

John Terry

The future captain of England pulls his socks above his knees

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His manager calls him the best central defender in the world, and unlike many things his manager says this is not a minority view. John Terry is 25, and he has grown up fast. Ten years ago he was a midfielder. Six years ago his future at Chelsea was uncertain. Four years ago he was brawling in nightclubs and risked going to jail. And then he began to realize something important: he had the chance of becoming one of England's greatest footballers, perhaps the greatest defender since Bobby Moore.

Terry was made captain of Chelsea two seasons ago, and is already looking like a natural successor to David Beckham for the captaincy England. He is a perfect leader, a skill learnt from adversity. His personal qualities – reliability, honesty, fortitude – complement his attributes on the pitch: bonkers bravery, faultless positioning and distribution, a commanding stature in the air, a capacity to remain injury-free, an ability to score crucial goals. And he is undoubtedly the best crunch tackler in modern football, the indomitable lynchpin in Chelsea's first league title for 50 years. 'JT' gives fans something back for their devotion and money: a pure passion, a deep love of victory and hatred of defeat, an unswerving belief that the game is important in people's lives, and it deserves everything he can give it. This summer in Germany, English hopes depend heavily on him having a great World Cup.

And he possesses another asset, the hardest to obtain: he is liked and respected by other players and non-Chelsea supporters. He shares this quality with his England team-mate Frank Lampard, with whom he has a habit of sharing the big end-of-season awards. But Terry is unique in his homegrown journey from schoolboy to professional, and it means much to him that he came through at a time when Chelsea was buying up the ageing cream of Europe. Perhaps it is this that has strengthened his resolve to remain a one-club player throughout his career.

When I met him towards the end of April, Chelsea needed one point to retain the Premiership title. But Terry's mind was temporarily on other things. A few weeks before the start of the World Cup, he had some important decisions to make about his boots. He picked up a sample of a shoe called the Xai V, the successor to the Xai I, Xai II, Xai III, Xai IV and the Elite X. The Xai V was being marketed not just as a shoe: it had a wishbone sole plate, special strips for added ball control, and something called Exoskeleton III for comfort and protection. Terry liked them, but he found they pinched a little in the width. 'A quarter-size bigger?' he asked the shoe representative in a suit. Pointing to the monogram on the side he said, 'and I don't want a dot after J or T. And this leather here - smoother? And the studs - can I have half moulded and half screw-in?'

He was standing behind a screen at an exhibition of football photographs at a gallery near London's Old Street. Most of the photos showed people kicking balls or crowds going wild, but the one of John Terry showed him playing snooker at his home in Surrey. To launch the exhibition, Terry had agreed to sign some books and talk to Sky Sports. When this was over, he removed his

England top and shiny tracksuit bottoms and changed into his own clothes - a crisp white shirt, a tan leather jacket, faded jeans, pale leather shoes that fit just right. Then he walked out into the street.

Not everyone he met in the three-minute walk to the photographer's studio was a Chelsea fan, but everyone seemed to like John Terry. 'Even Arsenal fans come up to me and tell me they're pleased I'm doing so well,' he said as he waited for traffic to pass. 'I think they can tell I'm passionate about the game and they like that.' A lot of people probably like the *idea* of John Terry: talented, modest, fearless, gifted, English. It seems to be a good time to consider what has gone before.

JT: My earliest memories of football are when I was about two or three. My dad used to play to quite a good standard on Sundays, and I remember watching him on the sidelines and having a ball by my feet, and having a kick about. And when he'd go to the pub and I'd stay out with my brother, playing until it got dark. My brother Paul is two years older. We kicked about in the garden, coming home with thick mud, and them early memories are really special to me.

At what point did you or dad realise that it would be worth taking football seriously?

I was 9 or 10 when people first took an interest. In junior school I was selected by West Ham and by Millwall to go for a trial. I spent four years at West Ham. Then when I was at Eastbury Comprehensive School, in Barking in Essex, I was scouted for the district, for Essex County schools. Then Chelsea came in for me at the age of 14. I trained twice a week with them and played on a Sunday for Chelsea Schoolboys.

You were a midfielder at this point?

