

'I had no chance to make friends. It's hard enough being injured in your own country, but here, where you don't know the language ... '

Jonathan Woodgate became football's forgotten man after his surprise £13 million transfer to Real Madrid in 2004. Sidelined for more than a year by injury, he was then sent off and scored an own goal on his belated debut. But the Real fans adore his spirit and tenacity. Can the defender make it back into the England squad in time for the World Cup? Exclusive interview by John Carlin

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Had the Spanish Armada won, England might never have given the world its most precious export. An England under the yoke of the Spanish empire, conditioned by Spanish culture, is unlikely to have invented football, or indeed any of the great games it has bestowed on a grateful humanity. The Spanish don't have the mindset for this sort of thing. They are individualists. An individualist does not ponder ways to bring people together in an organised fashion, which is the seed of the mental process required to think up a new game. The closest approximation to such a thing the Spanish have ever devised is the bullfight, the individualist pastime por excelencia.

They like to play games, though, and they have shown themselves to be especially good at those that require no more than one participant on a side. Tennis, for example. Golf. Motor racing. There is a reason why the Spanish national football team have been so consistently ineffectual: the strength they possess man-for-man dissolves when they are required to pull together in a group. There is a reason why Real Madrid and Barcelona have been so successful - their decisive players down the years have been foreigners.

The Spanish are aware of this national failing. And that is why - never mind the Armada or, for that matter, Gibraltar, which is an issue only for the politicians - the Spanish not only feel a debt of awed gratitude to the English, they also admire the way they possess, in abundance, those never-say-die, team-player qualities of solidarity and commitment to a collective that the Spanish so manifestly lack.

Such ruminations are unlikely to pass through the mind of Jonathan Woodgate, yet were they to do so he might begin to understand something that he has found utterly baffling.

Why on earth is it that the fans of Real Madrid have taken him so instantly, so generously, so warmly to their hearts? Especially after that debut he had.

'Bit special, wasn't it?' he says, in a distinctively English comic reflex (a Spanish player would never have reacted in this way; he'd have hung his head in shame or clocked me one) when I say his first official game in a Real shirt had to go down as one of the most excruciatingly embarrassing episodes in the history of sport. Woodgate had been bought in the summer of 2004 for the princely sum, for a central defender, of £13.4 million, but owing to injury he had not made one competitive start during the whole of his first season. Here at last, on the night of 22 September, came his moment. A home game at the Bernabeu against the old Basque enemy, Athletic Bilbao. After a difficult start to the season it was an important game for Real - a game to impose order, to put the team on an even keel.

'It was a great moment, going out under the lights of that fantastic stadium, in that white shirt at last,' Woodgate recalls. 'I thought, "Right, you're back. Show them what you can do".' He did too. In the 25th minute he met a half-shot, half-cross from Joseba Etxeberria with a diving header. The ball hurtled past a helpless Iker Casillas into the back of the net. The problem was that Etxeberria played for Bilbao and Casillas for Madrid. 'I lay for a moment with my face in the grass, then I got up, shook my head and thought, "Oh my God! This is unbelievable!" ' A weaker soul might have fled down the tunnel and sought political asylum in Borneo. But Woodgate said to himself: 'Now's the moment to show a bit of character. Don't hide. Go up for corners, go on, go and try and score one at the other end. An own goal's an own goal. You've had worse things happen to you.' Which in Woodgate's particular case, if not that of many other footballers, was most certainly true. Yet it got worse.

Nervous, with the first half ticking away and Real still 1-0 down, he made a clumsy tackle and was booked. 'I am not the sort of player who gets yellow cards but, yes, that first-half tackle was a bad one.' Seventeen minutes into the second half he got his second yellow and he was gone. Sent off. On the footballing stage it is the closest thing you get to a horror movie. (Though it could have been even worse: Real finally won 3-1.) 'I didn't protest. I don't see the point in protesting the way other players always seem to once the ref has made up his mind. I just walked off. My mum was there in the stadium. She was crying.'

And yet, here is the amazing thing. The score was an edgy 1-1 but the Bernabeu responded as if he had single-handedly won the match. They gave him a standing ovation. 'Yes. The whole stadium standing, or so it seemed from down there. All clapping and cheering. Unbelievable! I still don't understand it. It's almost weird, isn't it?'

