

HART and SOUL

Celtic and Wales legend John Hartson talks to CHRISTOPHER EVANS about the ups and downs of a goal-laden career ... and his battle to beat cancer

You played for a number of clubs. Which club did you enjoy playing for the most?

That's a really tough one. I enjoyed my time at Luton Town as I did a great apprenticeship there when I was 16. I learnt from some terrific professionals like Mick Harford and David Preece. David Pleat gave me my debut at 17 and that was a great learning curve. Leaving Swansea at 16 to pursue a football career wasn't easy and I struggled initially to deal with moving away from home. Arsenal was a wonderful experience too. At 19 I was Britain's most expensive teenager. It was great going in to that dressing room and playing up front with Ian Wright, England's No.9 at the time. I learnt so much from Tony Adams, Martin Keown, David Seaman, Nigel Winterburn and Steve Bould – they were great characters.

West Ham was brilliant because I didn't stop scoring goals for the first 12 months. Then I spent five amazing years in Glasgow with Celtic and scored over 100 goals. That was special. It's difficult to say one club above any other so I'll say I enjoyed each and every one of my clubs. I genuinely mean that.

If you had your time again, which team do you wish you could have played for?

I would love to have played for Liverpool. Ian Rush was my hero growing up and was the Welsh centre-forward too. Also, my hometown club Swansea, but the timing was never right. I was scoring for Arsenal in Europe, playing for West Ham and Wimbledon and Celtic. No disrespect, but at the time Swansea were playing to fewer than 2,000 people against Scunthorpe in the bottom tier. The timing just wasn't right.

You made 51 appearances for Wales. What are your memories of playing for your country?

Well 51 caps and 14 goals isn't bad, but it could have been a lot more. I fell out with one or two of the managers and didn't play for about 18 months at one stage. I could have got 75 or 80 caps, but I'm proud to have over 50, especially the position I played. When you look at the list of great strikers Wales have had – John Charles, Trevor Ford, Ian Rush, Mark Hughes and Dean Saunders – for me to have played up front for the best part of ten years made me proud. I'm proud of my career with Wales and that I owned that No.9 shirt for such a long time.

Do you regret not making it to a major tournament with Wales? (They lost 1-0 on aggregate to Russia in the European Championship play-offs in 2003)

It's a major disappointment but I don't lie in bed thinking about it. I've moved on from that. I've got my media work, my foundation and a big and brilliant family. I've got no major regrets really. I had many highs and lows, but I prefer to remember the highs of my career because I had some terrific highs.

Who is the best player you played with?

Again, that's a difficult one. I would have to say the best two are Henrik Larsson and

Dennis Bergkamp. I played with Henrik for three and a half seasons at Celtic and with Dennis for two seasons at Arsenal. I played with Ryan Giggs, Mark Hughes, Roy Keane, Tony Adams, Paul Merson, Chris Sutton and Craig Bellamy and they were all fantastic players. But if I had to choose, it would be Bergkamp and

Larsson as they were on a different level.

And who is the best player you played against?

I remember going to Barcelona in 2004 with Celtic and I scored at the Nou Camp in a 1-1 draw. Ronaldinho was playing that night and at that time he was the best in the world. He was fantastic. I also have to mention when I played at the San Siro when I was still a teenager. Milan had Baresi, Costacurta and Maldini – that was a great experience, they were an unbelievable defence. In this country I would have to say Roy Keane. Roy was a phenomenal player. When he came to Celtic for a short time I got to know him and play with him a bit. I've also played against Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and Lionel Messi. But if I can only choose one, then it's Ronaldinho.

Who were the best and toughest defenders you played against?

Tony Adams and Martin Keown were brilliant and a phenomenal partnership. I trained against them every day and got to know their strengths and weaknesses. Tony was England captain and rock solid. He was a great defender and would put his head in where the studs were flying. Tony was a brave and inspirational captain, a real man amongst men. Foreign-wise, I would say Roberto Ayala when he was playing for Valencia. He had over 100 caps for Argentina. We (Celtic) played Valencia in 2001 in the UEFA Cup. We lost on penalties and Ayala was a different class. I was very impressed and hardly got a kick. He was physically strong and up for the challenge. He could jump, he could defend and he wouldn't let me bully him like I could other centre-halves. He was rock solid.

I also have to mention Gary Pallister, Neil Ruddock, Colin Hendry, Steve Bruce and Sami Hyypia. They were proper centre-halves. You could go at it for 90 minutes, you could throw the odd elbow – not maliciously, but jumping with your arms – and you knew you would get one back and you'd accept it.

But after the game in the players' lounge you would shake hands and have a pint and move on to the next game. There was none of this rolling on the floor trying to get a fellow professional sent off. Tony Adams would have had his own player in the dressing room and given him a good dressing down if that had happened. It was a man's game and I loved the physicality of it.

Which goals were your favourites?

I enjoyed my first goal for Wales. It was against Scotland at Rugby Park in 1997 and we won 1-0. I also scored for Celtic in the quarter-final of the UEFA Cup against Liverpool in 2003. It was at Anfield and it finished the game off at 2-0. That was



amazing. My most important goal was for Celtic against Celta Vigo in the Champions League in 2002. We lost the game 2-1, but my goal meant that we went through to the knockout stages, something that Celtic hadn't done before. That was special and was a great way to endear myself to the fans.

What is your favourite memory and best moment from your career?