Yeah, central midfield. My dad was always a defender, but me and my brother both enjoyed playing midfield. I began playing for a team called Comet, we used to win that league and then all of a sudden a team called Senrab come along and started dominating. I joined them after two years with Comet, and in that team was myself, Ledley King, Paul Konchesky, J Lloyd Samuel and Bobby Zamora. We won all the cups, and we always had a lot of scouts at our games watching us.

I joined Chelsea as a YTS when I left school at 16. My brother had been at Charlton on a two-year YTS, and he stressed to me that it was important that the fun's over and it was now time to knuckle down and work hard. I managed to get a professional contract a year into my YTS, when I was 17.

And you weren't a Chelsea supporter.

No, I was Man Utd growing up. You know what it's like when you're a boy, you want to support the team that's winning everything. And my dad and grandad

were Man Utd fans. But my first day at Chelsea I knew that was the club I wanted to be at. I just loved it. But Man Utd also approached me. I met Alex Ferguson - great to meet. During the school holidays I would go up to Manchester and train with their boys for two weeks, play a few goals and come home. But one thing that was really special about Man Utd was that Alex Ferguson took time out and invited me to one of their games and have lunch with their players. So there we are - me, my mum and dad, my brother. He made me feel so special, autographs, my photo done with the Premiership trophy. I think it was hard for my dad to take that I was going to sign for Chelsea, but I had to sit him down and tell him it was definitely the right decision.

I imagine Dennis Wise looked after you.

It was one of my duties to clean Dennis Wise's boots. I cleaned Dennis Wise, Eddie Newton and David Lee. You have to clean up after the professionals and Hoover the rooms. I made Dennis's boots look really nice every morning and I think he took a bit more time out for me.

Things have changed now for the younger players - they don't get any of that stuff. They come in, they train, they go home. It's a lot easier for them now - I sound quite old when I say that. But we used to get in at eight in the morning to set the kit out and the first team came in at 10. I personally think it's something they should bring back in, and make the younger players do the boots at least.

A lot of people fall by the wayside during YTS.

Yeah, me and Jon Harley were the two coming through. He had a nice run in the side, we were good mates. I was lucky to get a professional contract early, but it's usually two years you have to wait. Then on the last day you all get called into a room one by one, all your friends. You're sitting there and you see your mates come out in tears. You're thinking, I'm next...I've seen a lot of friends who were good enough but maybe just didn't have that drive and ambition that I always had installed in me.

Who helped you the most?

When I was in the youth team from 16 to 18, the manager Bob Dale was the person who moved me from midfield to defence for one game. Before one youth game a couple of defenders phoned in sick, and Bob asked me if I wanted to play there. We won three-nil, didn't concede, I got man of the match, and since that day I've never played in midfield since. I thank him an awful lot. Because I never wanted to be a defender - as a kid you always want to be a bit further forward and scoring the goals.

That hasn't really changed...

Yeah. But coming off that game, I really enjoyed playing centre-back. The feeling I got from not conceding any goals was very very similar to the feeling I got from scoring a goal. The next game I played in defence again, got man of the match again, and from that day I was regarded as a centre-half.

Presumably you had to fill out a bit?

A lot. From the age of 14 I was quite short and had a lot of puppy fat, and all the other boys around me shot up and were physically stronger and quicker. People were worried about whether I was going to be big enough, and there were a few question marks at Chelsea about whether they were going to give me a contract, but then in the space of a few months I shot up God knows how many inches, and it took four or five months for the rest of my body to adjust to how much I'd grown.

Ten years ago, footballers weren't as conscious of their diets as they are now. The Arsene Wenger influence...

He brought it in. When I was coming through I was eating anything I wanted. At lunchtime even the first team players had pizzas and chips and steak. Nowadays every club has their own chef - it's pasta, chicken, vegetables, all the right drinks available, breakfast laid on, it's quite nice. Even when you go home you think about having something and you know you can't. I think Luca Vialli was the first man to bring it in at Chelsea. He brought in an Italian chef who's still there now - Nick. First of all the players were all, 'Oh, I can't eat this pasta - what's this all about?' We'd never seen it or tasted it. But now when I go to a restaurant that's all I eat. I want to eat chicken and pasta, and that's something that I'm going to do forever.

You broke through in 1998 when you were 17.