It's more weird than one might think. And not just because the Real fans are perfectly aware of the murkiness of his past: four years ago, when he was a Leeds United player, he was convicted of affray and sentenced to 100 hours of community service after an attack on Sarfraz Najeib, an Asian student. A friend of Woodgate's was jailed for six years for causing grievous bodily harm in the same incident. The fans might have been a bit iffy about him arriving in Spain with a girlfriend, Kate Lawler, who had been a housemate in Big Brother. Or they might have taken offence when he continued to receive a huge salary for no visible returns. Or even because of the rumours doing the

rounds when he arrived in Spain - utterly unfounded - that he took drugs. What is most weird is that he should have made such an intimate connection with such a vociferous mass of people who have next to no idea about him (beyond the Bernabeu, the TV fans and the sports media took to him immediately) when the fact is that during his first year in Madrid he has led a life of almost monkish solitude .

He is certain that he has fully recovered from the thigh injury that he picked up in a game for Newcastle against Chelsea in April 2004 - an injury that the Real doctors failed to spot when he was bought three months later, even though his then manager Sir Bobby Robson had described it as the muscular equivalent of a zipper being undone. He trains as hard as anyone else in the squad now. Watching him sprint and jog and jump at Las Rozas, Real's training ground in Madrid's northern suburbs, before our interview, it 's not just his fitness that is evident but the easy power of his bearing. He is a strong, tall man who stands shoulders back, like a soldier, but combines authority with a grace and looseness of movement you might associate more readily with a Brazilian attacker than an English defender. One Spanish football writer remarked after that first game against Bilbao that, calamitous as the outcome might have been, he looked like Real's most elegant centre-half in living memory - Fernando Hierro not excluded.

Such words would have been encouragement to Woodgate after that lonely, drudging first year of his.

'Lonely?' he says as we settle down to talk after training. 'I don't like that word. Sounds too ... ' Sad bastard? 'Yeah. Sad. No, lonely's not right. It was boring, though. A lot of boredom.' What was a typical day? 'I'd get up about nine, go into training at 10. An hour's work, stretching, a thousand situps.' A thousand sit-ups? 'Yes, to keep the posture better. Most problems to do with your thighs, your hamstrings, your calves, come from your back. It's the same for everyone. So a lot of stretching of my back, too. But after that first hour the rest of the players went out to train and I stayed indoors. They went left and I went right, to the gym. Gyms can be very boring on your own. And of course I got no chance to develop friendships with the players. You make friends in training or when you go off on away games, but I had none of that.

'It's hard enough being in your own country with a long-term injury like this; here you don't know the language, you're staying in a hotel room for the first four months. Thank God for David [Beckham] and Michael [Owen], who are both very nice geezers and would invite me to eat now and again, but they were with their families and you don't want to intrude too much on that. Actually, I did develop a family of my own - almost family - and that was the docs and the physios. They're my friends in Madrid. They're my friends, man. Brilliant fellas.'

It was from them, in addition to the two classes he takes a week, that he learnt his Spanish. I begin this interview by asking, jokingly, whether he prefers to speak en español o en inglés. His reply, perfectly comprehensible and in a decent accent but with not quite perfect grammar: 'Entiendo español y hablar OK, pero no muy fluido.' (I understand Spanish and speak OK, but not very fluid.) At Leeds they used to nickname him 'Village', as in 'village idiot', but it appears that attaching the label to him is as unfair as once it was to attach it to Beckham. After one year in Madrid, Woodgate's Spanish is notably better than Beckham's after two. Stung by this development (and the

fact that his two oldest sons speak fluent Spanish), the England captain is redoubling his efforts to learn the language.

Other than learning Spanish, though, Woodgate's time beyond the morning physio sessions has not been the most rewarding of his 25 years. 'I had a girlfriend [Kate Lawler] but we finished. What I did at the hotel was develop a set routine. I'd have lunch at a certain time. Go to bed for a couple of hours. Go to the gym downstairs. Go on the internet. Train again. Swim a bit, keep myself ticking over. I'd watch TV - got English TV. And I'd go off in my car and get lost in Madrid. I'd get lost and then I'd find my way back. Then on Sundays I'd go to the airport and buy every paper, every magazine in English, and come home and chill out, reading all day.'

