

## PAUL GASCOIGNE NEARLY COST ME MY JOB

After Gazza swerved a *Loaded* photoshoot due to having one bevvie too many, one terrified cub journo was tasked with stopping a repeat incident...

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*What if he's annihilated? What if he doesn't turn up? Or, worse still, what if he turns up but then gets annihilated and it's All Adam's Fault?*

I'll never forget waiting for Paul Gascoigne to arrive at The Tower Hotel in London's St Katharine Dock on a pissing-down afternoon in November 2012, mad thoughts running through my head. Gazza was already late, and neither he nor his agent were answering their phones. I was working for *Loaded* magazine at the time, and was tasked with staying with Paul that night, before whisking him off for an interview and photoshoot the next morning at a nearby studio. The reason I was so terrified, though, was that this was our second attempt to get him in the magazine, after the first went horribly wrong.

A couple of months earlier, the deputy editor had to bundle him into the back of his car and drive him to The Priory after finding him so drunk he could hardly walk on the streets of Bournemouth, where he lived. During a frantic, afternoon-long search for the ex-England midfielder – who seemed to evade our searching party like a bemused Colin Hendry during Euro 96 – neighbours spoke of how Paul had gone off the rails again, and was making their lives a living hell. It was even common, one irate flat owner claimed, for Gazza to wake up at 4am and vacuum his home while belting out *It's Coming Home* so loudly residents could hear his drunken singing over the hum of his Hoover.

My job in the hotel that day, really, was to chaperone our cover star so closely that he couldn't sneak off for a drink and sabotage our issue. Or as my terrifying editor, an ex-*News of the World* tabloid ruckweiler, barked to me on my mobile, "Don't let him out of your fucking sight".

I thought it best to end the call before mentioning that Gazza was meant to arrive an hour ago.

I was obsessively prepared. I booked my suite next to his so I could sit outside his room for an hour after he turned in – in case he snuck off – and briefed all the bar staff not to serve him (even handing the foreign ones a photo, lest they not be familiar with the dentist's chair et al). Sure, I felt a tad guilty – the print-outs felt patronising to a player I idolised as a kid – but it was in both of our interests for a sober Paul Gascoigne to emerge the next morning.

And then something surprising happened.

Because while I was expecting a frail and broken man, the Paul

Gascoigne who finally swaggered up to the check-in desk was full-on razzmatazz. He was dressed like a Rolling Stone for a start – hair gelled, lashes lined with mascara and designer shirt popped to reveal a huge gold crucifix – and was every bit as witty and generous and eccentric and obsessive and dapper and bonkers and just plain Gazza as I hoped.

He was an anecdote machine, for starters. He revelled in telling me about the time he dived into a restaurant's lobster tank the night before a Lazio game ("Cook this bastard!"); the time he walked into the England women's dressing room to see the team tits-out naked ("I couldn't stop thinking about them and got subbed after 70 minutes"); or the time he stole £2000 worth of wine from Diana's ex James Hewitt ("I called him Ewsy"). Oh, and I've still not worked out if he was joking when he claimed to have thrown Alka Seltzer tablets at birds to munch on ("It makes them go POP!").

But he was more than just a nostalgia trip, too. He was kind: finding time to chat to every starstruck fan who came up for a chat; he was obsessive: explaining that he did 600 sit ups before breakfast every day, despite a hip injury that meant he could barely break into a jog; but most of all he was funny. Like properly, dryly hilarious. When I asked him why he chain smoked, for instance, he snapped back: "On the pack it says Smoking Kills so I think to myself, 'Well, I suppose I've tried everything else.'"

That day, Paul Gascoigne was the Gazza we all remembered.

So when I sat down with him for a burger and chips in the hotel restaurant that evening, it was with a newfound respect. And he opened up to me, without prompting, talking candidly about his troubles. Of all the family members who exploited his surname, the lovers who turned up at his door promising him help before selling their stories to the red tops or the fans who would buy him a pint when he was trying to get dry. It was just so desperately, desperately sad.

"If someone is giving me stick," he explained when I asked him how he coped, "all I do is look at their forehead and imagine a bandage and think, 'Bless him, he's not well.'"

The following day's shoot and interview went so well that the subsequent issue's cover designed itself. We decided on a beaming photo of Gazza's face wearing a Santa's hat, tongue poking out, above the headline: "Gazza's for life, not just for Christmas".