I was training with the youth team every day, and then occasionally I would get called over to train with the first team. Not many youth team players had the opportunity. When I went across I had a lot of respect for the players around me, but once I was on the pitch I became a different character. Normally I would be too scared to say hello to the first team players, but when I was playing with them I was shouting and bossing them about a little bit, and I think Vialli was really impressed with that. So he chopped me over, and even though at the weekend I was maybe playing with the youth team or reserves on a Monday, during the week I was part of that first team squad. Luca could see that I was very ambitious. And then having that first game, getting the taste, I just wanted more and more.

You went on loan to Nottingham Forest in 2000, and after that you established yourself and the fans really started to shout for you, and you slowly became a great player.

Jon Harley was loaned out, Jody Morris and Mark Nicholls moved on, and we went out and bought some great foreign players, but I think the fans really wanted someone with that bit of homegrown spirit coming through. And training with Zola, Vialli, Mark Hughes was great for me, then Frank Leboeuf and Marcel Desailly. Even Michael Duberry in the early days helped me a lot. As a young player I had so much respect for them that they were giving five or ten minutes of their time to say 'maybe you should do this' and staying behind to give me little bits of help.

Over the course of the year I must have had 60 or 70 extra sessions, just five or ten minutes, nothing too strenuous, but still now I do something in the game and I think, 'No, you got told by Marcel two years ago not to do that'. There were times when I tried to do too much as a defender, that midfielder in me still, and Marcel said to me 'Simplicity is genius'. Those great words he said to me. So now if it needs to be kicked into Row Z then I'll do that. I won't be getting a telling off from somebody behind me that I should have cleared it.

And then after a while you started to earn real money.

As a YTS player I earned £46 a week. When I was 17 I signed a contract for £250 a week. In that contract it said that when I played 20 games, whether as a sub or not, I then got a new contract. The figures were still very small - from £250 to £1,000 a week. I was just so happy playing that the money wasn't a factor - they offered it to me and I signed it. When I had a full season under my belt it was time to sit down and negotiate similar to what other players were earning around me.

Presumably you then got the flash car and the fancy clothes.

I had the opportunity to look after and treat my family, which is something I still do now. I look after their mortgage, things where I can show my appreciation. My dad used to start work at six in the morning and get back home at six - he was a forklift driver in a wood yard. He got home and then took me to football with no dinner, and he'd eat dinner at ten and then be up again at six. Money was very tight when I was growing up. When I did first get that good contract, other players around me said, 'It's not time for sports cars, it's not time for nice watches and fancy clothes.' And if it wasn't for them...Kevin Hitchcock and Dennis Wise were important in that role. They forced me to put a deposit on a house.

But there obviously was a period when your head was turned. There was that nightclub incident which led to the court case. [At the beginning of 2002, Terry, Jody Morris and Des Byrne were charged with affray at a club in Knightsbridge. During the trial, Terry cried as he spoke of punching a bouncer in self-defence, but denied allegations that he had attacked him with a bottle; he was acquitted eight months later.]

I know it was perceived that I was always out clubbing and getting in in the early hours of the morning, but that certainly wasn't the case. As any young player, it was important to go out and enjoy yourself and let your hair down. I was doing the same, and obviously I regret the situation I got myself into with the court case. But Aaron [Lincoln] my manager, my mum and dad, my brother and Ken Bates were sitting me down saying, 'You know what? There's been a change - that's not the way forward anymore.'

The court case was the final straw. And I was completely innocent. I hold my hands up that I shouldn't have been out on a Thursday night before a Saturday game, and I got fined for that and apologised for that. But the thing I got taken to court for, it was embarrassing what the guy was trying to do, and one day

we'll tell exactly what happened. That made me open my eyes to the way people are seeing me.

Does the club provide media training for you?

They do nowadays for the boys, but in my days that wasn't the case. You were thrown in front of a TV crew and see how you go. You just learn from watching other interviews on TV.

So how do you cope with inaccurate reports in the newspapers? All those stories about who Chelsea are going to sign, or which club has made offers to sign you. It must be unnerving.

Yeah, a little bit. You learn to deal with it. If someone's in for me, I'd be the first person to know, surely, not the tabloids. I think other clubs know I'm a Chelsea player through and through.

Is there any way you can see yourself leaving?