Yet lonely is not the word. 'No it's not. I'm not a sad bloke. I'm an optimist. That's why I always believed I'd play again. Always. Even when I thought things were getting better and I felt a twinge. Sure, it was a terrible feeling. But I'm an optimist. I don't let things get me down. I've got a sense of perspective.' And not only because of the tough times he endured as a consequence of his foolish, loutish youth - at the end of his trial, the judge, Mr Justice Henriques, addressed him and said: 'It has been obvious to everyone that you have suffered through the currency of this trial, agonies, and that is etched upon your face.'

He has also seen suffering in others close to him. The head of Real Madrid's medical team, Alfonso del Corral, endured unspeakable sorrow in 1997 when his six-year-old boy was killed, crushed under an electronic garage gate. 'I know,' he says. 'The worst. That's what I mean. Puts it in perspective. And the doc, he's been so good. In the summer I'd go running in the mountains near Madrid then he'd invite me to his house for breakfast. Met his family. We were in it together, getting over this injury. The doc's a proper brilliant fellow. They all are, the docs. The physios. All of them.'

He is finally beginning to know his team-mates now that he is easing his way into the side, is part of the daily training routine and is travelling to away games. And he is deriving more enjoyment from life, building at least the foundations of a relationship with fellow players. Who among the galácticos had he been particularly struck by? 'I get on well with all of them and there's obviously David, but Ronaldo's the one who stands out. He's excellent. Excellent! He's the nicest fellow in the world. Best player, nicest [he repeats it with feeling, stressing each word] fellow-in-the-world. He's just great. Always smiling. Always asking if I want to join him for something to eat. He's a proper, spot-on geezer, Ronaldo.'

Ronaldo is the one player in the Real team who has undergone an injury nightmare even more harrowing than Woodgate's, having been completely out of the game, condemned to the solitary gym routine for two-and-a-half years. Maybe that is why, like Woodgate, he is a cheery fellow, a happy spirit. Because he has that sense of perspective. And maybe that is why Ronaldo was the player who sought Woodgate out in the changing room after the Bilbao game. 'There I was thinking, "Bloody hell ... " and Ronaldo came up and said, "Don't worry about it. It's your first game. We all know you're a decent player. And besides", he said, "your leg's all right, isn't it?" That gave me a lift.'

So all the assumptions about the prima donnas in the Real dressing room were wrong? 'Absolutely! I had expected a bit of that, but nothing. Look at David. If you don't know

him you expect him to be full of airs and graces but - and everyone who knows him says it - he's a nice fella, too. Top man. The papers create different perceptions, but those perceptions are wrong.'

What about the debate in England about Beckham being past his best? 'In England they're obviously not watching our games this season. They can't be. David's playing brilliant. He knows it, the players know it, the president knows it, the fans know it. Some people might have it in for him, for whatever reason. But the way he's playing, that's another thing. He's been exceptional. His passing is second to none in the world. He's done eight assists in, what, 10 games. Amazing! And he works hard and he's fit. Man. He's fit!'

And yet people in England are saying he should not be in the national team ...

'They're saying that?'

Yes.

'They really are?'

'Yes.'

That's ludicrous. Ludicrous! I can't understand that. I hope he wins the World Cup next year and shows them all up!'

That is the most heated moment in the hour we spend together. The only heated moment. He is self-deprecating, even self-mocking, but passionate in defending his team-mate against what he feels to be an absurd injustice. As to his own prospects of going to the World Cup, he says: 'No, no. I've got to make it regularly on to the Madrid team first. Then we'll see ... '

The word from the Real camp is that their Brazilian coach, Vanderlei Luxemburgo, likes the look of Woodgate, his grace and power and positional intelligence, and sees him as a member of his starting XI once he has had more of a chance to run himself in. Luxemburgo admires his pluck and commitment. He sees him as a team man. As he does Beckham. As the fans see both Englishmen. As they see all four English players who have worn the Real kit in recent times.

Steve McManaman was immensely popular with the fans, even though he very rarely got a game. Michael Owen scored often enough, but could never consolidate a first-team place and left for Newcastle this summer. Yet the day he appears at the Bernabeu again, in the shirt either of England or of a rival club, he will receive the loudest cheer of the night. Beckham is as popular with the Bernabeu as he is with Woodgate. And Woodgate himself, as we have seen, can do no wrong.

'In my case maybe it's to do with the fact that they know I've been working on my Spanish,' he said, 'and they do appreciate that, the Spanish, even if you struggle with it. But also maybe because they've seen I've worked my bollocks off to get fit.'

