally hit the heights he scaled consistently during his time with Liverpool. Owen has pondered how many more trophies he might have won and how many more personal milestones he might have achieved had injuries not robbed him of some of his best

years, but his haul is impressive by anyone’s standard, including winners’ medals in the Premier League, FA Cup and UEFA Cup, 89 caps and 40 goals for England, and 222 top-level career goals. In 2001, he won the Ballon d’Or (the trophy given to the best player in Europe) ahead of the likes of David Beckham, Luís Figo and Zinedine Zidane, who Owen says is the best player he’s ever shared a pitch with.

For Owen, though, three highlights outshine everything else: scoring a hat-trick for England versus Germany in Munich in 2001; his two goals in the last eight minutes to win the FA Cup for Liverpool against Arsenal, also in 2001; and that seven seconds in Saint-Étienne.

“When the plane landed in England and I drove back home,” Owen recalls of the aftermath, “the streets were lined with photographers and cameramen and neighbours. It was about then I thought: ‘Life isn’t going to be the same.’” ❶

IMAGES: AFP PHOTO; COURTESY OF KENT & CURWEN



**SHARP SUITER** As the owner of six thoroughbreds and one of England’s best-dressed footballers, Owen makes an apt ambassador for Kent & Curwen

## FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

Fittingly for someone who burst onto the football world stage at such a tender age, Michael Owen has a keen interest in youth development. It’s a topic on which he could wax lyrical for hours, he says, and one that is central to any club or country’s footballing aspirations. Indeed, if Asia is serious about improving its standing in the football world, then there’s no better place to start than by paying serious attention to grassroots development. “If you’re a very good football player, you will make it in England—I mean the system won’t fail you if you’re good enough and mentally strong enough—whereas there’s not really a system in certain parts of Asia,” he says. “There could be lots of quality players out there who literally don’t get the opportunity. Put it this way, the rest of the world would have to watch out if places like China got their house in order. They could be a huge force—and no doubt they will be in 20 years.”