Definitely playing for my country. I really enjoyed playing for Wales. I am a very passionate Welshman. I speak the language and I believe it's the pinnacle of a player's career to represent your country. When you have that red shirt on your back for Wales it doesn't get any better. I've won Players' Player and Football Writers' Player of the Year. I also won Welsh Player of the Year a record three times, but none of those accolades can beat when you take to the field with your fellow Welshmen and hear that national anthem.

What is your worst memory?

There are a few. I had a couple of injuries when I was at Wimbledon and I was never able to justify the transfer fee. For Celtic, we lost the title on the last day at Motherwell in 2005. We were 1-0 up but conceded two late goals. Also, as mentioned, losing to Russia in the play-offs for Wales. That was one of the most upsetting times of my career. That hit me for about six months afterwards. We were so close.

What is the best game you played in?

The Celtic against Rangers matches. The passion and hatred up there between the two sets of fans is unbelievable. I scored the winning goal in four consecutive derbies and eight goals against Rangers in total. When you score against your biggest rivals it's something special. It's a phenomenal derby and the atmosphere is electric. They are the biggest and most exciting games I have played in.

Do you have any regrets from your playing career?

Not so much my playing career, but maybe one or two things in life, but nothing that I lose sleep over. I had a bit of a gambling problem when I was younger but I've been clean for two and a half years now.



GOAL: Hartson scores for West Ham against Coventry City in 1997.

A helping hand

THE John Hartson Foundation was set up in February 2010 following the former Wales striker's battle with testicular cancer. After delaying going to see a doctor, Hartson was told that the cancer had spread and he was left fighting for his life.

Media coverage of Hartson's illness and amazing recovery made national headlines. As Hartson began to beat the disease, he decided to use his public profile to provide support and inspiration to others going through the same experience, and to raise money to help people with cancer and their families.

Hartson's cancer was diagnosed in July 2009 after he ignored lumps on his testicle. By the time he went to have it checked, it had spread to his lungs and brain. "I'd had a tiny little lump, two in fact, on my right testicle for four years before I did anything serious about it," said Hartson. "The way I saw it, I was 31, I was fathering kids, I was training hard every day, I was moving clubs, I was doing everything that was asked of me. I was also, if I'm honest, pretty ignorant about the symptoms of testicular cancer and the importance of getting treatment early. I had no idea of the danger I was putting myself in."

Hartson says it is a major regret that he ignored the symptoms and wants to highlight the importance of getting checked early if you have any worries or concerns.

"It wasn't until I started suffering the most horrendous headaches that I went to see my GP and mentioned the lumps. Within days I found out the lumps were testicular cancer and the headaches were the result of a tumour. I had waited so long to get checked that the cancer had spread to my lungs and my brain and I was diagnosed with stage-four cancer. Had I got the lumps checked when I first discovered them, I could have spared myself months of operations and gruelling treatments, not to mention the worry I could have saved my family in the process."

Hartson is determined to help others not to make the same mistake as he did. "I urge you, don't do as I did, do as I say. Check yourself regularly, know what to look for and get anything out of the ordinary seen to by your GP. It could save your life."

The John Hartson Foundation's aim is to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of testicular cancer in the hope that men with any concerns about their health will see a doctor sooner rather than later, leading to early diagnosis and treatment.

One of the first organisations to benefit was Maggie's Centre, a new £3 million specialist unit at Singleton Hospital in Hartson's hometown of Swansea.

The centre provides free practical, emotional and social support for people with cancer and their loved ones.

Hartson was also able to fulfil his pledge to donate £50,000 to Yorkhill Children's Charity in Glasgow, the city where he had so much success with Celtic. The money was used to fund family facilities in the children's oncology ward at the new Yorkhill children's hospital, currently under construction on the south side of Glasgow, and due to open in 2015.

With its roots in Hartson's native Wales, but a reach that spans throughout the UK, the Foundation is now managed by a board of trustees including Hartson's wife Sarah, while the Celtic and Wales legend is busy doing everything he can to draw attention to the charity's work, including regular speeches, golf days and sponsored events.

For more information visit www.johnhartsonfoundation.co.uk

Obviously I regret the Eyal Berkovic incident (Hartson kicked his then West Ham teammate in the face during an altercation in training). That was a spur of the moment thing that I wish I hadn't done. I don't really regret anything as I think a lot of players would swap their careers for mine. I had a fantastic career.

What is the best stadium you played in?

That's another difficult one. Celtic Park is amazing. In Europe there's the San Siro and the Nou Camp. Old Trafford is special, as is Anfield for its history. But if I have to say one, I'll go with Celtic Park. The atmosphere there, especially on European nights and the Old Firm games, can't be beaten.

Who were the best fans?

It's tough as I don't want to do an injustice to the rest, but the Celtic fans are obviously right up there. Arsenal and West Ham fans were great. I had a great relationship with the fans of all the teams I played for but I genuinely believe Celtic football fans are the best in the world.

Who is the best manager you played for?

Again, I keep saying it's difficult but it is. It's hard to say one as I have too much respect. I played under David Pleat, George Graham, Arsene Wenger, Harry Redknapp, Joe Kinnear, Martin O'Neill, Gordon Strachan, Mark Hughes and John Toshack. The list is the length of my arm and they are all great managers. I'll say three though – O'Neill, Redknapp and Strachan.

Finally, are you on speaking terms with Eyal Berkovic?

Yes I am. Eyal is a good lad. We bumped in to each other at Euro Disney with our families a few years back and shared a few meals and drinks. Eyal was a fantastic player and it's something I regret but you have to live with the consequences. It happened and that was that.



MAKING UP: Hartson with Eyal Berkovic.

ON the SPOT