Never. No chance. I can firmly sit here and say I never want to leave Chelsea. It's the club for me. When I first came through the crowds sung my name, 'John Terry', and then week-in week-out 'Terry for England'. That relationship I've had with them...and I'm a very loyal person anyway. There's not many players that do that nowadays - start at one club and finish at another. I really really want to do that - I can't stress it enough. Everything's going in the right direction and touch wood I can't see them going wrong. But if they ever did, I still wouldn't want to leave Chelsea. But I don't take anything for granted. I'm a captain of a great side, but the manager's made it clear that if I lose form I'm out. When I come round the room for the pre-match meeting and I see my number up there it's a relief. Honestly.

I sometimes get a bit scared as I watch you go in with your head for knee-high tackles. Other players would perhaps think, 'there's a World Cup coming up and I might take it a bit easier.'

My dad always told me when I was growing up never to go half-hearted into a challenge. Always 100 per cent, fairly. If you go in half-hearted that's when you really can get injured. I get paid by Chelsea to play, and I'm going to do that to the best of my ability. The World Cup is in the back of my mind, but first things first - Chelsea, right until the last game. And that will continue for years to come, to keep dominating English football and keep winning the Premiership.

I know you were right behind Claudio Ranieri staying. What would have happened if he had?

I was a real supporter - he made me captain. But I believe that Jose has taken us to another level, which maybe in a couple of years Ranieri could have done. Under Ranieri we did quite a bit of running, but with Jose we do hardly any at all. And I feel a lot fitter and better for it, I've stayed injury-free. Jose has

brought great man management, great team management, great training, he's very thorough on his own players and on the opposition.

Do you ever take the piss out of him?

No, I wouldn't like to upset him, actually. No.

**I know you invest most of your money and you get advice from your accountant and your agent.
And you get phonecalls if you spend too much?**

It's the way it should be. If I went and spent a few thousand on clothes, Aaron would be on the phone saying 'you don't need to spend that.' But he's the first person to say when we won the Premiership, 'Go and treat yourself.' But the people around me will tell me things straight. If I played shit, Aaron will say, 'John, you played shit today.'

What's the most you've ever spent on a shirt?

I'm not much of a clothes person actually.

But there must have been things you bought that you really didn't need but you thought, 'I'm having it!'

I'm quite into watches. [He displays the shiny chunk of silver on his wrist.] This is a Rolex Daytona. For winning the league I treated myself to a Franck Muller.

What about cars?

Not really. I've got a family on the way. Twins - a serious business. They're due in two-to-four weeks.

And you're not married.

No, I'm engaged to my girlfriend Toni Poole, she's been with me since I was a YTS.

She looks very nice in the photographs.

She is. And she's good for me. She's been there from the start. When I was earning £46 a week she was earning £250 a week -she was taking me out to restaurants. It's nice that she's there for the right reasons -for me.

And she's forgiven you your indiscretions.

Indiscretions - you know, I've never cheated on her or anything like that. I never would. I can look you in the eye and tell you that. There's been stories out there that I've cheated on her but I certainly haven't - I love her to bits. There was an interview in the News of the World where I'd seen a reporter out and I'd apparently admitted it all to Toni. I never admitted anything to Toni

because I've never done anything. With me saying I'm a loyal person, that goes with my girlfriend as well as with Chelsea.

But you must have been sorely tempted.

Yeah, there's occasions. I've obviously explained to Toni that we get opportunities, we get approached and I've probably been in situations that she doesn't approve of. Maybe. But it certainly wouldn't be the case where I'd take it any further.

Is that the worst thing that anyone's written about you?

First of all I thought, 'why are they doing that?' But my girlfriend now realizes that it's a load of rubbish - she trusts me, she knows where I am if I go out, she knows people who are with me. There's been stories written when I was at home with her or at her mum and dad's. Three different stories, and we looked back at restaurant bills and we paid it on that night when I was 100 per cent with her. But it's opened my eyes and her eyes.

It is time for some photographs on the streets. Terry stands by some white railings and some old tiles outside a pub, and the sessions are interrupted by passers by seeking autographs. Terry takes considerable care with each signature. A messenger biker passes and shouts 'Mash it up Rasta!', which Terry loves. We talk about the next England manager, unaware of the FA's pursuit of XXXPhilippe Scolari. 'He's got to be English,' Terry reasons. 'I think everyone wants that.'