While the rest of the team were off on their summer holidays Woodgate remained in Madrid, fighting to overcome his injury. 'That has a lot to do with the feeling the fans have for him,' a Real director said. 'He is the embodiment of the narrative of the hero who overcomes terrible obstacles to succeed. Who perseveres to victory. And everybody in the world responds to that.'

But it's also, in the words of another director, Carlos Martinez de Albornoz, who has lived in Britain, something to do with the relationship the Spanish fan has with English football and English players. They start with an advantage, an inbuilt prejudice in their favour, for being English, he told me. 'We respect that tradition the English have as the inventors of the game. We know the English have the game in their blood. But it's also a sense of commitment to the group that the English have that you don't find so much in Latin culture. A loyalty, a sacrifice, a subordination of your own selfish interests to those of the team. The fans see that immediately and they fall for it.'

Other players of Latin nationalities might be more talented, Martinez de Albornoz added, but their occasional 'indolence', as he put it, can rub fans up the wrong way. The English, on the other hand, seem never to give less than their heart and soul. And in this they are at one with the fan. Beckham has won the devotion of the Bernabeu faithful because he is them on the pitch. Woodgate, they sense, will be the same.

'I certainly hope it lasts,' Woodgate says of his popularity. 'I want to remain many years at Real Madrid. I want to win trophies here. There is no bigger club in the world. No place I could be prouder to play. And with such players, too! I see the things [Zinedine] Zidane does in training - he's an immense fella, too, by the way - I see him smash those volleys of his into the net from balls that come over the full-back's head and I just laugh and laugh.' He laughs? 'Yeah. Because I can't do that. Couldn't in a million years. And because it is so brilliant to be on the same team as a player like that.'

Zidane may be saying the same thing about him one day. Maybe he is saying it already after what happened in Woodgate's second official game for the club, at home to Rosenborg in the Champions League. Not that the omens had been encouraging. In a friendly immediately after the Bilbao game Woodgate scored another own goal. Before the Rosenborg match, his team-mates joked that they would have to mark him as well as the Norwegians. Luxemburgo said he was planning to appoint Beckham to man-mark him. Woodgate was laughing with the rest of them, but he was worried. 'Being alone at home a lot you get to thinking and what would sometimes go through my mind was, "My God! And what if I score an own goal next time, too?" But you've got to be strong. I went on to the pitch that night nervous, sure, but above all happy, excited.'

Real Madrid were 1-0 down at half-time. On points they were well ahead, but merit is not always rewarded in football. It was Woodgate who restored order to the universe. In the third minute of the second half Beckham sent in a cross from the right. 'When I saw the ball coming in, I thought, "I've got a chance here. This one's coming for me". And I thought too, "Give a bit back! Go on, give a bit back!"'

That was the English moment. That was the team-player talking. 'Give a bit back!' And he did. He rose high and met the ball with the meatiest of impacts. 'And I saw the ball hit the back of the net and, well ... you do not realise! You-do-not-realise! The relief!'

Had he ever had a better moment on a football pitch? 'If you put together all the circumstances, the terrible year, the own goal, well, the feeling when I scored that goal was excellent!'

He is not speaking loudly, but in hushed tones, euphoric but almost solemn, as if he were recalling a profound religious moment. 'I swear, I swear,' he says, 'it was unbelievable!' And then he makes a vow. 'That own goal has driven me and it's going to keep driving me to score a lot more goals. I'm going to go into that box now, watch me! I'm going to score at least five goals this season. And wait,' he says, breaking into a big smile, because Woodgate is incapable of sustaining solemnity for more than about 10 seconds, 'I have to score five goals at least, because if I don't, with those balls Becks puts in, I'll need shooting!'

You could have shot him after that goal against Rosenborg and he would have died happy. Instead, he ran towards the bench. Not to his team-mates, not to the coach. He ran to Alfonso del Corral. He ran to the doc, a big bear of a man, a former basketball player. He leapt into his arms. 'I'd always thought - I'd dreamt of this - that the moment I scored a goal I'd run for the bench and jump on the doc. It's been tough for him - for all the medical team - and it's been tough for me.'

That embrace was one of the sporting images of the year. 'He's a proper brilliant fella,' says Woodgate of the doc. The doc - I know - thinks Woodgate is a proper brilliant fella, too.

• John Carlin is the author of *White Angels: Beckham, Real Madrid and the New Football* (Bloomsbury, £8.99)