He laughs a great deal, and he can stand a lot of ribbing. But several times he repeats how hard he finds it to accept defeat. Back at the studio I ask why Liverpool and Arsenal have done so well in the Champions League and not Chelsea. He can find no simple reason. Two days before Chelsea's defeat to Liverpool in the FA Cup semi-final, he says he is still 'burning inside' from losing to Liverpool in the semi-final of the Champions League the year before. 'I sat in the dressing room for an hour after, and I'm not embarrassed to sit here and say that I had a towel over my head crying my eyes out.'

Were you weeping alone?

No, there were a couple of other players - I'm not going to name names, it's up to them. But I'm a very passionate footballer who loves winning, whether I'm training or even if I'm playing with little kids.

There may be more crying after the World Cup. Every four years we get to this point a few weeks before it starts, and we convince ourselves that this time we'll go all the way...

I do think it's hyped up a bit. I think if you left it alone, and you let the whole nation build up to it together as we slowly go on through the tournament...It's certainly hyped up a bit too much. Mr Eriksson done great for us, and it's time

he was moving on. As a country we have got a good chance, but let's not hype it up and say we've got a very good chance. We need that little bit of luck.

A lot of people all over the world are going to see you playing with your socks over your knees. Perhaps you'll start a new fashion trend.

I get so much stick for that - other players say it's so not me. I think Di Matteo was the first player to start it, and it just felt right to me. Now, because I've got so much stick, I've tried putting them below my knees and it just doesn't feel right. So you'll see me constantly pulling them up. I really don't know what it is.

And what's that thing where you put your arms out wide when you're defending, almost inviting a hand ball?

I don't know. I think people and referees respect me a little bit and know I'm going into a tackle to throw my body in front of the ball, not my arms. But when I try to get leverage my arms come out. And the manager has been on to me to stop it as well, so in the last few games I've been trying not to do it. But I'm just there to block it, and I think referees know that I'm not trying to stop the ball with my hands. Really I'd much rather the ball smash me in the face and the nose.

You're quite reflective talking to me now, and you have a soft voice and gentle demeanour - you certainly don't seem like someone who would harangue a referee.

Stepping onto that football pitch, there's just a different person in me. I'd do anything in my power to help me and my team-mates win. And when I feel that a decision should have gone our way, then it's down to the players to make a point to the ref. But we do have to stop running up to him, in his face, if there's ten of you. Certainly the captain should be allowed to go up and have a decent conversation. But you see some refs now just waving players away. We should listen to what they have to say and they listen to what we got to say, and then we get on with it.

It seems to me you're at that point in life when you're becoming more interested in the world outside football. When England were playing Poland you went on a trip to Auschwitz.

I just remember walking into dungeons. They were saying that they used to get a thousand people in there and there was a hole in the ceiling where they had the gas come through when the door was locked. You can imagine what they went through. There was a sort of aura about the room that certainly opened up my eyes. If I had went on them trips when I was at school we would have been messing about, but now I can go to those places and appreciate what it means.

And presumably that puts football in perspective.

Definitely.

Do you read books much?

Definitely. I was never much of a reader. I started reading autobiographies, I like to know what other players have been through. I do read before I go to bed, and nine times out of ten I wake up in the morning and I've got the book still on my chest. My girlfriend's trying to get me into the Harry Potter books, but I'm not doing that. I'm reading a book at the moment, but I'd rather not say what it is. Oh, I'll tell you what it is - but it's the worst time to talk about it. It's about a gang of people who go to Vegas, mathematicians, and they get the better of the casino. Bringing Down The House.

There's been a lot in the newspapers about how gambling is a serious problem for you and other players.

I've never known anyone to get into difficulties. We get so much spare time on away trips, we might get four or five hours before dinner. So it's just a way of passing the time. But it's never big money changing hands that you read about in the paper. It's a team bonding thing. On the coach it'll be £25 or £50, and by the end of the bus journey nine times out of ten the other player will say forget about it, it's only a bit of fun. So it's a little bit annoying the figures that are being spoken about.

What about casinos?

I've never known anyone to lose ridiculous amounts. I've been to a couple and when you go, the food's free. There's a good casino I go to in London that does lovely food, but it's not a place that I've seen players out every weekend or whatever.

The casino food - all pasta and chicken?

And sometimes other things as well.

